

Portrait of a political operator

Australian tour by Indonesian opposition leader Amien Rais

Peter Symonds
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A lecture in Sydney last week by Indonesian political leader Amien Rais provided a first-hand insight in the deeply conservative character of the man himself, and more generally of the bourgeois opposition to the Indonesian regime. What emerges is the picture of a political operator, fearful of any movement of the Indonesian masses, subservient to the needs of big business, and like all opportunists, ready to bend the truth to fit any situation.

Rais, head of the multi-million strong Islamic organisation Muhammadiyah and the newly-formed National Mandate Party (PAN), was strongly promoted in the international media as a key opposition figure and a 'democratic reformer' during the student protests that led to the downfall of Suharto in May. Now he clearly has ambitions to be the next president of Indonesia. National elections have been tentatively scheduled for May 26 as the prelude to the selection of the president by the end of 1999.

The lecture held at the University of NSW began with a critique of the Suharto regime which was both shallow and self-serving. In the formative years, Rais said, Suharto had made many promises that were not fulfilled. No mention was made of Suharto's bloody anti-communist military coup of 1965-66 that had resulted in the genocide of between 500,000 and a million workers, peasants and supporters of the Stalinist Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Nor did Rais explain why or how he, as a student during that time, had actively supported Suharto's New Order regime.

According to Rais, Suharto had failed to implement the 1945 Indonesian constitution; he had a very myopic vision; he had failed to utilise the oil profit bonanza to create an educated middle class. But Rais had very little to say about the social conditions facing Indonesian workers,

peasants and small shop keepers, nor of the ruthless suppression of all forms of political opposition under Suharto.

Throughout the lecture, Rais played upon his opposition to Suharto. But the fact is, like the other opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri, he was part of the ruling elite. He remained a university lecturer and leader of Muhammadiyah for years under conditions where such posts were carefully vetted by Suharto and the state. He was a close associate of the current president B.J. Habibie in the Association of Indonesian Moslem Intellectuals (ICMI), a body set up with the approval of Suharto, to buttress the regime's position among the largely Muslim population.

Rais was well-known in Indonesia for his public attacks on ethnic Chinese and his demands for a reduction of their influence in business, the state bureaucracy and government. Earlier in the year, he was complaining of Chinese 'parasites' and calling for them to surrender their control of the Indonesian economy. In Australia, however, he was keen to put on a more democratic face--encouraging Chinese businessmen to return to Indonesia and pledging to end legal discrimination against ethnic Chinese.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the lecture was the perspective offered by Rais for the future. Already student protests in Jakarta, Surabaya and elsewhere have called for the resignation of Habibie. Social unrest, looting and riots have been widespread as the regime has implemented the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), resulting in soaring prices and levels of unemployment.

Rais, however, insists that Habibie must remain in place until the elections next year. Only after a legitimate parliamentary assembly was established, with the

confidence of the people, he explained, could the economic crisis be tackled. Any attempt to oust Habibie would only result in anarchy.

Behind his insistence on slow, formal change lie two considerations. Firstly, Habibie and his ministers have no intention of establishing an electoral system that will allow the 88 newly-formed parties to compete on an equal basis in next year's elections. The current proposals include the retention of 55 military appointees in a lower house of 550 members, allowing the Indonesian armed forces to retain a central role in government.

Furthermore proposed regulations would require parties to obtain at least one million supporters in half of Indonesia's provinces before being eligible for registration. In the 75 seats assigned by proportional vote, a party would have to poll at least 10 percent to win a seat. But the majority of seats--420 in all--will be decided on a first-past-the-post basis. All of these measures are designed to favour larger, more established parties and will undoubtedly benefit Rais and Megawati as well as the government.

More fundamentally, as a product of privileged, middle class layers in Indonesian society, Rais is organically hostile to anything that might set off a political movement of the working class. From the beginning of the year Rais has acted as a brake on student demonstrations and rallies. After Suharto was rubberstamped for another term of president in March, he urged young people to hold off protests for six months. Just days before Suharto's resignation in May, Rais called off nationwide demonstrations, enabling a transition to Habibie as president and the consolidation of a regime in which the military retain all the key security and political posts.

Now he is calling for Habibie to be given a breathing space. What Rais, Habibie and all these bourgeois politicians fear is that, under conditions of deepening economic and social crisis, the student protests may spark an uprising of the workers and impoverished masses that will threaten the entire structure of class privilege and exploitation. That is why Rais indicated that he would retain the military in a political role for at least five years: he knows he may have to rely on its support to crush the opposition of workers.

At a short press conference held after the lecture, the *World Socialist Web Site* posed two questions to Rais which shed further light on his political outlook and that of the bourgeoisie he represents--its subservience to international capital, and its complete inability to deal with its own bloody history.

Asked about his attitude to the IMF plan and its devastating social impact, Rais prevaricated at first: he had been hesitant to agree to the program, disbursements had been delayed, it was only an interim solution. But as he continued it soon became clear that in any government he headed, the demands of the IMF would prevail. There was simply no alternative, he asserted. Indonesia had to work with the IMF to improve its economic shape--it was a necessary evil.

Challenged on the role of his own organisation, Muhammadiyah, in fomenting the massacres during 1965-66, Rais became very defensive. These were the very darkest years of our history, he said, and the Muhammadiyah did not condone this inhuman and barbaric action committed by Suharto's soldiers. 'If you can find one single statement of Muhammadiyah which does I will give you will give you \$US1,000,' he exclaimed rhetorically.

An appropriate quote was read back to Rais from a standard Indonesian history by M.C. Ricklefs: 'At a meeting in Jakarta on November 11, 1965, Muhammadiyah proclaimed that the extermination of the Gestapo/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.'

Clearly shaken by the response, Rais first asked for the reference to be repeated, then claimed it must be a distortion, and finally proceeded to a lengthy dissertation on the theological impossibility of such a proclamation. Needless to say, neither the \$1,000, nor more importantly, an honest political account was forthcoming.



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