

Sordid political horsetrading in the new Indonesian parliament

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If voters had hopes that the Indonesian elections in June would result in a break from the military-backed regime then they have been dashed during the initial four days of meetings of the new People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in Jakarta.

The shape of the new government due to be formed later in the month can already be seen in the backroom manoeuvres between the main parties and political figures in these preliminary MPR sessions. Both the military and the ruling Golkar Party, the main political vehicle of the Suharto dictatorship, will have a major role in determining the outcome.

The first significant decisions were the appointment of the MPR chairman and of the speaker in the House of Representatives (DPR), a smaller body, which will meet more frequently and, under proposed constitutional changes, may have more powers. The DPR consists of 462 elected members and 38 military appointees. Together with 200 members nominated by the regions and special interest groups, it comprises the MPR.

In a close vote on Monday, opposition figure Amien Rais, leader of the National Mandate Party (PAN) won the position of MPR chair, defeating his closest rival Matori Abdul Djalil from the National Awakening Party (PKB) by 305 to 279. A candidate nominated by the Armed Forces (TNI) faction received 41 votes.

The vote gave a first glimpse of the line-up of the parties. Rais himself only controls the 34 votes of PAN members but has formed an alliance known as the "axis force" with eight small Islamic parties, boosting the numbers to 125. The figure is still substantially less than Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) faction with its 188 votes, and the Golkar faction with 164.

Rais is reported in the Indonesian press to have struck

a deal with Golkar, guaranteeing in return that "axis" would support the Golkar nominee Akbar Tanjung for DPR speaker. Although Rais has not publicly confirmed the claim, Akbar, who is Golkar chairman and one of its candidates for the vice-presidency, did win the post on Tuesday. The PDI-P has admitted to negotiating a deal with Golkar prior to the vote and in doing so contributing to Akbar's overwhelming majority and the defeat of its own candidate.

Political pundits have interpreted Rais's win as an initial defeat for Megawati and the PDI-P, which backed the PKB candidate for the MPR position. Commenting in the *Jakarta Post*, Arbi Sanit said: "The axis force is gaining in strength, Megawati made a fatal mistake." He concluded that a number of factors were involved, including "a weak lobby, error in strategy, the arrogant demeanor of the PDI-P people, including Megawati's own attitude."

The vote has led to considerable speculation about the chances of Megawati being defeated in the presidential contest. While PKB chairman Abdurrahman Wahid has publicly backed Megawati for the position, Rais has in turn supported Wahid for the position. Rais' alliance has called on Golkar to ditch Habibie as its presidential candidate and to throw its weight behind Wahid.

On Wednesday, around 1,500 PDI-P members staged a noisy demonstration in central Jakarta to urge MPR members to back Megawati for the presidency. "We believe there are attempts coming from every direction to intercept her support," demonstration coordinator Yadi told the press.

Habibie himself is under siege from a number of quarters. He has been widely criticised for allowing a referendum in East Timor and permitting an Australian-led military force into the territory. His close supporters have been implicated in the ongoing Bank Bali

financial scandal. There have been a number of calls from within the Golkar party for Habibie to stand aside from the presidential contest.

The wheeling and dealing, however, is still in the early stages. Megawati is engaged in her own horsetrading, including with the Golkar party and elements of the military. Her opposition to Habibie's plan for a vote on the future of East Timor and her more recent failure to publicly oppose state of emergency legislation were aimed at securing support from the TNI.

The process is revealing of the character of the so-called reform parties and figures such as Rais, Wahid and Megawati. All of them operated freely under the repressive Suharto regime and have a myriad of connections to the military, the state bureaucracy, and to sections of big business. Each has backed the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a far-reaching restructuring of the economy, including the removal of price subsidies and cutbacks to spending on already limited government services.

The willingness of Megawati and Rais to strike deals with the military and Golkar leaders, who formed the backbone of the Suharto dictatorship, is a further indication of the class nature of the next government. It will be nothing more than a democratic façade for the implementation of an economic program that will lead to further unemployment and poverty, and the continued use of the military to suppress any opposition from workers, students and the urban and rural poor.



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