

Habibie unveils plan to maintain political restrictions in Indonesia

Mike Head**12 August 1998**

Indonesian President B.J. Habibie has set out plans to maintain the military-backed dictatorship of Suharto, while appearing to make democratic concessions to opposition groupings and the major powers. He has outlined a tightly controlled political system, with guaranteed places for the military and presidential appointees in parliament and wide-ranging restrictions on new parties.

Habibie gave the first sketch of his scheme in an interview with the South Korean conservative daily newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* on Saturday. He said his proposals, still under study, would 'make it possible for any man, any group' to take part in parliamentary elections scheduled for next May.

In reality, his plan would produce only slightly modified versions of the Suharto regime's two puppet legislative bodies, the People's Representative Council (DPR) and the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). The latter meets every five years to select a president and vice president.

His scheme would increase the DPR's membership from 500 to 550, with 55 seats set aside for the military, compared to 75 at present. Of the remaining legislators, 420 would be elected from among the parties permitted to register for the poll. The other 75 seats would be allocated to the authorised parties on the basis of 'proportional representation'.

The MPR membership, currently 1,000, would be reduced to 700. It would consist of the DPR plus 81 appointed by the government to represent the regions and 69 to represent non-political groupings. The president would pick the latter on the basis of suggestions by the DPR. In other words, the president would directly control about one-third of the body that selects the president.

At present, the MPR consists of the 500 DPR members, 251 presidential nominees allotted between the three legal parties, 149 appointees representing the regions and 100

selected by the president to represent non-political groups.

Unveiling his plan, Habibie said the proportion of elected legislators would rise from 85 to 90 percent in the DPR and from 42.5 to 70.2 percent in the MPR. In practice, the regime aims to retain a tight grip over the elected representatives as well as the appointed ones.

Suharto's 'New Order' laws, still in force, restrict the number of political parties to three--the ruling Golkar group, the Muslim-based People's Progress Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). According to media reports, some 60 new parties have emerged since May 21 when Suharto handed over to Habibie, but they are still not recognised.

Habibie said parties eligible to take part in the elections would need to be represented in at least 14 of the country's 27 provinces. They must also be recommended by 1 percent of the voters, or about 1.2 million people, with each restricted to recommending one party only.

These restrictions are calculated to favour the existing officially sanctioned machines of Golkar, PPP and PDI. Habibie made no mention of the laws that prohibit political parties from campaigning in rural areas, outlaw political advertising, and ban unauthorised public meetings and speeches. Nor did he foreshadow any further release of political prisoners. Those still incarcerated include members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), Democratic Peoples Party (PRD) and the East Timorese separatist movement.

Under Habibie's proposed timetable, the current MPR--the same one that rubberstamped Suharto as president in March--would reconvene in November to endorse the revised election laws, with the polls to be conducted in May 1999. The resulting MPR would convene at the end of next year to select a president and vice president to govern for five years from January 1, 2000.

In the interview Habibie expressed the hope that 'the

people' would consider him a candidate for the presidency for a second term. Only five months ago, Suharto used similar language to indicate his determination to remain in power.

By all indications, the leaders of the bourgeois opposition parties intend to accommodate themselves to Habibie's scheme, and seek official sanction to take part in the elections. Last Saturday, supporters of Megawati Sukarnoputri, the PDI leader ousted by the government in 1996, decided to prepare for the elections.

A three-day national working meeting of Megawati's PDI faction, attended by 125 party representatives made the decision. Habibie's administration gave permission for the meeting but police said that did not mean the government recognised Megawati's wing of the PDI as the legal one. Only last month, the regime refused to allow Megawati's organisation to hold a public meeting to commemorate the second anniversary of the riots that accompanied her removal in July 1996.

It has long been clear that the regime now headed by Habibie intends to keep a tight grip over the political system. In June Habibie's interior and justice ministers said that no socialist or communist parties would be legalised, only parties that subscribe to the official ideology of *pancasila*. This doctrine, with its insistence on 'national unity' forbids appeals to the independent class interests of the working people.

Apart from the modifications proposed to the token parliamentary bodies, Habibie's regime is dominated by former Suharto ministers and military chiefs, led by General Wiranto, who is both Defence Minister and head of the military, as he was under Suharto.

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