Indonesian generals and businessmen join Megawati's camp

Mike Head
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No less than 161 retired generals, as well as several former senior officials of the ruling Golkar party and scores of foreign diplomats, attended last week's congress of Megawati Sukarnoputri's faction of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). It was one of the more revealing features of the congress, where Megawati was rubberstamped as the party's chairman and nominee to run for the country's presidency next year.

Under conditions of economic disintegration and widespread unemployment and hunger, key sections of the ruling elite in Indonesia, including those who loyally participated in the military dictatorship of General Suharto for years, are joining Western governments in boosting Megawati. The daughter of Suharto's predecessor, Sukarno, she is being promoted as a cult figure behind which a new capitalist government can be cobbled together.

Most of the publicity given to the PDI-Megawati congress, the first to be held since Suharto's downfall, focussed on the tens of thousands of ordinary people who flocked to the opening rally and the carnival atmosphere of 'Mega-mania' generated on the eastern Indonesian resort island of Bali, where the gathering was held.

By one estimate, up to one million people converged on the rally. Shops, taxis, buses, boats and people were adorned with Megawati slogans, red flags and huge banners. Noisy convoys of motorcycles and trucks paraded through streets. Clearly, masses of people facing social misery associate Megawati with desires for a better life after 32 years of Suharto's regime.

But the main concern of media commentators was that Megawati and her backers demonstrated their capacity to control and contain the popular discontent. 'The completion of the Bali PDI Congress showed that Ms Megawati could draw a sizeable crowd as well as preventing mass rallies from disintegrating into violence,' noted Louise Williams in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The real business of the congress was conducted far from the rally staged in rice fields on the first day. Some 900 carefully selected delegates retired to a plush hotel to approve a new handpicked party executive and to grant wide-ranging powers to Megawati and her advisers to change the party's name, structure and policies.

After two days of closed-door haggling and jostling for position between several factions, including long-time backers and some of the generals and other new recruits from the Suharto order, Megawati unveiled an expanded 17-member central board. The three new members symbolised the domination of her party by various elements within the Indonesian capitalist class.

The first was Major-General Theo Syafei, the highest-profile of the retired military officers who have joined the party. Then there was Meilono Suwondo, a prominent businessman who will be expected to provide financial support and links to the corporate elite. Finally, there was Hasyim Wahid, the brother of the country's leading Muslim figure who heads Nahdatul Ulama (NU) a large rural-based organisation.

The assembled delegates cheered the announcement of their appointment, as they did the pronouncement of Megawati as party president, but no other candidates were allowed. Senior party official Mochtar Buchori somewhat lamely dismissed media suggestions that the process lacked democracy. 'It looks undemocratic but it is not undemocratic,' he said. 'Every one of the 300 party branches wants her to be the leader. It is real consensus with consent.' Of course, in their time, both her father and General Suharto proclaimed the virtues of 'consensus'.

According to media reports, manoeuvring was fierce for positions on the central board, particularly the Secretary-General's post and that of Vice-Chairman, who would take over as chairman if Megawati became President. To a large extent, Megawati is simply a figurehead being used by other forces. When they speak to the Western media, her leading supporters openly disparage her alleged lack of political acumen.

'I wish she was 10 percent as smart as her father, as educated as her father, then everything would be all right. But she is not even 10 percent of her father,' said Buchori in an interview with the *Australian*. Buchori is part of the political establishment, a former deputy of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences. He indicated that Megawati would have her policies dictated by himself and other advisers.

Asked how effective a Megawati presidency would be, he replied: 'It depends on the staff who support her. That is why our job is to prop up Megawati. As long as she is willing to

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listen and to learn, that's okay. She does not understand many things too well.'

Media reports refer to Buchori and others as 'image-makers' for Megawati. In one of their more crude efforts, they concocted a front-page photo of a young Megawati atop a bucking bull, the PDI symbol. More seriously, their goal is to trade on hazy recollections of the pre-Suharto period, when Sukarno became the country's first president after formal independence from the Netherlands.

At the same time, these advisers are anxiously assuring the United States and other capitalist powers that a Megawati-led regime would not mean a return to the nationalism and populism that characterised Sukarno's rule in the 1950s and early 1960s. That message could be 'read between the lines' of Megawati's rally speech, Buchori said.

While Megawati declared in her speech that she would pursue 'justice' and unearth corruption, taken by the audience to mean action against the Suharto family and its business associates, one of the few concrete policies to emerge from the three-day congress was a plan to establish a South African-style 'Truth Commission' or a kind of amnesty in which corrupt officials could declare themselves and pay back an agreed portion of their gains to the government.

'There is too much corruption to try to punish everybody,' said PDI official Laksamana Sukardi. Under the Mandela-ANC regime in South Africa, the Truth Commission has been crucial in legitimising the continued domination of economic and political life by the wealthy, joined by a new ANC elite.

The PDI itself has a long history of service to Indonesian capitalism. During most of the Suharto period, it was an officially sanctioned political safety valve for the military dictatorship. It was one of the two token opposition parties formed by Suharto in 1973. Sukarno's former Indonesian nationalist party, the PNI, was bureaucratically merged with Christian parties to set up the PDI.

The PDI's role began to shift in the early 1990s when the United States started demanding the dismantling of the economic monopolies established by the Suharto family, the generals and their cronies. Megawati was hoisted out of obscurity by US-backed, disaffected sections of the Indonesian business elite to become PDI chairman. The conflict became more open when Suharto removed Megawati as chairman in 1996 and set up an alternative PDI. Both at that time and during the May events that toppled Suharto, Megawati refused to lead any campaign against the regime, expressing an innate fear of encouraging any broader movement by the working class and poor masses.

Editorials in the corporate-owned media in Australia have welcomed Megawati's rising star, particularly from the point of view of securing the substantial investments of Australian-based companies in Indonesia. Nevertheless, certain reservations have been expressed.

Rupert Murdoch's the *Australian* hailed the peaceful rally on Bali, referred to Megawati's 'enormous popular appeal' and praised her for promising an 'open economy'. It said fundamental questions remained about her close ties to the military and her possible support for a nationalist and interventionist economic model.

The *Australian Financial Review* called on the current government headed by Suharto's anointed successor, Dr Habibie, to end its efforts to block Megawati's participation in next year's scheduled elections, so as to prevent conflicts that could get out of hand.

With an eye to opening up new profit-making opportunities for Australian business, particularly in the oil and mineral-rich regions, such as Timor, West Papua and Sulawesi, the business paper also urged Habibie to offer greater regional autonomy to such provinces, as well as Bali, to cater for local demands for bigger slices of mining and tourism revenue.

Finally, the newspaper forecast the development of coalition politics in Indonesia, with Megawati negotiating with other parties to create a government. Although the editorial did not specify, this could include the rump of the Golkar party headed by Habibie and the National Mandate formation of Amien Rais, another capitalist-backed opposition figure.

Whatever combination emerges over the next year, these elements are being brought together to implement the dictates of the global capitalist market and impose them on the Indonesian masses. As Megawati's congress illustrated, declarations of democracy are for public consumption only. None of these parties are capable of providing genuine democracy because that requires freeing the country from the grip of world capitalism and the national bourgeoisie.

See Also:

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