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Indonesia Burning

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by Terry McCarthy

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With rocks crashing through his windows, an iron spike punching holes through his kitchen door and a mob outside baying “Burn! Burn!,” Philip Lo discovered the meaning of terror last Thursday as he cowered for two hours with his family inside a locked bedroom.

“This is like being in a war,” said the ethnic-Chinese pastor whose church and adjoining house were attacked during riots in Jakarta that left around 400 dead and hundreds of stores looted and gutted by fire. “All we could hear was things being smashed up outside,” said Lo. He and his family escaped injury, but their food stocks were carried off, their car was burned and the inside of the church was ransacked. Lo knows he was targeted because the Chinese minority is perceived as more affluent than most Indonesians. “This is a problem of the stomach. People don’t have food,” he said. “If there are no reforms, the riots will get even worse. This is amok.”

“Amok”–literally, “to go berserk” in the Malay tongue that is spoken across Indonesia–is precisely what the outside world has feared for Jakarta ever since it was hit by a currency crisis late last year that the aging President Suharto, 76, seemed unable to understand or to control. Suharto, in power for 32 years, refused to implement key economic reforms that could damage the private business interests of his family members and close friends, even as food prices spiraled. The fatal shooting of six students by police in the capital last Tuesday sparked riots and looting. “Indonesia needs to break the cycle of violence that appears to be emerging,” said Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, calling for “dialogue between the Indonesian government and its citizens.” Suharto cut short a visit to Egypt, but by the time he returned to Jakarta early Friday, clouds of smoke hung over the city as the country he had patiently built up for three decades burned before his eyes. Early Saturday

morning the U.S. embassy began an emergency evacuation of Americans on charter planes. Other embassies advised their citizens to leave Indonesia as soon as possible.

Indonesia's economy has taken a hard fall, and no level of society has escaped the pain. The population of more than 200 million people has seen per capita income drop from $1,200 to $300 almost overnight. Tinted-glass towers in the business district of what was last year one of Asia's hottest cities for investors now stand virtually empty. Corporations have no way of repaying the $70 billion they borrowed from foreign banks, and much business has simply ceased. At the other end of the economic scale, poor households have no way of paying the escalating prices for rice and cooking oil that keep them from going hungry.

"There is a lot of pent-up anger in people, and now it is blowing," says Endy Bayuni, managing editor of the Jakarta Post newspaper. "Now it is revenge time." It was the very symbols of the country's new wealth that became the targets of last week's rioting: shopping malls were looted and torched, car dealerships were destroyed, the new toll road from the airport was commandeered by lawless mobs who threatened to set fire to cars that did not hand over cash on demand. "I have never done anything like this before," said Sali, a 27-year-old man who had just taken a television from an electronics store in Jakarta's Tanah Abang district. "But we can't afford to buy anything anymore." The precedents were not good–the last time Indonesia went amok was in 1965: half a million people were killed after an abortive communist coup then-President Sukarno could not control. Suharto used the turmoil to maneuver himself into the leadership.

It is a sad testament to the nature of power in Indonesia that the country must again be brought to the brink of disaster before leadership can be transferred. There is little argument that Suharto's rule is coming to an end. Said Amien Rais, a key opposition figure who heads the powerful Muhammadiyah Muslim organization: "The only way to stop this move toward anarchy is for Suharto to step down."

Students who have been demonstrating against Suharto's rule and in favor of democracy since February were more forthright. SUHARTO MUST BE THROWN OUT LIKE A DOG, read graffiti outside the elite Trisakti University in Jakarta. SUHARTO SUCKS THE PEOPLE'S BLOOD.

However, the military is the only body that will be able to pressure Suharto to step down–just as it is the only force that can restore order on the streets and stop the country from self-destructing. "Right now, they have a very tough decision to make," says Bayuni. "If they continue supporting Suharto, will the country break apart? Or if they pull out their support,

will it save the country?" For three decades Suharto has practiced divide and rule, carefully inspiring personal loyalty from his generals while cultivating conflicts between them so that none would emerge to challenge him–the very reason it is so hard to find a future presidential candidate. The schisms go to the very top: the current chief of the armed forces, General Wiranto, served as Suharto's personal adjutant from 1989 to '93, and his main rival is the head of the army's special forces, General Prabowo Subianto, who also happens to be Suharto's son-in-law.

Sources close to the military have told TIME that in the past three months, differences in the officer corps have been papered over and an informal advisory group has been meeting to discuss possible ways of easing Suharto out of power without loss of face to him or threats to national stability. One possible scenario: calling a special session of the parliament in three months' time, when Suharto could announce that he was stepping down and a new President would be appointed. Another option being considered is for Suharto to remain as a figurehead President, while a transitional council of military and civilian officials would be set up to run the country's affairs.

The military has clearly decided political change is necessary: Wiranto has repeatedly supported the students' right to demonstrate on campus, and ordinary soldiers patrolling universities have begun high-fiving students and giving them thumbs-up signals. "The military has decided what's good for society is good for the military, and what is good for the military is good for society," says Afan Gaffar, a political scientist at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. "I strongly believe the military will take the side of the students."

However, there is still one huge imponderable standing in the way of a peaceful handover of power, and that is Suharto himself. Senior figures at the Pentagon are skeptical that Suharto is ready to step down. Said a Pentagon official: "My sense is that Suharto will not go willingly. I think he'll put up a fight, and it could get very bloody." Most Indonesians were terrified by the sight of mobs running amok in Jakarta last week, and terrified because there was no immediate solution in sight.

–With reporting by John Colmey and David Liebhold/Jakarta and Mark Thompson/Washington

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