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Prospects for a Putsch in Djakarta

FILE

SUMMARY

President Sukarno and the nation's top leadership appear to be engaged in little Palace games completely divorced from the harsh economic and political realities of present day Indonesia. The Army leadership, by adding its voice to the chorus of praise to Sukarno and by muting its attack on Palace policies, now seems to have joined in. In many countries, public disgust at such irresponsibility would lead to putsch attempts. The traditional apathy of the Indonesian masses argues against any broadly-based and spontaneous uprising in Indonesia. More prone to action are certain elements of the elite including political party activists, youth groups and exponents of regionalism. These elements have, however, demonstrated unwillingness to move without some Army guns behind them. While there are sympathetic and action-prone elements among the second echelons of the Army, the September 30 Affair has placed the Palace guard on alert and rendered the prospects of a "Colonels' coup" unattractive. The chances for unseating Sukarno thus appear to hinge principally on the ability of the youth, parties and lower military ranks to exert such pressures within the moderate camp as eventually to force a change of tactics upon the top Army leadership. Additional wicks of economic deterioration and Palace procrastination could bring these pressures to the critical point. In the meantime, Palace games will continue.

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1. Causes for Revolt

A. President Sukarno seems in many ways to be as divorced from the current economic and political realities of Indonesia as was Louis IV from those of 18th Century France. As students demonstrated in the streets against rising prices, Sukarno discoursed on the importance of national monuments. The observation that women were not frying stones on street corners was presented as proof that there is plenty to eat. Sukarno admitted publicly and with a chuckle that he knows nothing about economics and leaves that sort of thing to his advisors. He has not, however, left them the money. He tours the city weakly seeking sites for new buildings and monuments and recently allocated \$11 million for the construction of a grandiose building complex for COSEFO at the moment when his Government's default on foreign loans darkened the prospect for the import of rice and essential consumer goods. Finally, the complete transformation of the Indonesian political scene through the destruction of the communist party has changed Sukarno's tone of voice but not his slogans for Nasakom unity.

B. Sukarno has ensured his isolation from life's grimmer realities by surrounding himself with a cabinet, parliamentarians, and even political party leaders who have long lost touch with the "electorate" and can no longer see past the intrigues and schemes of the Palace. Indicative of this situation is the fact that Nahdlatul Ulama youth leaders felt it necessary to kidnap and threaten their party's Chairman to ensure that he stuck to the tough line adopted in party councils. This leader subsequently came unstuck, however, and rejoined the merry-go-round propelled by the President's smiles, reproaches, rewards and bribes.

C. Now military leaders seem to have joined the Palace games. Apparently persuaded that a clash with the President would endanger their own and perhaps the nation's future, Army leaders have muted their attacks on the Palace and have joined in the chorus of praise to the Great Leader of the Revolution (Embtel 2204). The suspicion arises that Army leaders, who have fought all their political battles during the past decade within the confines of the Palace, have also lost touch with their "electorate."

D. This airgram attempts to determine who may now be fed up with what is going on at the Palace and what they are likely to do about it.

2. Potential Rebels and Inhibiting Factors

A. The Masses. Although the absence of the usual outlets for public opinion makes it most difficult to measure popular support for Sukarno, there are signs in the attendance at public rallies, in

the street and kampung reaction to the President's radio addresses and in the circulation figures of the anti-Palace press that Sukarno's prestige has declined. The magic aura of charisma and authority, which the Indonesians call kepribadian, can be lost through one important mistake. Sukarno demonstrated a clear lack of divine guidance in choosing the side of the PKI and the population has undoubtedly taken note. The Indonesian "masses" are unlikely now to rally in significant number to Sukarno's defense if he is threatened. On the other hand, they are culturally conditioned to accept adversity passively and are equally unlikely to rise up spontaneously against Sukarno's misrule. If disgust at recent Palace games is to evoke any meaningful response, it must come from the intellectual elite, from the students, the political parties, the regionalists, and the second and third echelons of the military.

