

Indonesian election campaign:

East Timor trip provides a revealing glimpse of Megawati's politics

Peter Symonds
4 June 1999

Indonesian opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri's trip to East Timor on Tuesday provided an insight into the political character of her campaign for the country's elections on June 7. Addressing a crowd of about 3,500, she reiterated her position that the island should remain part of Indonesia. "The people of East Timor have to be shoulder to shoulder—one family with us," she stated.

Explaining her views in a recent interview with the US-based *Time* magazine, Megawati described the UN-endorsed referendum on the future status of East Timor planned for early August as "not well-prepared" and "very risky". "Problems in East Timor have developed to the stage that might encourage others to follow. The current government has taken steps too hastily. This might create new problems in the future, destabilise the entire country and prevent us from getting out of this economic crisis," she said.

Megawati speaks for those in Indonesian ruling circles, particularly among the military top brass, who fear that independence, or even autonomy for East Timor will lead to a fragmentation of Indonesia as separatist movements in other provinces, including West Papua, Aceh and Riau, follow suit. Asked by *Time* whether "radical change to return power to the provinces" was needed, she responded: "Don't talk about radical change in this place. There are so many islands in Indonesia where conditions are very fragile. Radical change will only make things very difficult."

From the outset, Megawati and her Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P) have opposed President B.J. Habibie's autonomy package for East Timor and his suggestion of formal independence if autonomy is rejected. When Habibie announced his plan in January, Megawati defended the 1975 invasion of the former Portuguese colony and its forcible annexation as "legitimate, politically and constitutionally". Her defence of Indonesian rule over East Timor, which was maintained by brutal military methods, stands in stark contrast to her comments in Dili this week expressing opposition to "torture and violence" on the island.

Megawati's visit to East Timor in the midst of the election campaign was a highly political decision geared not so much to winning the support of the East Timorese as to consolidating her support among sections of the military. Her rally in Dili was tiny compared to the hundreds of thousands who have flocked to the

PDI-P processions and gatherings over the last fortnight in Jakarta, Bogor, Lampung and other major centres.

Her calculated appeal to the military underscores the fact that the next Indonesian government is not going to be decided by the votes of ordinary Indonesians but by the wheeling and dealing in the upper echelons of the military, state bureaucracy and various political groups. The closely-controlled elections will only decide 462 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives (DPR)—the other 38 are military appointees. Another 200 nominees by provincial governments and social organisations will be added to form the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR), which is scheduled to nominate the president in November.

The limited opinion polls indicate that Megawati and the PDI-P are the frontrunners in the elections. A recent survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems found that 29 percent of Indonesia's potential voters supported Megawati's party, as against 23 percent for Golkar and 20 percent for the National Awakening Party (PKB) of Abdurrahman Wahid. The PDI-P is in a loose electoral coalition with Wahid's PKB and the National Mandate Party (PAN) of Amien Rais. But even if she can count on their backing, Megawati is still likely to fall short of a clear majority in the MPR. She will require the support of other parties, the military and bureaucratic appointees.

The military, renamed the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), carries a political clout that far exceeds its appointees at the national level. A recent article in the *Indonesian Observer* newspaper revealed that despite various so-called reforms, the military still has more than 6,000 serving military officers in civilian posts, including in national and provincial parliaments. Many more former officers occupy such posts. The armed forces remain the linchpin of a regime established in the CIA-organised coup of 1965-66, which has preserved bourgeois rule in Indonesia through torture and repression.

The ruling elite's reliance on the military is highlighted by an article in the British *Financial Times* newspaper on May 24, which commented: "Few members of the elite have much faith in Megawati Sukarnoputri or other opposition leaders, while President B.J. Habibie has alienated people with his weak and haphazard rule. Many have come to associate the budding democracy with continuing civil unrest and rising crime. 'We still need to be ruled by an iron hand,' said one businesswoman. 'This

country is not ready for democracy. [Armed Forces Chief and Defence Minister Wiranto] seems to be pretty popular with the strongest parties.”

Under Suharto, Megawati retained her position as head of the state-supervised Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) with the approval of the regime from 1993 until she was ousted in 1996, and had close links with the military and the state bureaucracy. In the year since Suharto's forced resignation in May 1998, Megawati and the PDI-P have wooed sections of the military and recruited senior officers to the party's ranks. More than 150 retired generals attended last year's party congress in Bali, as well as former senior Golkar members and businessmen. Megawati used her powers to override the party rules and appoint as one of the party's deputy chairmen, retired Major General Theo Syafei, who had joined only weeks earlier.

According to the *Financial Times*, “Ms Megawati and Abdurrahman Wahid, leaders of two opposition parties expecting to do well in the elections, are in regular contact with [TNI head] Gen Wiranto and are said to be considering him at least for the vice-presidency.” Wiranto, who has also been proposed as a possible compromise figure for president, was one of Suharto's protégés and close associates in the military. Megawati has not advocated the abolition of the military's “dual role,” which is used to justify its direct involvement in political life. In her *Time* magazine interview she described the army in glowing terms as “born from the people” and “an integral part of our nation”.

Sharp doubts have been expressed in the international press about her inability to elaborate policies, poor public speaking skills, lack of political experience and personal foibles. Prior to her recruitment as a candidate for the PDI in the late 1980s, she led the life of a middle class housewife in a well-off suburb of Jakarta—her only political capital being the family connection to her father. Her image as an opposition figure received an unexpected boost in 1996 when Suharto, fearful of any rival, engineered her removal as PDI leader.

In its latest issue, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* expresses a further reservation: “The family's weight in the PDI-P is evident, but it also leaves the presidential candidate open to disquieting charges of nepotism. Megawati's husband, Taufiq Keimas, who runs a string of petrol stations, is standing for the party in the South Sumatran city of Palembang... Two of his relatives are PDI-P candidates in South Sumatra and Jakarta. Forsaking their earlier apolitical stance, Megawati's younger brother, Guruh, is a PDI-P candidate in Blitar—Sukarno's East Java birthplace—and sister Rachmawati is vying for a parliamentary seat in Semarang, Central Java.”

Megawati's firm support for the IMF's restructuring plans is reassuring to big business, however. Asked about her economic policies by *Time*, Megawati merely said: “My platform is democracy and market economy without distortion. We need to restore confidence.” Reform of the legal system was necessary to allay the concerns of investors, she added.

The international markets are looking to Megawati's key economic advisors—Kwik Kian Gie, an economic commentator and former businessman, and PDI-P treasurer Laksamana Sukardi, a former bank executive with Citibank and the Indonesian

Lippobank—both of whom are advocates of dismantling the Suharto-era monopolies and opening up the economy to international investment. Kwik recently advocated pegging the shaky Indonesian rupiah against the US dollar, a move strongly opposed by the IMF. But his comments are aimed at boosting the party's electoral support. As he quickly added: “We are not going to say to hell with you [the IMF]. We will just be putting our argument as well as possible.”

It is precisely because the economic restructuring is going to intensify the country's deepening social crisis and generate opposition that big business, both in Indonesia and internationally, is looking to a combination of Megawati, Rais and Wahid to form the next government. The expectation is that such a regime will legitimise these economic measures and suppress, using the military if necessary, the opposition of workers, small farmers, the unemployed, students and others.

AsiaWeek magazine recently stated: “Ironically, one big reason why Indonesia's future president and parliament have to really command the people's support through the polls is the certainty that life for millions of Indonesians will continue to look bleak for a long time to come. Besides the economy, there is continuing ethnic conflict, particularly in East Timor, where rival militias threaten to unleash civil war. Jusuf Wanandi, chairman of Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, believes one of the greatest dangers of the election comes from the public's high expectations: ‘Our people have to realise how tough it's going to be for the next five to 10 years.’ Only leaders with a genuine mandate can tell the painful truth and still retain the clout to bring the people out of their dire existence.”

Megawati's party is fielding some 12,000 candidates for all levels of government—national, provincial and local—and claims to have handed out as many as 40 million membership cards to voters across the country. Party spokesmen predict that PDI-P will win up to 40 percent of the vote in next week's poll. But as *AsiaWeek* so bluntly puts it, the purpose of the next government is not to meet the heightened aspirations of the Indonesian masses but rather is to push through a program which is inimical to their interests by whatever means necessary.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact