

The thin façade of democracy:

Army on full alert as Indonesian voters go to the polls

Peter Symonds
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Great efforts are being made to portray the elections taking place in Indonesia today as democratic, or if not, at least a step in that direction. Thirteen international delegations are fielding almost 530 election observers. They include a joint team from the US National Democratic Institute and a centre headed by former US president Jimmy Carter. Millions of dollars have been provided by the European Union, the US, Australia and others to stage the poll and assist the army of local monitoring teams organised by bodies like the University Network for a Free and Fair Election (UNIFREL), the Independent Committee for Election Monitoring (KIPP) and the Election Monitoring Committee (SBSI).

The international media, while pointing to the underlying economic problems, social tensions and conflict in areas like Aceh and East Timor, has for the most part focussed on mass rallies of the major opposition parties—particularly those of Megawati Sukarnoputri and her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P)—and the paraphernalia and incidents of the limited 17-day campaign. A sampling of the latest headlines is illustrative: from the BBC's "Democracy beckons Indonesia" to CNN's "Habibie hails Indonesian election as a new era of democracy" and "Indonesia exuberantly testing democracy" in the *Chicago Tribune*.

But the reports also point to the high expectations that the elections have aroused. Ishkander, a 32-year-old construction worker on Sumatra, told the *Chicago Tribune*: "Indonesia is going to be better off after this election because every party has made its promises to the people—a lot of good promises—and people will be waiting for those promises to be fulfilled."

Occasionally commentators voice the concerns in ruling circles in Indonesia and internationally of the consequences of a disappointed electorate, whose hopes and aspirations cannot be met by the next government, no matter which party or combination of parties holds power.

The latest issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* noted: "In the short term, the polls offer no guarantee of a flourishing democracy. While the campaign in the countryside trumpets the merits of transparency and justice, the new president and vice-president selected largely by the new parliament will probably emerge through backstage manoeuvring in Jakarta. Such a shadowy denouement could prove a deep disappointment to voters and trigger yet another convulsion of violence, especially if charges mount over election fraud."

The entire 500,000-strong Indonesian Armed Forces has been placed on full alert, ready to suppress any signs of opposition or outrage at the conduct of the polls or the outcome of the elections.

Just as the stage-managed elections that took place under Suharto were presented uncritically by the media for many years, so little attention has been paid in the course of the latest poll to its restrictive nature, the conservative character of most officially recognised parties, and the continuing and pervasive role of the military and the state bureaucracy in the parliament and in society as a whole. Suharto may have been forced to resign in May 1998 but the military-backed regime that emerged from the 1965-66 CIA-organised army coup remains substantially in place.

The political laws under which the elections are being staged were drawn up by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and the House of Representatives (DPR)—two bodies stacked with Suharto appointees, army generals, and ruling Golkar Party members. These layers recognised the need to loosen the regulations somewhat to allow the formation of new political parties; in particular to allow the participation of the bourgeois opposition figures—Megawati, Amien Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid. But they were equally determined to ensure that the state apparatus maintained a firm grip over the process and that the parties and candidates continued to be vetted.

Under Suharto, only three parties were permitted—Golkar and two controlled opposition parties: the United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). Both opposition parties were formed in 1973 through the forced amalgamation of existing parties by the Suharto regime—the PPP through the unification of Islamic organisations, and the PDI from the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), several Christian and other parties. Candidates, speeches, rallies, advertising and party leaders were all controlled by the state. Golkar was assured of a majority at every poll, as it was the only party permitted to organise in rural areas. The country's millions of civil servants and soldiers were compelled to vote for it.

The ruling party retains a formidable apparatus and has countless connections to the military, the state bureaucracy and big business interests. But the ruling layers are counting on the opposition leaders—Megawati, Rais and Wahid—and their parties to play the key role in implementing the economic austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund, and suppressing any popular opposition. While their three parties—Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the National Awakening Party (PKB)—have all been formed in the last year, each is intimately tied to the ruling elites, including the military. PAN and the PKB are based on the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia—Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

The new political laws effectively ruled out the formation of parties

lacking the backing of sections of big business, the military or state bureaucracy. To be officially registered, a party had to establish branches in one-third of the country's 27 provinces and at least half the local districts in those provinces—a substantial organisational barrier. A committee of government appointees then screened those that met the requirements. Only 48 of the 141 organisations that applied were formally registered.

To be recognised, parties had to formally acknowledge that Indonesia is based on Pancasila—the conservative state ideology which includes among its five tents, belief in one God—and also that their own “principles or characteristics, aspirations and programs do not contradict Pancasila”. Individual party members must be “loyal to Pancasila” and not be members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) or any other banned organisation.

Voting is by proportional representation within each of the 27 provinces. Each party is required to provide lists of candidates on a district basis and seats will be assigned to parties according to the districts in which they fared best. To be eligible to take seats, a party must, however, win 2 percent of the total number of seats in the parliament—effectively barring parties with localised support. Furthermore only those parties that achieve the 2 percent barrier will be permitted to contest the next elections due in 2004—a condition likely to be achieved by only a handful.

Superficially, 48 parties appear to offer Indonesian voters a wide choice but the reality is quite different. Many formed as splinter groups from the three state-run parties permitted under Suharto, and thus retain close ties with the state bureaucracy and the military. Some are simply fronts for particular business interests, including those of the Suharto family, which retains considerable political clout, due to its vast business empire and connections to ruling circles.

A brief examination of the parties indicates their conservative, capitalist nature. Outside the three previously established parties—Golkar, PDI, PPP—and the three major bourgeois opposition parties—PDI-P, PAN and PKB—14 of the remaining 42 are parties that split from, are connected to, or support Golkar. Their leading figures are often former top Golkar officials who are attempting to distance themselves the widely despised party. Some of these include:

- * The Indonesian National Party of the Marhaenism Front, which has as its head Probosutedjo, Suharto's half-brother, and is closely connected to the Suharto family. The term *marhaen* was adopted by former president Sukarno and demagogically used to refer to the Indonesian masses, particularly the peasantry.

- * Islamic Democratic Party (PID), which although nominally Islamic, was formed by a community organisation called Generasi Muda Kiara (GM Kiara)—closely linked to Suharto's eldest daughter Siti Hardiyanti “Tutut” Rukmana. The party has nominated the head of the armed forces, Defence Minister Wiranto, as vice-president.

- * Justice and Unity Party (PKP), which is led by retired general and former defence minister Edi Sudrajat, along with another general and former vice-president Try Sutrisno. The grouping split from Golkar after losing out in the contest for the party's top positions at Golkar's emergency conference last year.

- * People's Sovereignty Party (PDR), which was formed with the support of the current Co-operatives Minister Adi Sasono. He has sought to appeal to anti-Chinese racial sentiment by calling for the dismantling of largely ethnic Chinese-owned private conglomerates and the distribution of their resources to small, predominantly Indonesian or *pribumi* businesses. Sasono has been removed from his official Golkar posts but is still a member of the ruling party.

- * Three parties attempt to appeal to workers—Indonesian Workers Party (PPI), Workers Solidarity Party (PSP) and All Indonesia Workers Solidarity Party (PSPSI). They are tied to Golkar or the state-run SPSP union federation that existed under Suharto. The PPI leader Saleh Said Harahap was head of Golkar's organisation in Riau province from 1976 to 1982. The PSPSI supports the so-called dual role of the military, its direct involvement in politics, and also calls for the establishment of military conscription.

Of the other 28 parties, there are two Christian parties and 15 Islamic parties in addition to PPP, PAN and PKB. These Islamic organisations have emerged in a variety of ways—as splits from the three major Muslim parties, as the representatives of particular religious organisations, or the resurrection of previous parties. All of them, to a lesser or greater degree, pursue the reactionary aim of entrenching the Islamic religion and law in the Indonesian state.

Significantly, several of these parties claim connections to the right-wing Masyumi party, formed as an amalgamation of Islamic organisations during the Japanese wartime occupation of Indonesia. The party was banned by Sukarno in 1960 and was not resurrected by Suharto. The Masyumi Islamic Indonesian Political Party (PPIIM) is one of the few Islamic parties to call for the implementation of Islamic law.

Of the remaining 11 parties, only a handful even attempt to project a progressive image. The most significant is the People's Democratic Party (PRD), formed by student activists in 1993. Its leaders, including party chairman Budiman Sujatmiko, are still in jail as political prisoners after refusing to accept a presidential pardon. The PRD has orientated to students, workers and others radicalised by the country's deepening political crisis, only to subordinate them to the major bourgeois opposition parties. In the course of the election campaign, the PRD has called for an “anti-Golkar front” with Megawati, Rais and Wahid—the very leaders likely to form the next government and to implement the harsh IMF austerity measures.

Voting in the Indonesian elections will last just a day, but the final results are not expected to be available until July. Only 462 of the 700 seats of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) are being contested at the elections—military and state appointees will fill the other 238. The MPR is due to meet in November to select the next president and vice-president, who will in turn form the next government. In the intervening months, the party leaderships will be engaged in behind-the-scenes horse-trading and manoeuvres with the military, big business and elements of the state bureaucracy to secure support for the top posts.

Such is the thin façade of democracy in Indonesia.



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