



Continuity and Change in ASIA

Join us every Wednesday for an insightful look at *Continuity and Change in Asia*, a social studies-based program exploring political and social issues shaping Asia today and designed to encourage students to better understand the various issues shaping the countries and regions of East, South and Southeast Asia. This Newspapers In Education program is in partnership with the Asia Outreach Centers at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies. Series will run through Wednesday, June 7, 2006.

Activities

- 1: In The Seattle Times, locate an article about someone who could be considered an activist. Write an expository essay for your teacher explaining how this person has made a positive difference in their community.
- 2: Look through the newspaper for references to places in the world where people are being denied their rights and freedoms. Think about what kinds of actions could help to change the circumstances for the people living in these places and discuss the topic with your classmates.

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Emerging Voices
The Challenges of Democracy in Modern India



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ARTICLE 6

Emerging Voices

Indonesians Speak Out

By Mia Siscawati – Graduate student in sociocultural anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington

Have you ever imagined living in a country with authoritarian rule? Indonesia is one of several countries in Southeast Asia that had a long period of authoritarian rule. In Indonesia, the authoritarian regime was led by the second president of the Republic of Indonesia, General Soeharto (Suharto), who came to power through the military coup of 1966. Soeharto's regime controlled citizen's lives politically and socially for 32 years. During that time, citizens were not allowed to hold different opinions from the regime or their actions could be labeled as subversive. The regime even regarded some cultural activities as politically subversive, such as theater, music and dance performances that delivered messages which the regime feared might awaken critical awareness in Indonesians. By securing political and social control, the regime was free to control Indonesia's economic development by exploiting its natural resources and neglecting the human rights of the Indonesian people.

How did Indonesians deal with this difficult situation? Indonesian activists questioned the regime. Sadly, some of them risked their own lives and were assassinated or kidnapped by the regime. Many of them were jailed without trial. Nevertheless, almost daily, new groups of brave people emerged around the country and worked hard to develop a variety of strategies to end the authoritarian regime. One of them was a group of women called *Suara Ibu Peduli* (Voices of Concerned Mothers or SIP).

How could a group of women challenge the authoritarian regime in Indonesia? When the Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia in late 1997, Soeharto's government failed to control the economy. As a result, many Indonesians lost their jobs at the same time food prices skyrocketed. The price of milk powder increased by almost 400 percent and poor families simply couldn't afford to buy it. In this situation, some Indonesian women intellectuals and activists began to organize against the state. The women formed *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP). On February 23, 1998, about 20 mothers gathered at central Jakarta's main traffic circle to demand lower milk prices for everyone. Participants pressed their demands while praying, singing patriotic songs and distributing flowers. This kind of protest was an activity forbidden during the Soeharto era and usually dealt with harshly. But the police –

many of whom faced similar difficulties themselves in buying milk for their children – did not harm the women.

Nevertheless, three protesting mothers were arrested and charged with disturbing the public order for conducting a demonstration without a permit. Many ordinary Indonesians – mothers, grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers who simply wanted lower milk prices, as well as students, academics, journalists and economic and political observers – came to the courthouse or wrote to the news media on behalf of the women. Eventually, the women were released.

The bravery of these women, and other protestors against the regime, inspired Indonesians to join the rising public demand for political rights, honest government and lower prices of everyday goods. Among the protestors were large numbers of university students. The students eventually took a more prominent role in the growing people's movement that challenged Soeharto's regime. During student demonstrations, many people dropped off food, clothes, medicine and money at SIP's office to be channeled to those in need. Even the killing of several students by the military during the street protests did not stop the movement. By mid-1998, Soeharto and his regime were forced to step down.

Living under authoritarian rule for many years, people in Indonesia and other

Southeast Asian countries have developed a variety of responses and strategies for making their voices heard. The student movement in Thailand in the early 1970s, the People Power in the Philippines in the mid-1980s, and the civil society movements in Indonesia and Malaysia during "reformation periods" of the late 1990s, can all be taken as examples. The movements in these countries have enabled ordinary citizens, such as women, workers, farmers, student activists, arts activists and members of non-governmental organizations, to challenge the state's excesses, social injustices and inequalities in their respective countries. These social movements continue, even after the authoritarian regimes that brought them into being have collapsed. To this day, the activists persist in developing unique ways to address the social problems that took root under authoritarian rule.

Questions for discussion:

- What characterizes the rule of an authoritarian regime? Which Southeast Asian countries have been under authoritarian rule?
- According to the author, what was it like for ordinary citizens to live under authoritarian rule?
- What made the people's movement in Indonesia successful?
- What lasting impact have authoritarian regimes had in Southeast Asian countries?