B. The Political Parties. The top leadership of the major political parties has been firmly snared in the tangle of Palace intrigue but the second echelon contains several influential leaders (the NU's Dahlan and Subchan, the Catholic Party's Kasimo, the Protestant Party's Tambunan) who have the initiative and the following to act on their own. These political forces have been united in Subchan's Action Command, now called the Pantjasila Front. The Pantjasila Front has spoken out boldly in public--Subchan, on February 2 warned that a political settlement involving "simplification" of the party structure could evoke "serious consequences." In private conversations, however, Subchan and other moderate political leaders have spoken of the Army's accommodation to the Palace with disheartened resignation rather than defiance.

C. The Youth. The political parties owe most of the militancy they have mustered to their youth. Djakarta students during the past two months have amply demonstrated their disgust for the present regime through the Student Action Command (KAMI). KAMI now unites an overwhelming majority of the youth activists in the capital and probably in the provinces. The NU youth arm, Ansor, in particular, possesses both the numbers and the militancy to constitute an effective paramilitary force. The students, however, probably shot their wad in the January street demonstrations. The limited success they attained in that operation was due to the cooperation they received from the Army. KAMI leadership at that time showed itself highly sensitive to the guidelines laid down by the Army and it is highly unlikely that they would take to the streets (much less besiege the Palace) unless assured by the Army that its guns are behind them.

D. The Regionalists. Worsening economic conditions as well as signs of a political interregnum in Djakarta have undoubtedly enlivened traditional centrifugal tendencies in the provinces. Recent remarks by

the Atjeh Military Commander drawing attention to his province's self-sufficiency in rice and calling for a more equitable distribution of oil revenues evoke memories of earlier complaints from the outer fringes of the nation. The decisive defeat of the 1958 rebellion, however, looms over the head of every exponent of regionalism and will argue against a repeat of such adventures. More significant, the provinces are now firmly in the hands of the Army and loyalty to Djakarta has figured prominently in the choice of regional commanders. Any anti-regime activity in the provinces would most likely be a reflection of disaffection within the Armed Forces as a whole.

E. The Generals. Prospects for a Palace putsch thus inevitably hinge on the attitude of the military. Not all Generals agree with Nasution's and Suharto's softness towards the Palace. Principal among the dissenters is Minister Attached to the Presidium Sukendro. Sukendro, however, controls no troops and is active only as a political strategist. West Java Commander Adjie's recent ban on a "Sukarno Front" in his province threw a new light on his relation to the regime and roused some hope among the Palace's opponents. Adjie's crack troops could, of course, play a determining role in any Djakarta power play and Adjie's lead would probably be followed by other regional commanders, by his former subordinate South Sulawesi Commander Solichin in particular and perhaps by Generals Mokoginta and Sibiran in Sumatra. The banning of the "Sukarno Front," however, is entirely inadequate proof that Adjie's demonstrated loyalty to Sukarno is fading.

F. The Colonels. To find determined Sukarno opponents among the military it is necessary to move further from the Palace, to the second echelons of the Army. When Djakarta pundits discuss the possibility of a "Colonels' revolt" or a Kong Le-type coup, the name first mentioned is that of Colonel Sarwo Edhie, the commander of the Paracommando Regiment (RPKAD) which spearheaded the anti-PKI operations in Central Java and is now present in strength in the capital. Sarwo Edhie gave his enthusiastic approval to student demonstrators at a time when his superiors were observing a discreet distance. Recently his troops have been seen with the militantly anti-communist Moslem student organization HMI, and a street banner publicly proclaimed the alliance between the RPKAD and this previously untouchable "rightist" student group. A coup in the capital would, however, require a strong element of surprise which the September 30 Affair has obviated. Sarwo Edhie is aware that the Palace Guard, the Air Force Special Troops (PGT) and elements of the Marine Corps (KKO), all responsive to the President, are on constant alert against such a move and, if unable to defeat it at the onset, could cause a lethal delay.

3. Conclusions

A. While isolated assassination attempts by small groups of Anzor youth or discontented military are always a possibility, it now seems unlikely that students, political parties, regionalists or second echelon Army elements will move either individually or collectively to mount a putsch.

B. Assuming Sukarno does not make a mistake and overplay his hand, the sole hope for a change in the Palace leadership seems to hinge on these forces building up such pressures within the moderate camp as to force Nasution and Suharto to reconsider their present tactics. Additional weeks of economic deterioration and Palace procrastination could perhaps bring these pressures to the critical point. In the meantime, the Palace games will continue under the direction of President Sukarno.

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