

A caricature of democracy:

New political laws passed in Indonesia

Peter Symonds
4 February 1999

After months of debate and haggling, the Indonesian parliament last week passed a series of amended political laws, which establish the framework for national elections on June 7. The legislation sets out in detail the new composition of the parliamentary bodies, the rules governing the election and the functioning of political parties.

A great deal is riding on these elections for the ruling class in Indonesia and internationally. The economic collapse over the last year in Indonesia has produced deepening poverty and unemployment and heightened political tensions and social unrest. B.J. Habibie replaced Suharto as president last May but his government has faced continuing protests and demonstrations calling for his resignation and broader democratic reform.

The widespread distrust of Habibie is a major factor hampering the implementation of measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF): the dismantling of price subsidies, the slashing of government spending and the removal of barriers to international investors. The election is widely perceived in the international press and in ruling circles as a means of legitimising the next government by drawing in opposition leaders such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer summed up the agenda when he stated at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland: "This is a fundamentally important period for Indonesia. Its election has to be a success. It should be a safety valve to ease internal tensions. But if they fail to conduct a credible election process the potential for instability will be very great indeed and would raise questions about the integrity of the country."

Any examination of the new legislation, however, reveals that the next national elections will be just as stage-managed as those that took place under the previous Suharto regime. The Australian government, along with the other major powers, backed Suharto for decades and accepted his electoral charades. Downer is now concerned that unless "the international community" provides the necessary "support and encouragement" the elections will be widely viewed as undemocratic and illegitimate.

The elections will take place within the overall framework of

the 1945 Constitution which provides for two parliamentary bodies--the House of Representatives (DPR) and the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which includes the DPR. The president, who has broad powers to rule by decree and appoint and dismiss ministers, is not subject to direct election but is appointed at a special session of the MPR.

Under Suharto, the parliamentary bodies operated as rump organisations, stacked with handpicked appointees including a substantial number of military top brass. These bodies had little say in the day-to-day running of the government and rarely exercised any legislative powers. The MPR, which unanimously rubberstamped Suharto for seven consecutive terms as president, consisted of the 500 members of the DPR, only 400 of whom were elected, and another 500 appointees.

Only three officially sanctioned and controlled parties--the ruling Golkar party, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and the United Development Party (PPP)--were permitted to field candidates. The state apparatus vetted all candidates and electioneering material, including speeches, rallies and meetings. Golkar was ensured a majority of 70 percent to 80 percent of the vote, as it was the only party permitted to organise in rural areas. In addition, millions of government employees including the members of the military, had to join Golkar and so vote for it.

Just one year ago, the MPR voted without opposition to elect Suharto for another five-year term as president. Last May, less than four months later, he was forced to resign. Yet these same parliamentary bodies deliberated on the new electoral framework, provoking huge anti-government protests last November during the special session of the MPR called to discuss the election. Organised by student leaders, the demonstrations in Jakarta and other major cities drew tens of thousands of workers and sections of the middle class. The Habibie regime responded by unleashing the police and troops, who shot point blank into crowds, killing and injuring demonstrators.

The changes to the electoral laws vindicate the concerns expressed by the protesters that any framework decided by the existing parliament bodies would be completely undemocratic. The major features are as follows:

* The military will retain a substantial presence in the DPR

with 38 nominees. The size of the MPR will be reduced from 1,000 to 700. Sitting alongside the DPR's members will be 200 appointees--135 appointed by regional parliaments and another 65 from various social groups. As a result, a third of the modified MPR, which is due to select the president later this year, will be appointed not elected.

The continued presence of the Armed Forces (ABRI) within parliament has provoked considerable opposition from student groups. The PPP faction initially called for no military representatives but backed off when ABRI made clear it would not tolerate an end to its role. Under the military's *dwifungsi* or dual role, ABRI representatives are appointed not only to the national parliament but also to all levels of government.

* Since May, more than 120 political parties have been formed in Indonesia. But under the new laws, very few of these parties will be eligible to stand in the national elections. A party is eligible to stand candidates only if it has branches in nine of the country's 27 provinces and at least half of the local regencies in those provinces--a virtually impossible task for smaller, newly formed parties without substantial big business backing.

Party recognition is to be ruled on by a group of 11 government and non-government representatives appointed by the regime. Home Affairs Minister Syarwan Hamid estimated that about 30 parties would be able to run in the elections but other commentators state that the number will be far less.

* The political rights of civil servants were not altered by legislation but by a special decree issued by Habibie. In the past, government employees were compelled to join Golkar. Now they will not be permitted to join or hold office in any political party. Those current party members and office bearers will have to either resign their jobs or end their party affiliation. Habibie was determined that if he could not compel the country's four million civil servants to be members of Golkar, then they would not be members of any party.

* Election procedures are yet to be fully clarified but it is already clear that under the pretext of preventing violence all aspects of the election campaign will be tightly controlled. Hamid has announced a ban on outdoor rallies by political parties and the campaign itself is to be limited to a 20-day period prior to June 7.

One of the surest indications of the character of the upcoming election is the fact that a number of parties and organisations, including the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and the People's Democratic Party (PRD), are still outlawed and their leaders remain behind bars. At the same time, Suharto who seized power in the 1965-66 coup and instigated the massacre of at least 500,000 workers, peasants and PKI members, is not only free but also reportedly paying large sums of money to political parties that will defend his interests.

The entire charade would have been impossible without the support of key opposition leaders--Megawati, Rais, Abdurrahman Wahid and Yogyakarta Sultan Hamengku

Buwono X. Last November when hundreds of thousands were taking part in protests, the four leaders held an emergency meeting and issued a declaration legitimising the process and supporting the continued political role of the military. Rais, in particular, warned of "anarchy" if Habibie was forced to resign and the electoral process was decided by other means than the parliamentary bodies stacked with Suharto's nominees.

These bourgeois opposition figures have been groomed and promoted in the international media as instruments for implementing the demands of international finance capital and at the same time suppressing any popular opposition. It is no accident therefore that they continue to back the active involvement of the armed forces in Indonesian politics and maintain the closest ties with sections of the military.

The rudimentary opinion polls available in Indonesia do indicate a considerable political crisis and a deep scepticism among voters. A University of Indonesia survey conducted last month of 4,925 voters in nine cities found that 44 percent of people did not know which party they would vote for in June and another 4 percent said they would not vote at all. Megawati had the highest support with just 15.8 percent and the rest trailed far behind--5.1 percent for Golkar, 4.3 percent for Rais and 1.5 percent for Wahid. Another survey in the *Tempo* magazine found that 76 percent of people did not support Habibie for president.

Throughout the entire history of Indonesia since it received formal independence from the Dutch colonialists in 1949, the bourgeoisie has been unable to rule except through the most anti-democratic methods. Soon after the first and only national elections in 1955, Suharto's predecessor Sukarno abolished the parliament, as well as a constituent assembly elected to draw up a permanent constitution. He reverted to the 1945 Constitution that granted him virtually unlimited powers, and established a system of so-called Guided Democracy, which the military junta under Suharto took over virtually untouched.

The inability of the capitalist class to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of the working people in Indonesia signifies that these tasks fall to the working class. It is the only social force capable of leading the masses on the road to genuine democracy and social equality, which can be achieved only through the socialist reorganisation of society.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact