On-the-spot report:

Mega fever in Bali

Our correspondent
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The national congress of Megawati Sukarnoputri's faction of the Indonesian Democratic Party--PDI Perjuangan or PDI in Struggle--held October 8-10 in Bali presented such a striking contradiction. On the one hand, for Mega supporters, especially the younger ones, it was an outpouring of exuberance and open defiance, a direct challenge to Habibie and the existing order. On the other hand, there were the empty rhetorical speeches of the leaders, the backroom manoeuvres, and timid pleas for reforms in the political resolutions. Underlying the actions of Megawati and the leaders was the implicit pledge to the ruling class that the party would work to ensure that no politically explosive movement emerged in the lead-up to next year's elections.

For four days or so, the congress disrupted the rather aimless, mundane and sometimes sordid routines in Bali's tourist enclaves south of the capital of Denpasar. In some way, everyone appeared to enter into the pro-Mega fever. In Kuta Beach, the seemingly endless maze of tourist shops and stalls were all decked out in the PDI colours of red, or red and white. Banners were stretched across the roads and flags flew with images of Mega, her father Sukarno, the first president, and the party emblem, the bull. Mega T-shirts, headbands and hats were liberally sprinkled through the crowds. Every motorbike, van, bus and car had its obligatory Megasticker. Some were dressed up in the most outrageous manner--banners, stickers, spray-painted slogans. Mega-fanatiks, as one slogan proclaimed.

It was the younger people who most actively shouted their support. Small groups of motor bikes turned into long convoys of hundreds of riders accompanied by an assortment of cars, mini-buses and four-wheel drive vehicles packed with youth hanging out the windows, riding on top--all revelling in the moment, revving motors in unison, swirling banners and shouting 'Mega' to bystanders.

A noisy parade along Kuta's main street seemed to hold a particular attraction. A good means perhaps of thumbing one's nose at those who not only bring their money but all the inevitable vices of such tourist traps around the world. Elsewhere the convoys took over the roads, particularly near Sanur, where the congress was being held.

Traffic slowed to a snail's pace but few except the odd bewildered tourist appeared to mind. No-one honked their horns or yelled abuse. The older onlookers smiled or looked bemused. The street hawkers, usually with their eye on the next tourist, stopped for a moment and turned to watch. The young, even the very young, sometimes cheered and called out their support.

Nor was the Mega-mania confined to Kuta and Sanur. It was visible everywhere--in the capital Denpasar, in the larger and smaller towns, in the villages, outside company compounds and banks, even in remote fields there was the occasional tall bamboo pole with its red and white flag flying from the top.

It expressed a mood, a rather vague feeling that an important change was taking place. Now, perhaps, after 32 years of Suharto's New Order dictatorship, something was about to change. The youth were demanding change, but their slogans and banners were very limited. Perhaps the party emblem--the bull--best caught the mood. Into its widely varied image, the youth poured their instincts and feelings. The bull snorted, the bull roared, the bull stamped its feet, the bull was not going to stop at anything.

What a contrast to the political offerings of the party elite. Local press reports estimated the actual attendance at 50,000 to 100,000 from all over the country--a sea of red banners and flags. But Megawati had little to say to her enthusiastic followers beyond a repetition of a few banal phrases about an honest and open government, which would tackle corruption, and appeals to the existing regime, the heirs of Suharto, for legal changes.

Her speech, when shorn of its rhetoric, was not directed at her members and supporters but to the ruling elite--both in Indonesia and internationally--of which she is a part. They had their representatives at the congress--the ambassadors of Brazil and South Africa, Bali's governor and former governor, economists and businessmen, and a swag of generals, from the regional armed forces head to a former head of the army's Strategic Forces, KOSTRAD. This was also evidenced in the plaudits for Megawati's speech from other political leaders including a former head of the ruling Golkar party, Sarwono Kusamaatmadja.

It was to these layers that Megawati promised to uphold the 1945 Constitution and the conservative ruling state ideology of Pancasila. It was a pledge not to rock the boat or upset the existing framework of state power, to accept all the structures, albeit in modified form, handed down from Suharto.

One of her close supporters and senior PDI member put the matter more explicitly. He made clear that Megawati would not use 'people's power' to challenge Habibie. The PDI, he said, did not agree with trying to whip up public sentiment to force its will because the president was elected by the People's Constituent Assembly (MPR). 'The only way for Megawati to become president is through elections.'

Summed up in these statements is the fear of all such bourgeois leaders who are willing, at times, and with great trepidation, to come to the head of protests and to use them for their own class purposes. But they are terrified that a movement of young people or students will trigger a broader social movement of the working class that will call into question the whole structure of capitalism.

This fear was encapsulated in the choice of congress venue. For weeks, Megawati and the Habibie regime batted the topic backwards and forwards. When it came down to it, the generals who stand behind Habibie would have preferred no congress at all. Their concerns about

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the threat to Bali's tourist industry were little more than window dressing--in the end very few troops and police were on the streets. In reality, for both sides, Bali and Sanur in particular could not have been a better choice--a site distant geographically and socially from the major centres of the Indonesian proletariat.

Sanur is not just a tourist resort but one of the more upmarket. As one bemo driver expressed it: 'Sanur is where all the rich pensioners and old people go--they have everything in their hotels--food, pools, beach on the doorstep. They don't have to move outside.' And the Grand Bali Beach Hotel where the congress was held is one of the more expensive and prestigious. Perhaps this is why the PDI convoys also had their sprinkling of late model, expensive cars.

One only has to consider the impact of such an outpouring of 'reformasi' sentiment if the congress had been held instead in one of the major industrial centres such as Medan, Surabaya or the capital Jakarta. And what the consequences would have been if the roving groups of youths had been shouting their slogans in the factory and working class areas where families are struggling just to survive. The social tensions created by Indonesia's economic crisis have created the potential for an explosive situation--a thought that would certainly have passed through the minds of PDI leaders.

What then did the congress decide? It reaffirmed its adherence to the program of 'economic reform' and 'an end to corruption'--watchwords for the implementation of the IMF's program of opening up the Indonesian economy to the predations of international finance capital and intensifying the burden on the Indonesian masses.

Politically, the congress entrenched Megawati as party chairwoman for the next five years with 'special autonomy to take extraordinary measures to maintain the party's existence.' Included was her right to 'determine the party's position in the national political constellation,' 'to solidify the party leadership' and 'to overcome obstacles, establish party discipline.'

So fearful are the PDI leaders of their own members, the party's instability, its reliance on Megawati and her familial connection to Sukarno, that they have insisted on a recipe for a one-woman dictatorship.

How it will be used was made clear when Megawati first flexed her powers to override party rules and appoint as one of the deputy chairmen, a retired Major General, Theo Syafei, a man who had joined the party only weeks before the congress. His choice was an obvious sop to the military, as other choices were to other powerbrokers. Haryim Wahid, brother of Abdurrahman Wahid, head of Nahdlatul Ulama, currently a political ally, was appointed to the party executive.

The gulf between the needs and aspirations of PDI members and supporters, and the political direction of the leadership was enormous. Why then were there no public tensions, no criticisms, no questions about Mega's thunderous silence during the events in May that led to Suharto's forced resignation?

To a certain extent, the eruption of Mega mania was ephemeral. Megawati was seen as expressing the ill-formed feelings and sentiments of many that there had to be a change, that ordinary people had to have a voice. The phenomenon appears to have been confined to Hindu Bali. Elsewhere others fix their expectations, uncritically, on Islamic leaders such as Amien Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid as well.

It is as if people are beginning to come out of a long political slumber. Opposition currents always existed but the heavy hand of Suharto and the military laid over every sphere of social life. As one man put it to me: for 32 years we were not free to talk, now we can. The youth are for Megawati but I will wait and see what happens.

Another semi-retired senior bank official told me that he had just begun to think about his political options for the first time. Under Suharto, he had to vote for Golkar along with the millions of other state officials and the military. Now he was looking at the PDI. His father had been for Sukarno and the PDI, so he should be a democrat too.

Add to this the all-pervasive distortion of history from formal independence in 1949 on. The bourgeoisie in Indonesia make great play of their struggle against the Dutch, despite the fact that they left all the fighting to the workers and peasants and at every turn vacillated, tried to reach a compromise with the colonial power and undermined the fight. Megawati plays on these national sentiments and her connection with Sukarno.

Moreover there exists the three decades of steady anti-communism--which is rooted in the identification of the Stalinist Communist Party of Indonesia with socialism. About Suharto's bloody military coup in 1965-66, there is widespread unclarity. Currently a public debate is beginning to open up over whether or not to modify the history books to include the genocide of 500,000 to a million workers, peasants and PKI members by the armed forces and right-wing groups.

All of this makes for great political confusion. Just months after Suharto's fall, there is a rather uncritical exuberance among youth. Among older layers a more cautious and perhaps more cynical approach, borne of bitter experiences. But it is also clear that this will change and questions will begin to be asked not only of Suharto and Habibie but Megawati, Rais and Wahid as well. More critical youth, workers and intellectuals will begin to question not just individuals but the social system of capitalism itself, which spawns the social misery and poverty that exist and begin to look seriously at a socialist alternative.

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