AD INFO

MARCH 3, 2000 VOL. 26 NO. 8

The Scapegoat?

Among questions that should have been asked: Was Prabowo Subianto truly the single "mastermind"?

By JOSE MANUEL TESORO

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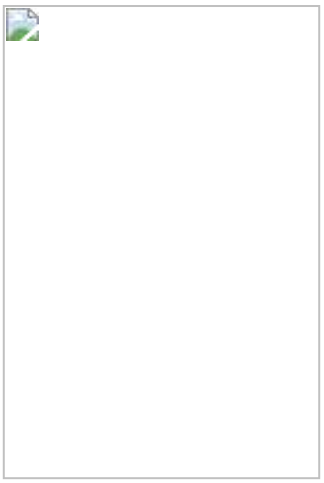
At night on May 21, 1998, the story goes, dozens of soldiers took up positions around Jakarta's Merdeka palace and the suburban home of B.J. Habibie, who less than 24 hours before had become the third president of Indonesia. The commander of this force was the brutal Lt.-Gen. Prabowo Subianto. A week before, he had marshaled the dark forces at his call - special forces operatives, inner-city gangsters, Muslim radicals - to murder, burn, rape, loot and sow ethnic hatred in the heart of Jakarta. His aim: to undermine his rival, armed forces chief Gen. Wiranto, and force his father-in-law, Suharto, to make him leader of the armed forces - a step closer, in a time of turmoil, to Prabowo himself becoming president.



Munshi Ahmed for Asiaweek
"I was not behind the riots," says Probowo. "That is a great lie"

Suharto's premature resignation as president frustrated Prabowo's ambitions. So he turned his wrath on Habibie. Disaster for Indonesia - and a nightmare for Southeast Asia - might have followed, if not for an order from Wiranto relieving the dangerously out-of-control general of his command position. Enraged, Prabowo brought his troops to the palace grounds and tried to burst, armed, into Habibie's chambers. But he was eventually outmaneuvered. His attempted coup d'etat was the climax to the 10-day drama surrounding the fall of Suharto, Indonesia's leader for three decades.

The problem is that not all of it is true. Maybe even none of it is.

The first to say that is Prabowo. "I never threatened Habibie," he says. Did Prabowo plan the May unrest against Indonesia's ethnic Chinese to bring down Wiranto or Suharto? "I was not behind the riots. That is a great lie," he responds firmly. "I never betrayed Pak Harto. I never betrayed Habibie. I never betrayed my country."

Prabowo, 48, is no saint. For 24 years, he belonged to the Indonesian military, which loyally followed the president's orders. He built up its elite special forces, Kopassus, to combat insurgency and internal terrorism. Prabowo was also married to Suharto's second daughter and enjoyed the wealth, power and freedom from accountability the First Family afforded. He admits to abducting in early 1998 nine activists, some of whom underwent torture. About a dozen others believed kidnapped in the same operation remain missing.

But is Prabowo a demon? In August 1998, a military honor court found him guilty of

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misinterpreting orders and recommended sanctions or a court-martial. Prabowo was later discharged. In its October 1998 report, the government Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF by its Indonesian initials) on the May riots asked that he be investigated for the unrest. Indonesian and foreign media have since linked his name with words such as "scheming," "ruthless and reckless," "power-hungry fanatic." Wrote one Asian paper: "He is said to hate the Chinese." The belief that he started the riots and failed to contain them has already found its way into history books. "I'm the monster behind everything," Prabowo says with undisguised irony.

Yet nearly two years after Suharto's resignation, no evidence has surfaced connecting him to the riots that triggered it. The complete picture of those days remains obscured by conflicting accounts and unnamed sources. In September 1998, Marzuki Darusman, then TGPF chair and today attorney-general, mused to reporters: "I think there's more to it than just Prabowo. I say he's a keeper of secrets. And he might be predisposed to reveal a few if forced to." Prabowo had been tried by public opinion and found guilty. But he had never had the chance to give his testimony. He now spends all his time abroad, though local papers say he did make a brief, discreet trip home in January, the first time in 15 months. (His wife remains in Indonesia, while their son is studying in the U.S.)

Now, many thinking Indonesians are acknowledging that Prabowo was perhaps the easy but not necessarily right target. Says veteran journalist Aristedes Katoppo: "He was made the fall guy for a lot of mistakes not of his making. He may have demanded things. But launching a coup? That is wrong. It's disinformation." Prabowo himself believes that his persecution has a reason: "There was a certain group that wanted to make me a scapegoat, maybe to hide their involvement."

