

Indonesian opposition leader Megawati opposes East Timor independence

Peter Symonds
24 February 1999

Indonesian opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri used a large rally in Jakarta, called to launch her party, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) Struggle, as an opportunity to strongly oppose the granting of any form of independence to East Timor. About 120,000 supporters, decked out in the party's red colours, filled the capital's Senayan Main Stadium on February 15.

"It is inappropriate to say that part of our country is a burden... Indonesia has always been a united country in the past," Megawati told the rally. "I feel very sad when I hear a statement that our own brothers, East Timorese, have been categorised as the nation's burden... that this burden will be released by January 1, 2000. Where is the truth or substance in the statement? For me, East Timorese are our own brothers... similar to other provinces in our beloved country."

She was reacting to comments by Indonesian President B.J. Habibie just three days earlier, indicating that East Timor was a burden and should be granted independence by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) before next year. "We don't want to be bothered by East Timor's problems anymore," Habibie said. "If someone asks me about East Timor, my suggestion is, give them freedom. It is just and fair."

Speaking to the media after the rally, Megawati's key advisor Kwik Kian Gie attacked Habibie, saying: "If he said he wanted to make a suggestion on East Timor to the assembly, he's completely crazy. Why? Because the first item on the agenda of the MPR is to replace him.... East Timor is a national problem, not a matter of a budgetary burden."

The MPR is due to be convened in November after national elections in June. The parliamentary body, a third of which will be civilian and military appointees, will choose the next president. According to the few scanty opinion polls, Megawati is likely, at present, to

win the largest number of votes.

The statements of Habibie and Megawati reflect sharp differences over the future of East Timor within the Indonesian ruling class. The former Portuguese colony was forcibly incorporated into Indonesia after a 1975 military invasion. Portugal had suddenly withdrawn from the island following the fall of the Caetano dictatorship in Lisbon in April 1974.

Over the last 23 years, the Suharto regime has maintained a substantial military presence on East Timor and ruthlessly suppressed opposition to its rule. According to human rights groups, an estimated 200,000 people have died in fighting between Indonesian troops and separatist guerrilla forces, or as the result of military abuses.

Since he was installed last May, Habibie has been under considerable pressure from the US, Portugal, and other powers to reach an accommodation with the East Timorese government-in-exile, the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT). His government recently offered to grant broader autonomy, but only if East Timorese representatives accepted Indonesian sovereignty. Now he has raised the possibility of a rapid Indonesian pullout. Habibie has rejected the CNRT's demand for a lengthy period of autonomy followed by a referendum on independence.

He made his latest comments after meeting with a small cabal of ministers--most of them serving or former officers, including Defence Minister General Wiranto, Lieutenant General Sintong Panjaitan and Information Minister Lieutenant General Muhammad Yunus, who participated in the 1975 invasion. He has held intensive talks with Sintong, his military affairs advisor, who was in charge of the military command overseeing East Timor at the time of the Dili massacre, when Indonesian troops killed at least 200 unarmed pro-

independence demonstrators in November 1991.

The military's close involvement in the formulation of Habibie's policy on East Timor is a warning that the regime is prepared to use whatever means necessary to defend its interests on the island. In recent months, the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) has been arming hundreds of local pro-Indonesian militia.

Neither the US, Australia, Portugal nor any other power has publicly supported Habibie's suggestion of a sudden Indonesian withdrawal. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth stated recently: "The Indonesians can't just pull out and expect it to be normal there. Any viable solution for East Timor must avoid the type of bloodshed that occurred in 1975, when Portugal withdrew."

Megawati's opposition to Habibie's proposal reflects concerns in sections of the Indonesian ruling class that independence for East Timor would rapidly lead to the break-up of the country. Armed separatist movements already exist in other resource-rich areas of Indonesia, including West Papua and Aceh in northern Sumatra, where bitter fighting has taken place against ABRI troops for more than a decade.

Megawati has close links with the top brass in the Indonesian military, including two former ABRI heads--Try Sutrisno and Edi Sudrajat. The PDI Struggle deputy chairman Theo Syafei was the Indonesian army commander in charge of East Timor when separatist leader Xanana Gusmao was arrested in 1992.

The Indonesian bourgeoisie has historically proven incapable of unifying and integrating, on any democratic basis, the widely disparate groups in the island archipelago, where there are many different languages, religions and ethnic backgrounds. Instead it has resorted to deals with the Western powers, enforced by military repression.

As part of the formal independence agreement with the Dutch in 1949, Megawati's father, the first Indonesian president Sukarno, accepted the artificial borders drawn by the colonial powers, including British control over Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo, Portuguese occupation of East Timor and Dutch rule over West Papua.

Backed by the US, Sukarno forced the Dutch out of West Papua in 1962 through a combination of military actions and diplomatic manoeuvres. Indonesian rule

over what became known as Irian Jaya was ratified in 1969 in an undemocratic "Act of Free Choice" orchestrated by the United Nations.

In 1963, Sukarno opposed British plans to integrate its Borneo colonies into a federation with Malaya and Singapore. He embarked on a policy of "Konfrontasi" involving an economic blockade of newly-formed Malaysia and military raids into the Borneo enclaves, where the Malaysian military was bolstered by British and Australian troops. The confrontation with Malaysia ended when Suharto seized power in the 1965-66 military coup.

In no case--West Papua, Borneo or East Timor--did Sukarno attempt to foster an anti-colonial movement against the Dutch, British or Portuguese. As a political representative of the emerging national bourgeoisie, he feared that such a political movement would spill over into other parts of Indonesia where his government had failed to meet the basic social needs and aspirations of the masses of workers and peasants.

Suharto's military junta followed the pattern set by Sukarno. When the Portuguese pulled out of East Timor, the regime, encouraged by the Ford administration in the US and the Whitlam government in Australia, seized the opportunity to invade the territory. Unable to provide for the needs and democratic rights of the masses, it only held onto East Timor through brute force.

By declaring that the 1975 invasion was legitimate, the so-called democrat Megawati, who has based herself on her father's reputation as "the founder of the nation," is making clear that she embraces the entire legacy of the last 50 years. Like Habibie, she is prepared to use the most anti-democratic and repressive measures to defend the interests of the Indonesian bourgeoisie.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact