The political tasks facing the working class

The Indonesian elections and the struggle for democracy

The Editorial Board
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Also in Indonesian

A year after the fall of military strongman Suharto, Indonesia's national elections will be held on June 7. Great efforts are being made by the government and opposition parties, state officials and the media to create the illusion that the poll will be a step towards democracy. The campaign itself is gathering momentum with street posters, party banners and flags, rallies, debates and speeches. But for all those who have taken part in the struggle for democratic rights over the last 12 months, it is necessary to critically examine the underlying political issues and the very real dangers facing the working class.

Suharto's forced resignation dealt a severe political blow to the ruling class, both in Indonesia and internationally, who for three decades relied on his junta to safeguard its economic and strategic interests in the world's fourth most populous country and within the South East Asian region. He was the central pillar of the “New Order” dictatorship and its extensive apparatus of repression established in the CIA-organised coup of 1965-66. In the aftermath of his ouster, the election is being used as a means of legitimising the military-backed regime, and of preserving the badly shaken state structures for the inevitable class struggles ahead.

The poll is being widely touted in the media as the first democratic election to be held in Indonesia since 1955. But its anti-democratic character is clearly revealed in the fact that the guidelines for the poll and the composition of the next parliament were drawn up by the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) and the House of Representatives (DPR)—two bodies stacked with Suharto appointees, army generals, ruling Golkar Party politicians, businessmen and state officials. Just over a year ago, the same MPR voted unanimously to rubberstamp Suharto for another five-year term as president.

Nothing fundamental has changed as a result of the amendments made by the MPR and DPR to Indonesia's political laws. The military will retain 38 appointees in the new 500-member DPR, and along with 200 state and regional nominees will form one third of the MPR, which will select the president and vice-president in November. Under Indonesia's 1945 Constitution, the MPR and DPR have limited powers. The unelected president, on the other hand, has sweeping authority to appoint and dismiss cabinets and ministers, and to circumvent parliament by issuing decrees.

The new political laws effectively allow only parties with big business or military backing to stand in the elections. To be officially registered, a party had to have branches in one third of the country's 27 provinces and at least half of the local regencies in those provinces. Even those that met the requirements were vetted by a committee of government appointees—only 48 of the 141 parties received state approval to stand in the elections. The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) is still proscribed and even though the leftist People's Democratic Party (PRD) has been recognised, some of its leaders are still behind bars.

The Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) retain their “dual role” under which military appointees are directly involved in all levels of government, from the national to the provincial and local. The generals, who are steeped in decades of repression and bloodshed, continue to wield enormous influence in the present Habibie cabinet, holding the key posts of defence, interior, political affairs and information. Moreover, the military has exploited the eruption of racial and religious unrest in Ambon, West Kalimantan, Java and elsewhere to extend its command structures, to bolster its powers and to recruit an armed militia to 40,000 to supplement its already substantial forces.

The elections are taking place amid the most serious political and economic upheaval in Indonesia in decades. Fuelled by the economic breakdown in Asia, Indonesia has entered the first stages of a profound revolutionary crisis. All the unresolved contradictions of Indonesian capitalism have erupted to the surface of political life: the subordination of the economy to international finance capital; the widening gulf between a tiny wealthy elite and the impoverished masses; the pressing needs of poor peasants for land and financial assistance; and the festering of bitter regional, ethnic and religious antagonisms.

Suharto himself was the first major casualty of the economic collapse which erupted in July, 1997 in Thailand and rapidly spread to the other so-called Asian tigers in the region. In just six months, the Indonesian rupee lost 80 percent of its value and share prices plummetted, undermining the economy as a whole—virtually every major bank and corporation was technically insolvent. Interest rates soared and credit dried up. The regime was compelled to declare a temporary moratorium on foreign loan repayments that for the most part were denominated in increasingly expensive US dollars.

Opposition to Suharto came from two completely different quarters. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the US and other major powers seized upon the crisis as a means for advancing long-held plans for imposing the radical restructuring of the economies not only of Indonesia but South Korea, Thailand and other countries in the region. Their tightly regulated economic and financial structures had become a barrier to the requirements of globally mobile capital.

In Indonesia, international finance capital could not tolerate the vast network of interlocking business empires owned by Suharto, his family and his business cronies, or their state-sanctioned monopolies, tariffs, subsidies and economic preferences that impeded the free flow of investment and profits. The IMF, with the backing of the US, insisted that in return for its $43 billion bailout, Suharto sign an unprecedented 80-point memorandum placing virtually every aspect of the economy under its supervision and control, and laying out a detailed timetable for the abolition of economic restrictions.

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As Suharto's resistance to these plans continued, the US began to intrigue for his replacement. According to a *New York Times* report, top-level White House briefings on Indonesia started to take place daily, involving financial experts, senior State Department officials, CIA analysts, Pentagon brass and national security aides. The US openly courted opposition figures: the American ambassador very publicly attended the political meetings of Megawati Sukarnoputri, and US officials and business leaders met Amien Rais during his visit to Washington.

The second source of opposition came from below. The pent-up frustration and anger of broad masses of students, workers and layers of the middle class, fed up with decades of dictatorial rule and hard hit by the rapid disintegration of the economy, boiled over in the form of strikes against job losses, deteriorating working conditions and rising prices, and increasingly militant protests by students, intellectuals and others calling for the ousting of Suharto and democratic reforms. In rural areas, small farmers and villagers began to protest over a variety of grievances including land held by Suharto and his business cronies.

By mid-May, Suharto's position had become untenable. Despite the military's continuing repression and Suharto's belated promises of reform, the anti-government protests continued to grow. The critical issue in the debate raging in ruling circles was when and how to replace him without a sudden and chaotic collapse of the state apparatus. Finally on May 21, after days of intense backroom intrigues, Suharto shuffled into a ceremony presided over by ABRI chief General Wiranto and, with the blessing of Washington, formally handed over to his long-time protégé B.J. Habibie.

The transition to Habibie bought some time for the regime but it resolved none of the basic issues confronting the ruling class. Despite a temporary stabilisation of the rupiah, the country's huge debts remain unresolved and the economy continues to be stagnant and highly unstable. The implementation of the IMF's demands for economic restructuring, budget cutbacks and the abolition of price subsidies will only worsen the unmitigated disaster facing the Indonesian masses. Factory closures and layoffs have driven up unemployment to 20 million, or about one quarter of the workforce. According to an official estimate late last year, 130 million people or more than 60 percent of the population are living in poverty. Many laid-off workers returned to their towns and villages compounding the problems already facing rural communities: the effects of drought, soaring interest rates, huge price increases for fertiliser, seed, and basic necessities.

The ruling class is acutely aware that it is perched atop a political powderkeg. It cannot permit any real democracy when it is implementing a program diametrically opposed to the interests of the majority of working people. But a semblance of democracy is needed to legitimise a government that will accelerate the economic restructuring and impose the IMF demands regardless of any opposition. Behind the gloss of the "democratic" elections, the security forces remain intact and will be used just as ruthlessly as under Suharto to defend the interests of the ruling class.

If the upcoming elections have any legitimacy at all in the eyes of ordinary Indonesians it is only because Habibie has been able to rely on the political support of bourgeois opposition figures such as Megawati, Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid. At every crucial turning point over the last year, these so-called democrats have acted as a brake on the developing opposition to the military-backed regime—a product of their instinctive fear that such a movement will threaten their own privileged positions and the profit system itself.

Their opposition to Suharto reflected the interests of elements of the ruling elite, who like the IMF and the US, regarded the regime's stranglehold of the economy as an impediment to their own ambitions. Their calls for an end to "cronyism, corruption and nepotism" were directed at opening up opportunities for profit making by a broader layer of businessmen and women. All of them have pledged to implement the IMF's program. At the conference of her PDI-Struggle party last October in Bali, Megawati urged her supporters to embrace "the era of globalisation, which calls for the implementation of the open market system".

These leaders are deeply imbued with the entrenched right-wing, anti-communist ideology of the military regime. Rais and Wahid head Indonesia's two largest Islamic organisations—Muhummadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) respectively—which supported or participated directly in the massacres organised by Suharto and the military in 1965-66, resulting in the murder of at least 500,000 workers, peasants and PKI members. One of the major components of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), was involved in the killing on the island of Bali.

Even to call Megawati, Rais and Wahid "democrats" or "oppositionists" is a misnomer. All of them are connected by countless ties to the junta and maintain the closest of relations with the top echelons of the military and the state apparatus. Under Suharto, they only held their leadership posts in parties and organisations with his personal blessing and by strictly toeing the official line. In conditions where even minor public criticisms often resulted in severe repression, none of them were ever arrested or imprisoned.

Megawati was a DPR representative for the state-run PDI for over a decade, along with her businessman husband. She became party leader in 1993 after Suharto removed the then PDI chairman Suriyadi, and was in turn ousted in 1996—not for making a public attack on Suharto but rather because he could not tolerate any potential rival. During the tumultuous events of May 1998, when hundreds of thousands of protesters were demanding Suharto's resignation, Megawati was nowhere to be found—she remained holed up in her suburban home and said nothing.

Rais and Wahid have played a similar role. In the months leading up to last May, Rais sought to publicly promote himself, particularly among student protesters, by guardedly threatening to unleash "people's power" against the junta. In private, however, he continued to meet with its leading figures and reassure them that he posed no threat. At the height of the May protests, Rais urged students to call off mass demonstrations in Jakarta and, behind the scenes, intrigued with the generals, bureaucrats and politicians to effect an orderly transition from Suharto to Habibie.

To remain in power and concoct the present bogus election, the Habibie regime has been completely dependent on these opposition leaders. Last November, the frustration of students, workers and sections of the middle class with the lack of any genuine change had reached breaking point. Huge protests were organised in Jakarta and other major cities to coincide with the special session of the MPR convened to discuss a new framework for the elections.

The calls of the protestors for Habibie's immediate resignation, an end to the military's political role, the trial of Suharto and the establishment of a governing transitional committee reflected a widespread distrust of the regime. Right from the outset, the bourgeois opposition emphatically rejected these demands. Rais warned that Indonesia would descend into "anarchy" unless Habibie was permitted to remain in office until a poll was organised.

As the MPR session wore on, the protests drew in hundreds of thousands of people, including workers and sections of the urban poor, exerting enormous pressure on Habibie. Jakarta was turned into an armed camp as the military mobilised 30,000 heavily armed troops and 100,000 so-called volunteers, backed by armoured vehicles, water cannon and light tanks, to contain and break up the demonstrations. Yet despite the army's tactics of provocation and intimidation, the crowds continued to grow. Unlike the protests in May, the movement was more focussed against the regime as a whole, and therefore, more dangerous to the bourgeoisie.

In the midst of the mounting political crisis, Megawati, Rais, Wahid and

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Yogyakarta Sultan Hamengku Buwono X hurriedly convened a meeting in the Jakarta suburb of Ciganjur and issued a joint declaration, which urged the MPR to amend its proposed political framework and election timetable. The crucial thrust of the document cut directly across the demands of the protestors: the opposition leaders endorsed Habibie as president as well as the MPR's deliberations and the “dual role” of the military.

The statement by the “Ciganjur Four” was a crucial political lifeline for the floundering Habibie. By throwing their support behind the regime and its electoral charade, the opposition leaders cut the ground from under the protests, opened up divisions in the protestors' ranks and gave the regime a free hand to disperse the movement. On November 13, Habibie and Defence Minister General Wiranto unleashed the troops who shot into the crowds in Jakarta at point blank range, killing at least seven demonstrators and injuring many more.

