Indonesians overthrow President Suharto, 1998

*Time period notes:* Anti-Suharto protests had happened often before this time period, however February 19, 1998, is considered as the start here because that is when the first prominent student protests occurred that are said to have begun the following strong campaign against Suharto.

February 19, 1998 to: May 21, 1998

**Country:** Indonesia

**Goals:**
Primary: The removal of Suharto from presidency

Secondary: reform of the political, legal, economic and educational system; repeal of five notorious laws on politics; abolition of the army's 'dual function'; reduction of the price of basic foodstuff; reduction in the cost of education; rejection of the plan to raise fuel prices; elimination of corruption, collusion and nepotism; an end to kidnapping of activists; an end to unfair and unofficial charges in universities; and speedy attention to unemployment.

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**
- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

**Methods in 2nd segment:**
- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

**Methods in 3rd segment:**
- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 026. Paint as protest
• 036. Performances of plays and music › "earth exorcism" festival
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 4th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 026. Paint as protest
• 036. Performances of plays and music › "earth exorcism" festival
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 021. Delivering symbolic objects › students delivered flowers to troops
• 026. Paint as protest
• 036. Performances of plays and music › "earth exorcism" festival
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 004. Signed public statements
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 015. Group lobbying
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
• 145. General administrative noncooperation
• 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
• 173. Nonviolent occupation

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy

Group characterization:

- Political Elite (mainly)
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Student councils within Universities, Key student activists of the People's Democratic Union (PRD) and Islamic students of the ICMI, Forum Kota- a student coalition.

Partners:
Working class and labor activists, some from the official trade union federation; SPSI; Middle class organizations such as “Voice of the Concerned Mothers”; Influential NGOs of Indonesia (LBH); Amein Rais, leader of the Muhammadiyah, a Muslim organization of over 20 million members; University administrations

Asiaweek reported that in early April, "Workers, professionals, housewives, even nuns began joining the demonstrations."

External allies:
Megawati, leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI)

Involvement of social elites:
Megawati, leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI); Muslim and Christian religious leaders; Retired generals; Academic deans; Professionals such as lawyers, doctors and stockbrokers; eventually politicians within Suharto's cabinet (13 resigned during the last days of the struggle)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Students on campuses throughout Indonesia
- University administrations.

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Amien Rais and Muhammadiyah

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- artists

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

- Members of the Indonesian Legislature

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Joining order for other groups is not known

Segment Length: Approximately 2 weeks 3 days
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
President Suharto and his regime

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not Known

**Campaigner violence:**
Some student demonstrators, especially early in the campaign, were not opposed to violence and would throw stones and even Molotov cocktails at security forces. It is not clear if government provocateurs or student demonstrators initiated and participated in the 2 days of massive riots in mid-May. Students did participate in riots before this point, however.

**Repressive Violence:**
Soldiers and police attacked students when they attempted to protest outside of campuses and used teargas and live ammunition against protestors in early May and during the riots of mid-May.

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
The primary goal of the campaign was achieved on March 21st, 1998 when Suharto publicly announced his resignation.

Due to his resignation, corruption lessened and prices of basic commodities did eventually fall in an eventual realization of their secondary goals.

The organizing groups survived through the campaign despite repression.

The campaign grew to incorporate citizens of all classes throughout the country as well as political elites in the legislature and Suharto's cabinet.

“I have decided to quit as president.”- Indonesian President Suharto, 21st May 1998

These words echoed across Indonesia, as students who had been occupying parliament for the past three days fell to their knees; while others cheered around television sets watching their president, in power for the past thirty years, resign.

In the years leading up to Suharto’s resignation, opposition to the corruption and mismanagement of Suharto and his cabinet was fractured and effected little change. Criticism of Suharto’s rule came from several different fronts including influential NGOs; political leaders such as Megawati Sukarnoputri, the head of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI); and Amien Rais, leader of Muhammadiyah, one of the two biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. Though these individuals and organizations grew increasing bold in their criticism of Suharto, the most influential voice of criticism came from students, effecting not only change during the campaign for democracy but throughout Indonesia’s history. Since the 1966 student-lead coup ousted Sukarno from power, students remained a critical voice in society, viewing their role as a moral or corrective force. Suharto, fearing their growing influence, banned all student groups from meeting on campuses and imposed state supervised student council leaders and deans of the universities, which quieted activism for much of the early eighties. Although dissent was never fully stifled, as
student activists continued to meet underground in “study groups” providing a continuance of student organization leading up to the events of 1998.

By the late nineties the sociopolitical environment was changing within the country. In late 1997 a devastating economic crisis swept through Asia with crippling effects for Indonesians. A once comfortable and growing middle class was now awakened to the massive political corruption of Suharto’s regime and his mismanagement of the country’s wealth, which became concentrated in the hands of his immediate family and most powerful political elites. By early 1998, several months into the economic crisis and just a few months away from the General Session of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MRP) in which Suharto was preparing for his fifth consecutive “reelection,” student and political opposition groups became more organized and bold in their demands for reduction of prices and an end to Suharto’s corrupt rule. “Suharto step down!” echoed throughout massive demonstrations that emphasized reformasi damai (peaceful reform). Political leaders, academics, retired generals and leading student and NGO activists signed petitions, made public declarations of protest and released statements calling for a new president. But on March 10, 1998 Suharto welcomed his fifth term as president serving to fan the flames of opposition. Although Megawati and Amien Rais made public declarations of protest and Amien spoke at many student rallies, encouraging the movement, neither emerged as leaders of the campaign during this critical time, as their opposition remained largely non-confrontational.

Recognizing the stagnancy the opposition found itself in, the students took decisive action to bring protest to a national, confrontational level, demanding Suharto’s removal. With protests that filled the streets, road blockades and increasingly provocative slogans, the students propelled the country into mass mobilization. During the months of March and April, student protest within universities grew to tens of thousands of participants spanning from the most elite to State-run universities. Despite the government’s attempts to open talks with the student protestors, the students refused to meet, continuing their protest demonstrations instead. Defying Suharto’s orders to stay confined to campus grounds, protesters broke into the streets.

Artists also joined in the protests in April, organizing a month-long festival using different forms of art as performances and displays of protest. University administrators also often supported the student protests by giving speeches at student-led rallies.

Upon the state’s announcement in early May of increased fuel and electricity prices the protesting students were joined by swells of Indonesian citizens.

During one demonstration on May 12, at Jakarta’s Trisakti University, four students were killed in a clash with security forces. Over the next two days Indonesia experienced the most violent and massive riots the country had seen. An estimated 1,888 people died, most of the victims of Chinese descent, while many more were raped or injured. Because of several suspicious occurrences—reports of muscly men in tight shirts and crew cuts, sometimes dressed as students, appearing at stores burning them and fleeing; the lack of any uniformed security officers in the streets during these two days; the inability of foreign diplomats to get a hold of top security officials when the chaos erupted; and nearly simultaneous eruption of rioting at nine different locations throughout the county—it is thought that riots were set up by government-hired provocateurs. A fact-finding team was created following the riots and found that in many instances, members of the military were, in fact, active instigators of riots and other violence, especially the widespread rape of Sino-Indonesian women. It is widely believed that the riots were instigated by Prabowo Subianto, a military leader responsible for student/dissident disappearances, upon orders from Suharto.

Nothing is decisive besides that the Trisakti killings and the riots only served to further weaken Suharto’s wavering rule. Political leaders, who just two months prior were applauding Suharto’s reelection, were now fleeing from his side. And although he seemingly had the support of Prabowo, the military was fractured and members of the military most likely did not all support the riots.

Within the military, there was great disagreement about the appropriate course of action in the wake of the riots. Some, led by Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, a military official with close ties to President Suharto, seemed ready to use much greater force to quell the protests and maintain Suharto’s hold on the presidency. It was later determined, for instance, that Prabowo was involved in, among other things, the kidnapping of student protesters. To a certain extent, however, the military did facilitate the
continuation of the peaceful protests, as they did, for example, when General Wiranto ordered that students marching on the
Parliamentary building be allowed to protest off their campuses, and later, to enter the government building without molestation
by military forces. One military officer spoke of the fact that the soldiers at certain barricades in parts of the city had not even
loaded their guns with rubber bullets, but rather with blanks, so that no harm would come to protesters had they been ordered to
“shoot.”

In response to the killings, student demonstrators had also occupied radio stations and played their demands on the airwaves.
After having presented further demands for the election of a new president to Indonesia’s legislative body on May 18, busloads
of students occupied one of the legislature buildings (that of the People’s Representative Council) for several days. Additionally,
opposition leadership additionally planned May 20th as a national day of action. While the million-person rally in Jakarta was
called off because of military threats, half a million protestors still demonstrated in both Yogyakarta and Bandung, with
thousands more assembling in cities and towns throughout the country. When word spread about an impending military
 crackdown on May 19, foreign journalists and diplomats placed themselves around students occupying legislature buildings to
prevent any military violence.

Due to the unwavering demands of the students and citizens of Indonesia, Suharto could no longer look to his political allies,
who in realizing the country’s unrest and Suharto’s increasing inability to run the country fled his side. Leaders of the legislature
announced that they would no longer support Suharto and gave him three days to resign before they would begin impeachment
procedures. Additionally, General Wiranto, the Minister of Defense, refused to use violence on protestors and students
occupying the legislature building, effectively removing the military support from beneath Suharto. On May 21st Suharto
resigned and the students looked to the future.

Though the immediate goals of the campaign were realized, protest and pressure on the government did not cease during the rule
of Suharto’s successor, former vice president B.J. Habibie. The next president found himself having to answer directly to the
people and in turn affected many democratic reforms.

Research Notes

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Cambridge University Press, 2004


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Personal Interview: Edmund McWilliams, Former US Political Affairs Counselor at the Embassy in Indonesia 1996-99. Date
of interview October 19, 2008.


Aspinall, Edward. Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia. Stanford, California:


Additional Notes:
To watch footage of student protests and commentary follow this link (there are five parts):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYqyd87qeKg

Following the Trisakti killings on March 12, riots erupted throughout the country for the next two days. An estimated 18,800 people were killed and many were raped and injured, most of Chinese ethnicity. These riots are widely believed to be the instigation of Prabowo, Suharto's top security official in either an attempt by the government to discredit the campaign or in a failed coup attempt of Prabowo's forces.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (19/05/2011)

Some information added from Dylan Hillerbrand

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Sarah Noble 10/06/2009

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