

Thousands rally at Indonesian PDI congress

Megawati pledges an "open market"

Mike Head
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Megawati Sukarnoputri, widely touted by the Western media as Indonesia's next president, pledged to uphold the 'open market system' of global capitalism on Thursday, the opening day of the congress staged by her faction of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI).

Speaking before a crowd estimated at 50,000 on the island of Bali, Megawati sought to identify herself with the plight of the poor. Her voice quavered as she spoke of hungry peasant families hit by 80 percent inflation for the past year.

Yet her central message was directed to the dozens of foreign diplomats, former generals and cabinet ministers in attendance. In a bid to assure corporate investors that a PDI government would protect and uphold their interests, she urged the crowd not to oppose an 'open' economy. 'In the era of globalisation which calls for the implementation of an open market system, as a nation with self-confidence, we should not have the need to feel worried or scared,' she said.

Her remarks are in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund, the global financial markets and the major capitalist powers for the complete restructuring of the economy to remove all limits on the operations of the transnational banks and corporations. The IMF exploited the meltdown of the Indonesian currency to repeatedly raise the demand for an 'open economy' against the longtime dictator General Suharto. When he was forced to resign in May, the same agenda was required of his anointed successor, B. J. Habibie.

The Western media interpreted Megawati's words as a promise not to follow the policies of her father, Indonesia's first president Sukarno, who fomented nationalism and placed Dutch assets under government or military control during the 1950s and 1960s to placate the demands of workers and peasants for social

justice. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described her remarks as 'an apparent signal to the scores of foreign diplomats in the audience that a PDI-led government would not turn back to her father's ruinous policies of nationalism and economic isolation'.

In recent years Megawati has become so closely identified with the Clinton administration in Washington that she features a US State Department human rights report as the first item on her Internet homepage. But the Bali rally showed how Megawati and her backers are walking a political tightrope. While distancing themselves from Sukarno's anti-colonial populism, they are seeking to exploit her prestige as his daughter to elevate her to cult status among the Indonesian masses.

By one police estimate, one million people gathered in the area surrounding the rally, near the beach resort of Sanur. Banners proclaiming 'Mega-mania', 'Mega for President', 'Mega-Trend' and 'Mega-Fanatic' decorated cars, shops, taxis and fishing boats.

The open-air meeting itself was a sea of red, with tens of thousands of supporters dressed in the party's colours. Red banners displayed images of both Megawati and her father. With the crowd cheering her on, Megawati made a series of demagogic and vague statements about securing 'justice'. She drew roars of approval when she said, 'criminals should be brought to justice'. This was taken as a reference to the Suharto government, although Megawati avoided any mention of the military regime.

Many of those present had travelled for days and walked for hours to reach the rally, defying threats of violence and intimidation by the Habibie-led regime. It was only a week since the government gave permission for the rally, abandoning an earlier ban.

In the days leading up to the meeting, at least 100

people were killed in a series of grisly murders and mutilations just across the sea in East Java around the town of Banyuwangi, the main port for ferries to Bali. Local people accused the military of trying to create an atmosphere of tension that could turn into violence when PDI supporters started arriving in the port.

Megawati's faction of the PDI remains illegal under the military's political system, which Habibie's administration has still not modified. The ruling Golkar party dominates the system, augmented by two authorised opposition parties, the PDI and the PPP--the Muslim-based Indonesian Peoples Party.

In 1996 Suharto removed Megawati as president of the PDI, a move that provoked clashes involving troops, government thugs and Megawati supporters outside the PDI headquarters. Much of Megawati's recent political campaigning has been to demand that she be reinstated as head of the official PDI, although she is expected to now rename her faction as PDI-Struggle.

Under conditions where the majority of the Indonesian population faces poverty, Megawati is being promoted by the media as a figure who can unify the nation and 'stop the drift towards chaos and disintegration,' to use the language of *Time*, the US newsmagazine.

On the same day the PDI congress opened, the Habibie government released a new unemployment forecast, predicting that another two million workers would lose their jobs by the end of the year, taking the official total to 20 million. The World Bank estimate is more than twice as high--40 percent by the end of 1998. Food prices have risen 123.4 percent in 12 months, with the rupiah having lost 80 percent of its value.

Time hopefully predicted that Megawati's PDI would win at least 40 percent of the vote in elections scheduled by Habibie for next year. It described Megawati as 'odds-on favourite' to win the December 1999 presidential ballot, with the backing of conservative Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid and other prominent figures. Likewise, the British Broadcasting Commission (BBC) hailed Megawati's 'triumphant re-entry into formal politics' and called her 'a symbol of resistance during the Suharto era' who has become 'the country's most popular opposition figure'. Reuters news agency contrasted Megawati's rally with Habibie's lack of support. 'His strong link to the now-

discredited Suharto regime make him an unlikely choice for an electorate seeking quick reform of their battered economic and political system,' it said.

With support for Golkar plummeting and a plethora of some 80 other parties seeking registration, sections of the Indonesian political elite have joined the campaign to mythologise Megawati as a charismatic martyr of the struggle against Suharto. 'Suharto tried to make her an un-person but he created a hero,' Aristides Katoppo, senior editor of the daily newspaper *Suara Pembaruan* told *Time*. In fact, Megawati almost disappeared from public view during the growing protests that forced Suharto to quit. She appealed for calm, a plea she has continued to make under Habibie.

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