

# indonesian attitudes

## WHY POLITICAL PRISONERS ARE A POLITICAL NECESSITY

**Why doesn't the Indonesian Government release these political prisoners whose continued existence is damaging in terms of international relations? This is one answer sent to Amnesty from Indonesia.**

One possible answer can be found in the basic strategy of the Suharto Administration. To execute his economic development programme, President Suharto feels it necessary to stabilise political life. He has given this job to the military. It has now become clear that what is meant by political stability is the absence of any kind of conflicts in society and that any situation which produces conflicts, even differences of opinion, cannot be tolerated. The stability President Suharto wants is not a dynamic one, but a static stability, almost a repression of freedom and action.

All this has been done under the banner of economic development. This slogan has become the key word to legitimise all kinds of action including action that violates human rights and is against the Indonesian legal system and constitution.

The detention of 100,000 people is also part of this strategy. If they were released nothing might happen, but it is also possible that something would happen and the present Government does not want to take the risk. They argue that it is better to sacrifice 100,000 people than the 120,000,000 who still live in poverty. So it is clear that the root of the problem lies very deep in the Government's basic concept of development. But Indonesian intellectuals are asking whether this kind of policy is a good one. Is it not better if we try to humanise the development programme, with the consequences of making it a bit slower? The essential point of this explanation is that there is an obsession with economic development resulting in a parallel obsession with social and political stability. Yet if the political prisoners continue to be held, other governments might be under pressure to stop their aid to Indonesia. There have been many moves in this direction coming not only from communists but also from non-political intellectuals, inspired by simple humanitarianism. Why has the Suharto Administration not responded to this pressure? It may be because no government has yet stopped its aid to Indonesia because of the political prisoner problem, but it may be for another reason. And here, I come to my second hypothesis.

One observer has drawn a comparison between the Javanese concept of power and that of the Western world. For the westerner, power is something abstract, a way of communicating with others, but for the Javanese, power is very concrete. Whereas for the westerner, power is unlimited and can be exercised through a knowledge of the techniques and a control over material things, according to the Javanese concept, power is dispensed by a supernatural force and is subject to limitations. Where good order and prosperity prevail, the man in power can rest assured of his legitimacy. But when disorder appears, whether natural



*Indonesian army officer detained in a West Kaimantan prison, suspected of involvement in the 1965 coup.*

disaster or social conflict, this is taken as a sign that the man in power has done wrong and power is slipping from his hands.

Now President Suharto is deeply influenced by the Javanese tradition which would teach him to regard conflict as a sign that power is slipping from his hands, even if that conflict is necessary for progress. Your opinions may differ from his but you must be circumspect in the way you express them. As one Indonesian newspaper editor has said, you may appeal to the government but you may not criticise.

According to this hypothesis, President Suharto may well fear that if the political prisoners were released they may disturb the stability and the harmony that has been achieved, which, because of his cultural

background, would make him uneasy upon his legitimacy to hold power.

A third explanation concerns the Army. When Indonesia gained its independence, the military only served as a defence and security force. But in the 1960's, the late President Sukarno used the army as a socio-political force in order to balance the growing strength of the Indonesian Communist Party. The concept of the 'dual function of the military' was launched as the philosophical base to legitimise this new role. Military generals became ministers in the cabinet as well as directors in state companies.

When the abortive coup of 1965 happened, the military, of course, were very active. The civilian force was practically crippled and at that time the military role was well received by the civilians because they desperately needed it. The situation improved and as a result of the economic development policy followed by the military themselves, a new hero emerged: the economist. Then followed the tragic fate of all military, the fate they can never avoid: in wartime people receive them with flowers; in peacetime they receive them with sour faces.

But it seems that the Indonesian army are not ready to accept such a tragic fate. Under the banner of 'political stability for economic development' they now have a new role - as the custodian of social-political stability - and to legitimise this role they have to show the people that there are enemies.....

The communist political prisoners act very well as a scapegoat. The danger of communist subversion is continually and dramatically proclaimed by the military. New arrests are being made continuously in order to convince the common people that they are still active communist members. The slogan 'subversive' has replaced the slogan of 'British-American Neo-Colonialism and Imperialism' used during the Sukarno period.

So my third hypothesis is that the political prisoner problem is needed by the present Government to legitimise the military power to rule because it creates a sense of danger. The military of Indonesia has tasted the honey of power and they want to keep it in their hands. It seems that these three factors (and maybe there are more) are interwoven, which makes the problem so complicated.