What emerges from Prabowo's own account, coupled with this magazine's independent inquiry, is a far different, more nuanced tale than the accepted assessment that Suharto's fall stemmed from a battle between good and evil - and that Prabowo was the villain. This story is a report from and about the highest reaches of Indonesian politics, a revelation of its treacherously shifting nature and the complexities of its actors. It challenges what many accept about the country: its military, its former ruling family, its history. Whatever verdict you draw, it is impossible to look at the fall of Suharto in the past - or the personalities and conflicts of the present - in the same way again.

THE RUN-UP

Many tales circulate in Jakarta about Prabowo. In the popular narrative of Suharto's fall, the former special forces officer is often cast as its author: an evil genius who, if he cared to explain, could show how the entire arc of events he designed made up one clever yet suicidally flawed conspiracy. But at

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the end of Suharto's rule, he was not the only figure. There were many actors, thus many motives and maneuvers. Amid social unrest and economic collapse, it had become clear long before May 1998 to Jakarta's elite that the question was not if the president would step down, but when. Most important to them was to survive or even benefit. That meant playing a difficult game: stay - or at least seem to stay - unwaveringly loyal to Suharto yet at the same time move into the best position for a future without him.

The students and the popular oppositionists, despite their high profile, were the least powerful of the players. The real decisions were made around the aging president. There were Suharto's six children. There was his vice president, Habibie. There were Suharto's ministers and the chiefs of his parliament. And there were his armed forces, and its two top generals, Wiranto and Prabowo.

In the run-up to May, Prabowo was snug in the center. In March 1998, he had been promoted from chief of the special forces, Kopassus, to head the army's key strategic reserve, Kostrad. The new job made him a three-star general. His Kopassus classmate Maj.-Gen. Syafrie Syamsuddin had taken command of the Jakarta garrison in September 1997. Prabowo's former Kopassus superior, Gen. Subagyo Hadisiswoyo, was army chief of staff. Other allies included new Kopassus boss Maj.-Gen. Muchdi Purwopranjono.

The one general Prabowo did not get along with was his superior, Wiranto. "There was not good chemistry between us," says Prabowo. "We never served in the same units. We came from different backgrounds." Wiranto grew up in traditional Central Java. Prabowo grew up abroad in European and Asian capitals. Where Prabowo's postings were field and combat assignments, Wiranto spent time in staff jobs and provincial commands. After four years as Suharto's adjutant, Wiranto rose quickly from Jakarta garrison commander to Kostrad chief. In 1997, he became army chief of staff. In March 1998, Suharto made him both the armed forces chief and the defense minister. (Asiaweek sent Wiranto Prabowo's claims and comments as well as questions appearing in this story. Wiranto's aide replied that the general had chosen to respond to Asiaweek in a later issue.)

Wiranto and Prabowo were equally balanced. But in March, when the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) re-elected Suharto and appointed Habibie vice president, Prabowo seemed to move a notch higher. He was a longtime friend of Habibie. They shared Western temperaments and an optimistic idealism. "I liked his vision of high technology," Prabowo says. "That captured my heart. There was always this: We'll show [that] Indonesia can be great." They met often. To fellow generals, Prabowo was Habibie's most ardent defender.

Given the shaky state of Suharto's health - he had had a mild stroke in December 1997 - Habibie's chances of succeeding him were better than those of any previous vice president. For Prabowo, Habibie's ascension meant a shot at becoming the military's boss: "Several times he mentioned: If I become president, you'll be armed forces chief, you'll be four-star."

That is, if there were an orderly succession. The collapse of the rupiah, which began in October 1997, had sent waves of social unrest throughout the archipelago. The following January, a bomb exploded in a Jakarta apartment

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occupied by members of the banned leftist People's Democratic Party (PRD). The military struggled to face strident student demonstrations. Some activists mysteriously went missing. On April 27, Pius Lustrilanang testified to his kidnapping and two-month imprisonment - the first of many accounts by abducted activists. During his interrogation, Lustrilanang said, he had received electric shocks and been held under water. Despite Wiranto's denials that kidnapping was policy, popular suspicion fell on the military, and especially on Kopassus, still identified with Prabowo though he was no longer with the unit.

While he had a reputation for absolute loyalty to Suharto, Prabowo also maintained friendships with critics of the president's "New Order" regime. These ranged from Suharto's disenchanted contemporary Gen. Nasution to Adnan Buyung Nasution, a lawyer who helped found the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, which defended and fostered anti-Suharto activists. Prabowo built relations with Muslim figures, who perceived themselves as both victimized by a Christian-influenced military and government as well as isolated in an ethnic Chinese-dominated economy. Among these: Amien Rais, a Jogjakarta professor whose attacks on Christian power and Chinese capital were turning into open criticism of Suharto. Prabowo's unconventional contacts, and closeness to Habibie, set him apart from others around the president.

