

TIME FOR A HUMAN RIGHTS RESCUE PACKAGE

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Indonesia may have agreed to a dose of harsh economic medicine, but it will take more than the IMF's prescriptions to stave off the country's woes. Distortions in Indonesia's economy cannot be addressed in isolation from distortions in its political and institutional life. Any rescue package should include strengthened rule of law, government accountability and respect for human rights.

The New Order government has brought Indonesia a veneer of prosperity and stability. It has pointed to these achievements to legitimise its authoritarian rule, justifying repressive measures and the abuse of power and position.

But, as the current crisis has shown, the New Order's transformation of Indonesia has been fundamentally flawed. The Suharto government may have overseen decades of high economic growth, but its legacy also includes a repressed political culture, institutional weakness and entrenched corruption and impunity.

The past weeks have seen unprecedented calls from within the Indonesian establishment for political change to accompany economic reform. Indonesia's own national human rights commission has joined in the chorus, arguing that the government's failure to resolve fundamental political problems is aggravating the current economic crisis.

These critics have good reason to worry. Indonesia's last major political transition was marked by massive turmoil and bloodshed, an experience the New Order continues to use as a pretext for its heavy handed rule. But as Indonesia moves into another uncertain political period, it remains ill-equipped to deal with the pressures which have mounted with rapid social and economic change.

These pressures will be exacerbated rather than allayed by implementation of the IMF package. The benefits of Indonesia's economic growth have not been evenly shared - nor will the pain of its economic adjustment. Poverty levels may have fallen, but they have also become more localised in terms of geography, occupation, gender and other factors. The IMF package is likely to deepen the marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable groups and contribute to further violations of their human rights. The impact of the recession on Indonesian migrant workers in other countries will add to their plight.

With economic hardship may come increased social unrest. Denied adequate channels for peaceful expression, discontent threatens to spill over into violence. The past weeks have already seen riots in East Javanese towns and cities protesting against rising prices. The Chinese community, with its prominent position in the local economy, and other minority groups are especially vulnerable to attack.

The government's likely authoritarian response to these tensions carries with it the prospect of increased violations of human rights. The past year has seen a widespread crackdown on all forms of dissent, as elections and the leadership transition enter their critical stage. The Indonesian authorities have once again resorted to the draconian Anti-subversion Law and other laws protecting them from criticism to

suppress opposition and stifle dissent. Peaceful demonstrations, along with more serious civil disturbances, have been met with excessive sometimes lethal force.

Recent criticism of the government's economic management has already been met with a similarly hardline response. Currency speculation and food hoarding have been publicly equated with 'subversion' – which in Indonesia carries the death penalty. The media has been taken to task for its negative reporting, accused of inciting panic buying – under existing press laws the license of an offending publication can be revoked at any time. Respected economists have been summonsed by the military intelligence services for their outspoken criticism of the government. Armed forces commander Feisal Tanjung has warned that the military will crackdown heavily on anti-government groups in the run up to the presidential elections.

Economic adjustment will bring downward pressure on wages and working conditions, as Indonesia struggles to maintain competitiveness and attract foreign investment. As tensions in the workplace increase, the government is likely to clamp down even harder on independent trade unions, whose activities remain banned and leaders imprisoned. Economic and social problems may also see an upsurge in crime, and with it the hardening of official attitudes and adoption of draconian measures. Last year, the number of criminal suspects shot dead by police in Jakarta doubled, amid official statements of a "shoot on sight" policy.

As the Indonesian government seeks to relieve strains on the economy, so too must it act quickly to vent pressures mounting in the political environment by creating the space for free expression of dissent. Indonesia's long term stability and development would be better served if tensions in society could be aired and resolved rather than bottled up to the point of explosion. Allowing discontent and dissatisfaction free and peaceful expression is a far better guarantee of security and confidence than the prison cell, baton and bullet. A starting point would be to stop use of the Anti-subversion law, pending its repeal, and to review the cases of those political prisoners already held under its provisions.

As the IMF package tackles problems of transparency and accountability in the economic sphere, reforms should be extended to other aspects of Indonesia's legal and institutional life. Steps should be taken to reinforce the independence of the judiciary and ensure the military's accountability before the law. And while Indonesia is allowing the IMF to look over its books, so too should it act on the advice of other experts, such as the UN's human rights mechanisms and its own national human rights commission, to strengthen protection for human rights.

Everyone has an interest in averting a human rights crisis in Indonesia – governments, international financial institutions and businesses alike. For years, the international community has ignored Indonesia's human rights problems at its peril. As Indonesia accepts the need for economic discipline and reform, it should also be encouraged to bring other aspects of its national life into line with international norms and standards.

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