Habibie's speech to the Indonesian parliament sparks protests and criticism

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16 October 1999

Indonesian President B.J. Habibie's speech to the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) on Thursday night may well be his swansong. Outside the parliament building, thousands of student demonstrators, demanding Habibie drop his bid for reelection, clashed with security forces. Inside the MPR, Habibie had to contend with interruptions and interjections from members as he delivered a formal accountability speech defending his 16-month term of office.

Around 10,000 students and their supporters took part in anti-Habibie protests on Thursday and clashed violently with riot police and troops surrounding the parliament building. At least three protestors were severely beaten, and others were injured as police fired tear gas and rubber bullets. Posters and banners read “Reject Habibie and Wiranto”, “Crush remnants of [Suharto's] New Order” and “Stop militarism, bring Suharto and his cronies to court”. Similar demonstrations took place in Bandung, Ujungpandang, Semarang and Bogor.

Habibie has been under fire over a range of issues, including his decision earlier in the year to permit an independence referendum in East Timor, and the involvement of his close supporters in the ongoing Bank Bali scandal. Earlier in the week he handed his opponents further ammunition when his Attorney General announced that corruption charges against the former president and military strongman Suharto would be dropped for “lack of evidence”.

Habibie was only installed as president in May last year after Suharto was forced to resign in the face of widespread anti-government protests. He has been closely associated with Suharto since childhood, serving as his science and technology minister, and then vice-president. His government's move to drop the charges—a decision that was bound to draw widespread criticism—could be interpreted as a final service to the ailing former dictator before Habibie leaves office.

The ruling Golkar Party has endorsed Habibie and Armed Forces (TNI) chief General Wiranto as its candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency, due to be decided by the MPR next week. But Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung made clear that the selection is conditional. He said the party had left room to switch its candidates right up until the “last seconds” before the MPR session on the presidency.

Habibie sought to use his accountability speech to shore up his position, by claiming to have saved the country from near bankruptcy following the Asian financial crisis. He pointed to the relative recovery in the value of the rupiah, and a predicted growth rate of 1 percent as compared to a huge contraction of 13.2 percent last year. Indonesia's economy, however, remains highly unstable with demands from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for its restructuring to be accelerated. Habibie defended his policies on East Timor as well as the government's decision to drop charges against Suharto.

The speech was immediately criticised by opposition leaders and the Indonesian press. MPR chairman and National Mandate Party (PAN) leader Amien Rais said it was full of red marks and did not fully elaborate on the issue of corruption. Megawati Sukarnoputri, Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) leader, and Matori Abdul Djalil, National Awakening Party chairman, both indicated that their parties were likely to reject the speech.

In an editorial entitled “Deceitful Grandstanding,” the *Jakarta Post*, condemned Habibie's speech as a “rehash” of his Independence Day speech in August “designed wholly to support his shameless bid to stay in power”. Sections of the ruling elite are clearly

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concerned at the ability of Habibie to hold back further political unrest. The editorial warned MPR members not to repeat the “fatal mistake of the 1998 MPR” when Suharto and Habibie were endorsed as president and vice-president. “They, and Habibie, would do well to remember that Suharto's unanimous election, which went totally against prevailing public opinion, could not stop him from being unceremoniously dumped two months later on a wave of mass unrest”.

A debate on Habibie's speech began in the MPR yesterday. If the speech is formally rejected, Habibie's future as Golkar's presidential candidate would be immediately thrown into doubt, leading to his replacement or the party's support for one of the other two declared candidates—Megawati Sukarnoputri and the PKB leader Abdurrahman Wahid, who is backed by a coalition of Islamic parties.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported yesterday that a secret deal had been struck two weeks ago between the PDI-P and Golkar to secure the presidency for Megawati with Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung serving as her vice-president with a “full mandate to run everything”. Based on “a source close to Megawati,” the article claimed that more than 75 Golkar MPs had signed promises to desert Habibie at the last minute and throw their support behind Megawati.

Such reports may simply be the product of the rumour mills in Jakarta. Over the next week in the lead up to the MPR vote on the presidency, there is considerable room for many twists and turns in the backroom manoeuvres that will determine the final line-up. It is unlikely, however, that Habibie will figure greatly in the calculations. Moreover, whatever the outcome, Golkar and the military, the chief political props of the Suharto dictatorship, will continue to wield power and influence.

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