THE RIOTS

The drama began on Tuesday, May 12, when Prabowo received a phone call. Some students had been shot during a demonstration at Trisakti University. Prabowo's first instinct was to blame ill-disciplined security forces: "Sometimes our police and soldiers are so unprofessional. You get some of these units - oh my God, this is stupid. That was my first reaction."

Sensing an impending emergency, he went to his headquarters on Merdeka Square, just beside the Jakarta garrison. As chief of the strategic reserve, Prabowo's job was to supply men and materiel. "I alerted my troops, to rush them in," he says. "These troops are always under operational control of the garrison commander. That's our system. I was basically in an advising capacity. I did not have command."

He returned home well after midnight, but was back at Kostrad HQ early the next morning, May 13. As marauding mobs began looting and burning buildings, Prabowo spent the day figuring out how to move in and barrack his battalions. Another worry: Wiranto had been scheduled to preside over an army ceremony the next morning, in Malang, East Java - over 650 km from the troubled capital. Throughout the 13th, Prabowo says he tried to persuade Wiranto to cancel his appearance. "I suggested that we call off the ceremony in Malang," he says. "The result: no, the ceremony was on. [I] phoned back. It went back and forth . . . Eight times I phoned his office. Eight times I was told that the show must go on."

So at 6:00 a.m. on Thursday the 14th, Prabowo arrived at Halim air base in East Jakarta. He says he was surprised, given the tense situation, to see most of the military's senior command there. During the flight and the ceremony, he says, Wiranto and he did not say much to each other. They arrived back in the capital after noon. Prabowo returned to Kostrad HQ, where he bumped into Syafrie. The Jakarta garrison commander was heading off to survey the western part of the city by helicopter. Prabowo accepted Syafrie's invitation to join him. As they watched the second day of rioting from the smoky sky, Prabowo remembers wondering to himself: "Why are there so few troops around?"

At around 3:30 p.m., Prabowo left Kostrad to see Habibie. The president had been away in Cairo since May 9 to attend a summit. The vice president and Prabowo talked about the possibility of a succession. Under the Constitution, Prabowo pointed out, Habibie was next in line. The subject of the future chief of the military came up. "I should have noticed the shift," says Prabowo. "He said: 'If your name comes up, I will approve.' There's a big difference there."

On the way back to Kostrad HQ, Prabowo noticed that Jakarta's main business artery seemed unguarded. He saw the garrison commander: "I said: Syafrie, on

Thamrin there are no troops. He was convinced there were enough. He asked me to come along, and we saw!" Prabowo suggested taking half of the 16 armored personnel carriers guarding the defense ministry and sending them instead to Thamrin. This did take place.

As night fell, Prabowo got a call from his secretary. Buyung Nasution and a motley collection of figures from various groups wanted to see him. (This May 14 meeting would become central to the later investigation into the riots.) "When I arrived at headquarters, they were there," Prabowo says. "I did not call them. They were asking: What's happening?" Buyung Nasution demanded to know if there was any truth to the spreading rumors that Prabowo had planned the riots, the Trisakti shootings, as well as the abductions. He also asked if there was rivalry between him and Wiranto. Prabowo denied everything. "How can there be rivalry?" he explains now. "He's a four-star. I'm a three-star. I was trying to step in line. But after him I would be a good candidate, wouldn't I?"

After a command briefing chaired by Wiranto which ended late, Prabowo arrived at his next appointment at nearly 1:00 a.m. Two close friends from Abdurrahman Wahid's mass Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) had suggested Prabowo see the cleric, who was already asleep when the general arrived. Wahid, a.k.a. Gus Dur, still received Prabowo and asked about the chaotic situation. "I said, we can get it under control tomorrow," says Prabowo.

After a change of clothes, he headed for Halim airbase, where Suharto was due to arrive before dawn on May 15, Friday. Prabowo waited in his jeep while Wiranto met Suharto. Then the three, with most of the senior command, drove to Suharto's home on Cendana Street in central Jakarta. Prabowo says Suharto appeared cold toward him. By now, Prabowo believes, Suharto thought his son-in-law was plotting against him. Says Prabowo: "It came out in the papers that Gen. Nasution, who everyone knew was fond of me, said that Amien Rais should talk to Gen. Prabowo [about] taking care of the situation. This must have been sent to Pak Harto."

At the end of his rule, Suharto had become as dependent on the ministers, generals and children who surrounded him as they were on him. He was their leader, but, in a sense, he was also their prisoner. "There's a thousand-year-old art of palace intrigue," says Prabowo. "You whisper something very delicately, and poison someone's mind. I tried to give information, but I was considered as meddling. There were people poisoning his mind: that his son-in-law's there only to grab power." This, Prabowo now believes, contributed to his downfall.

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