Indonesia's Reformasi movement yet to eradicate graft

SINGAPORE: Indonesia is marking the 10th anniversary of the Reformasi movement this week.

Thousands of students took to the streets in May 1998, demanding political change in the country. The movement marked the end of President Suharto’s 32-year rule, heralding a new era of democracy in the country.

At that time, with widespread unemployment and rising costs, Indonesia was bearing the full brunt of the Asian Economic Crisis and the late President Suharto did not seem to be providing any solutions.

The student revolt, along with opposition from his army generals and the economic crisis, proved to be a potent mix for the former president.

21 May 1998 was to signal a new era of democracy for the world's largest archipelago, but 10 years on, analysts said a report card on Indonesia's reformation shows varied results.

Dr Vedi Hadiz, National University of Singapore, said: "Some of these demands the students voiced ten years ago have certainly not been fulfilled, partly because a lot of the people who were powerful or who were in powerful positions during Suharto's new order actually survived Reformasi."

"The gap between the rich and poor hasn't really been narrowed. And basically, some members of society are more privileged than other members of society. I should also mention that for instance, the military has been driven more into the barracks," said Dr Tobias Retig, Singapore Management University.

What Reformasi seems to have failed to achieve is an end to corruption.

One of the potent ingredients of President Suharto's ouster was accusations of massive graft, but ten years on, the country seems to have fared no better.

"Business people often complain to me that today they don't know who to bribe. In the Suharto period, they knew who to bribe and they know the results would happen," said Dr Hadiz.

An annual corruption index last year ranked Indonesia a lowly 143 out of 179 countries. It is a figure that continues to slow the rate of foreign investments into the country.

But analysts said eradicating corruption will take more time.

Dr Hadiz said: "It is incorrect to imagine that the tide of Reformasi swept aside the entire edifice of the 30-year-old authoritarian Suharto regime. It got rid of Suharto, it got rid of certain elements in that network of predatory power, it forced the military to back down, but many, many important sections of the new order were able to reinvent themselves and re-position themselves within Indonesia's new democracy."

Fighting graft is one element Indonesia will reflect upon on its decade-old reformation report card and many know if nothing is done about it, corruption may still prove to be its failing grade ten years on.