

Leader of the bourgeois opposition

The elevation of Amien Rais

Peter Symonds
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In the wake of Suharto's resignation, Amien Rais, chairman of the Islamic Muhammadiyah organisation, has been the only political figure so far to openly propose himself as an alternative to B.J. Habibie for president.

In the international media he has been prominently featured over the last week as an opponent of Suharto, a spokesman for the student protesters and a potential next president. On May 20 the main US business daily, the *Wall Street Journal*, ran a largely favourable front-page profile of Rais, noting that 'he says he has modified his youthful hostility to capitalism.'

Just before the political crisis erupted, Rais visited Washington, appeared before a US Congressional Human Rights Caucus and held private talks with Clinton administration officials and business leaders.

The rapid promotion of Rais is a measure of the quandary facing the ruling class, in Indonesia and internationally, as they cast around for a credible alternative to Suharto. All of the bourgeois opponents to Suharto are tainted by their close associations with his regime, support for his policies and his brutal suppression of the working class.

Rais is no exception. He was born in the central Javan city of Solo in 1944, has a degree in sociology from the University of Notre Dame and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He is currently a political science lecturer at the prestigious Gadjah Mada university in Yogyakarta.

The very fact that Rais remained the head of the extensive 28 million-strong Muhammadiyah organisation, under conditions where all such positions were carefully vetted by Suharto and the state, reveals his close ties to the regime. Muhammadiyah played an important political role in sanctioning the mass killings of Communist Party members and ethnic Chinese that

accompanied Suharto's seizure of power in 1965-66.

A recent history of Indonesia recounts, 'At a meeting in Jakarta on November 11, 1965, Muhammadiyah proclaimed that the extermination of Geštapo/PKI constituted 'holy war.' Other Islamic groups endorsed this view. Whatever Islamic leaders may have meant by this, such pronouncements appeared to make the killing of Communists a religious duty and a passport to paradise to any Muslim who lost his own life in the violence' (*A History of Modern Indonesia*, p. 288, by M. C. Ricklefs, Stanford University Press, 1993).

Muhammadiyah is based among the traders, small shopkeepers, and other layers of the urban petty bourgeoisie throughout Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi. The organisation is considered more sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalism than the larger, rural-based Nahdlatul Ulama and, in the 1980s, Rais earned some official displeasure because of his public sympathies for the Iranian revolution.

He was until last year chairman of the Experts Council of the Association of Indonesian Moslem Intellectuals (ICMI). The ICMI was established in 1990 by Habibie, with the support of Suharto, as a means of containing Muslim opponents and extending the limited social basis of the regime.

Rais is widely known for his public attacks on the ethnic Chinese, many of whom are Christians, and has demanded a reduction of their influence in the state bureaucracy, business and government. As such, he is a spokesman for non-Chinese or *pribumi* businessmen seeking assistance in competing with their wealthy Chinese rivals.

Even though Rais has recently attempted to moderate his anti-Christian stance, he joined in the attacks on Chinese businessmen at the beginning of the year, blaming them for the economic crisis. In a comment to

the British *Sunday Times*, he complained that Chinese 'parasites' were close to Suharto and called on them to surrender their control of the Indonesian economy.

As a prominent ICMI member, Rais had close links with the so-called Green or Muslim faction of the Indonesian armed forces. Earlier this year, he held private talks with General Prabowo Subianto, commander of the notorious KOSTRAD strategic forces and the son-in-law of Suharto, and Feisel Tanjung, former armed forces chief and now Minister for Politics and Security.

Early last year, Rais was forced to resign as chairman of the ICMI experts committee after criticising the government's mining policies and the operations of the Freeport copper mine in Irian Jaya. Peeved at losing his position, he later complained that he posed no threat: 'Some people can't distinguish between cats and tigers. I'm only a cat, a thin cat.'

Over recent months, he has spoken at a number of student protests and rallies. But like all the bourgeois opposition figures, he is terrified of the potential of the demonstrations to trigger a broad social movement of the working class.

He has consistently acted as a brake on student protesters. In March, Rais urged students to give Suharto six months to resolve the political and economic crisis. Now he is calling for students to give Habibie, who is little more than a front man for Suharto, a similar chance.

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