The actions of the present opposition leaders demonstrate once again the historic inability of any section of the weak and thoroughly venal Indonesian capitalist class to lead a political struggle for genuine democratic reform or social equality.

The bourgeoisie has always been economically and politically subservient to one or other of the major imperialist powers. Its origins lie in the narrow social stratum of landlords, petty aristocrats, traders and civil servants that acted as key props for Dutch colonial rule. The political perspective of the bourgeois leaders such as Megawati's father Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, was never to mobilise the masses to drive out the Dutch but rather to exploit the widespread hostility to colonial rule in order to reach an accommodation with the Dutch.

When the Japanese military invaded in 1942, Sukarno sought to manoeuvre with the new power, hoping thereby to reach a deal for “independence” with imperial Japan. As a result, he became a mouthpiece for Japanese claims to be waging a war of liberation against the old European colonialists and the chief political puppet of the hated occupation forces.

Throughout the period from 1945 to 1949, when the Dutch attempted to reassert control over their former colony, Sukarno, as head of the self-proclaimed Indonesian republic, repeatedly undermined those fighting the Dutch military forces. He conceded territory and resources in the Linggadjati and Renville agreements, which allowed the Dutch to tighten their noose around the republic and to invade its central base in Yogyakarta. After the Dutch—under pressure from the US—finally relinquished control, Sukarno agreed to take over the debts of the former colony and guaranteed to protect the property and investments of the Dutch colonists.

In the 50 years since formal independence in 1949, the Indonesian bourgeoisie has never been able to rule through democratic means. The results of the first, and only open national election in 1955 were unilaterally overturned by Sukarno less two years later when he abolished parliament and an elected constituent assembly. On the basis of the 1945 Constitution, a document drawn up under Japanese wartime tutelage, Sukarno instigated so-called Guided Democracy—a term for his own personal rule in collaboration with military chiefs, state officials and unelected political figures, including representatives of the Stalinist Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

In many respects, the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s bears an uncanny resemblance to the situation in Indonesia today. The country was mired in economic crisis. Workers, small farmers and the urban and rural poor were fighting for their demands through strikes, land seizures and protests. Sukarno was walking a political tightrope—internally, between the military and the PKI, and externally, between the US and Soviet blocs. Amid an escalating war in Indochina, the US was deeply concerned at the strategic consequences of a social upheaval in Indonesia and began to intrigue with elements of the military for Sukarno's overthrow.

The 1965-66 military coup and subsequent political genocide, which was a calamitous setback for the working class both in Indonesia and internationally, was far from inevitable. The defeat of the military and its death squads required the independent mobilisation of workers and peasants—a process which would have inevitably come into conflict with Sukarno who passively acquiesced in his own removal from power. The chief responsibility for the disaster rested with the PKI, then the third largest Communist Party in the world. It tied the working class to Sukarno and, even as the slaughter was taking place, insisted that workers, peasants and party members took no action to defend themselves.

The PKI's betrayal was the end product of its perspective that subordinated the interests of the working class to those of the national bourgeoisie. Having repudiated the program of socialist internationalism, the Stalinists claimed that, under the pressure of the masses, one or other section of the capitalist class would wage a political struggle for progressive reforms. Time and again in the period from 1945 to 1965, Sukarno relied directly on the PKI leadership to contain social discontent and to bolster his own image as an “anti-imperialist” and “defender of the poor”. Far from moving to the left, Sukarno and other bourgeoisie leaders invariably responded to a growing mass movement with hostility and ultimately outright repression—as was demonstrated by Sukarno's execution of PKI leaders and supporters after the so-called Madiun uprising in 1948, and in 1965-66 on a far broader scale.

The immense scale of the repression and the continued reliance of the Suharto regime on arbitrary arrest, torture, imprisonment and murder reflects the impossibility of reconciling the class antagonisms between the tiny privileged ruling elites and the oppressed masses in Indonesia. Throughout his entire 32 years in power, the capitalist class proved utterly incapable of generating any significant opposition to his rule.

The events of 1965-66 are the sharpest warning of the enormous dangers facing the working class in Indonesia today. The economic, political and social convulsions of last year have shaken the confidence of the bourgeoisie but its state and military apparatus remains intact, and it is biding its time and preparing to inflict decisive defeats on the working class.

In the immediate aftermath of Suharto's resignation, the entire regime was compelled to take on a new more democratic coloration in order to have any credibility in the eyes of the masses. Ruling party hacks, state bureaucrats and ruthless generals suddenly declared themselves in favour of democratic change and “reformasi”. Habibie was forced to make a series of minor concessions, releasing certain political prisoners, sanctioning wider public debate and establishing nominal investigations into a few of Suharto's “excesses”.

But the real face of the regime can be seen in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh where the military, in some cases in cahoots with local militia thugs, has not hesitated to openly terrorise and kill supporters of local separatist movements. The measures now being tested in these outlying areas will be used in the future against workers, small farmers, students and anyone else who poses a challenge to the regime.

If anyone considers that a new government headed by a combination of the so-called democrats Megawati, Rais and Wahid will be any different, they should carefully consider the implications of Megawati's opposition to East Timorese independence. She continues to defend the military invasion of East Timor in 1975 and the two decades of brutal rule that have cost an estimated 200,000 lives. If Megawati is prepared to hang onto East Timor at any cost then she will employ the similar methods against the Indonesian masses.

In countries like Indonesia with a belated capitalist development, the working class is the only social force capable of carrying out a consistent political struggle for genuine democracy and progressive social reforms and thus of mobilising the urban poor, sections of the middle class, and the masses of small farmers, landless peasants and agricultural labourers

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for the conquest of power and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government. In the course of the fight for democratic reforms, improved living standards, an end to national and racial oppression, and against landlordism, usury and other remnants of feudalism in rural areas, the working class will be compelled to make inroads into the domination of economic life by international finance capital and the capitalist class—that is, to begin to reorganise society along socialist lines.

In order to win the active support of the urban and rural poor, small farmers, shopkeepers and stallholders as well as intellectuals, students and professional layers, the working class must wage an uncompromising struggle for its own political independence from the bourgeoisie and all its representatives, including various petty bourgeois radical groups and parties such as the People's Democratic Party (PRD).

It is significant that the PRD, which in the past was branded by the Suharto regime as communist, was one of the 48 parties to be officially recognised after a rigorous vetting process, which undoubtedly included the various state intelligence organisations. Far from being socialist or Marxist, the PRD bases itself explicitly on collaboration with elements of the capitalist class in a “People's Coalition Government, that is a coalition of progressive classes, sectors and groups”. No doubt elements of the bourgeoisie calculate that the PRD, like the PKI, may play a useful role in the near future in containing any movement of the working class.

In the past, the PRD slavishly backed Megawati as a champion of democratic rights and held out the possibility that US administration and sections of the military would support such a “coalition of progressive classes”. Following the widespread disillusion with the Ciganjur Four, particularly among students, after the army shootings last November, the PRD was compelled to modify its approach—looking instead for “a tactical alliance with Islamic forces” in Aceh, Lampung and elsewhere. What is common to all of the PRD's shifts and manoeuvres is that it politically subordinates the working class to various bourgeois political formations, and thus to the capitalist class itself.

While the PRD does not have the size and influence once held by the PKI, its political program, by blocking the development of an independent movement of the working class, it poses exactly the same dangers in the period of social and political upheaval that lies ahead. To fight for its class interests and to gain the support of the oppressed masses, the working class in Indonesia needs to build its own organisations of political struggle—above all, a socialist party directed at the abolition of the outmoded and oppressive profit system.

What are the measures that must be advanced?

* The decisions regarding the political and constitutional framework cannot be left to the Suharto-era institutions or committees of ABRI generals and bourgeois politicians. A genuinely representative body—a constituent assembly—must elected on the basis of universal suffrage to decide the basis for democratic reforms. Not only must all political prisoners be immediately freed but the multitude of laws and regulations preventing the formation of political parties, free speech and free assembly must be repealed to allow for the widest political debate and discussion.

* The economic and political oppression of the peasantry must be ended. Millions of small farmers and their families are living in abject poverty throughout Indonesia without adequate land, burdened with large debts, subject to landlords and lacking machinery, tools, fertilisers and pesticides. Many have been driven off the land to accommodate the demands of agribusinesses and developers. The big landed estates and plantations must be nationalised, under the control of peasants and agricultural workers, so as to provide the means of support for small farmers.

* The democratic rights of the masses are indissolubly bound up with the struggle for social equality, the abolition of all forms of racial and religious discrimination and an end to exploitation and poverty. Every worker should be guaranteed a decent job and proper wages. All young people must have access to free, high quality education. Provision must be made for the vast expansion of public health care and welfare services so that the elderly, the sick and the disabled are not left to beg on the streets or waste away and die in poverty.

* As a first step to realising these aims, the vast holdings of the Suharto family, estimated at a massive $15 billion, and all of their close cronies, including Habibie and others in the present government, must be confiscated and transformed into public enterprises run by and for working people. The vast mountain of debt owed to the international banks, finance houses and transnational corporations must be immediately repudiated, along with the IMF's plans for intensifying the economic exploitation of the Indonesian people.

* The struggle to unify the oppressed masses of Indonesia requires an intransigent fight against all forms of racism and ethnic and religious discrimination. The continuing riots throughout the archipelago are the latest example of how the ruling class deliberately inflames racial and religious bigotry to divide working people against one another. All laws and regulations discriminating against ethnic Chinese or any other group must be annulled. All Indonesian troops must be immediately withdrawn from East Timor, West Papua and Aceh to provide the basis for establishing fraternal relations with the people of these regions.

* Genuine democracy means a struggle for secularism, in particular against the influence of the Moslem clergy and fundamentalist tendencies seeking to entrench Islamic laws and an Islamic state. It is necessary to end the oppression of women, the persecution of religious minorities, and to establish the complete separation of religion and the state, including the abolition of the state ideology of Pancasila.

In the weeks and months ahead, political tensions will undoubtedly intensify, throwing up all the outstanding historic and political issues once again. Workers are being confronted with the fact that their most basic needs and aspirations are incompatible with the requirements of the profit system. Just two years ago there was no shortage of economic pundits who claimed that the strength of the so-called Asian tigers demonstrated the viability of the capitalist market and provided a new road to rapid growth and prosperity. Now these myths are in tatters.

A new period of social and political upheaval has opened up. The Asian economic meltdown has revealed a deepening global disequilibrium, characterised by chronic overproduction and slump in large parts of the globe, bitter trade frictions and rivalries, and increasingly reckless military adventures by the major powers, particularly the US, in the Middle East, Africa and now in the Balkans. Under the guise of concern for "human rights," a renewed drive for the colonial carve-up of the globe is underway—most graphically revealed in NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia and its demands that Kosovo become a virtual military protectorate.

Only the working class is able to offer a progressive solution to the calamities confronting humanity, whether in Indonesia or anywhere else. By throwing off the shackles of international finance capital and ending the domination of the capitalist class, the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government in Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world, would give an enormous impetus to the struggles of the masses throughout the Asian region and reverberate around the globe, opening up the prospects for a unified international offensive against the profit system.

Workers, students, intellectuals and others in Indonesia should critically examine their experiences of the last year within the context of this unfolding crisis of the capitalist order and draw the necessary conclusions. What is needed in Indonesia is the construction of a party based on two fundamental and interconnected principles: the irreconcilable struggle for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie, and the unification of Indonesian workers with their class

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