

A travesty of democracy: Indonesian parliament anoints Abdurrahman Wahid as president

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After more than a week of political machinations and backroom dealings between parliamentary factions, Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the Islamic National Awakening Party (PKB) was anointed Indonesian president yesterday by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

The result has been greeted in the international media as a vindication that Indonesia has entered a new era of democracy. An examination of the proceedings reveals, however, that the selection of Wahid was more akin to the palace intrigues surrounding the selection of a king or sultan by small groups of the wealthy and influential elites at a royal court.

It is worth considering how Wahid, who heads a party with 12 percent of the vote in the June national elections and just 51 members in the 700-seat MPR, came to win the presidency, defeating his rival Megawati Sukarnoputri by a margin of 373 votes to 313. Her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) outpolled all other parties, winning 34 percent of the vote.

The assembly itself is far from being a democratically elected body. Of the 700 seats, only two-thirds or 462 are elected. The remainder is appointed: 38 by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), 135 by the provincial legislatures and 65 from so-called special interest groups. The process of selection ensured that former ministers, influential generals and state bureaucrats, who had served under the military strongman Suharto and his handpicked successor B.J. Habibie, would be guaranteed a seat in the new parliament.

From the outset, it was clear that the Golkar Party and the army, the key props of the Suharto military regime, would play a major role in determining the next president and vice-president, and therefore the composition and policies of the next Indonesian government.

Both Wahid and Megawati, who have been built up as democratic reformers, were involved in negotiating with Golkar and its chairman Akbar Tandjung. It was widely reported in the Jakarta media that Megawati had reached a deal with Golkar in early October that would hand the vice-presidency to Tandjung and a number of key ministries to the party in return for its support for her run for the presidency.

Of course, such a move meant dumping of Golkar's own candidate, the incumbent president B.J. Habibie. But in ruling circles, Habibie, who took over the office after Suharto was forced to resign in May 1998, was more and more regarded as a liability. He was publicly berated for bowing to international pressure and permitting the UN-sponsored referendum in East Timor as well as being embroiled in the ongoing Bank Bali scandal and coming under fire for dropping investigations into the Suharto family's business empires.

But of most concern was the likely public reaction of disgust and anger to the re-election of Habibie—a long-time protégé and associate of the ousted Suharto. Not only would Habibie have faced immediate protests and demonstrations, but his ability to implement the economic restructuring demanded by big business and the International Monetary Fund would have been severely hampered.

Tandjung and his deputy Marzuki Darusman were instrumental in engineering Habibie's departure from the presidential race. While professing that Golkar was fully behind its candidate, its chairman carefully left open the option of shifting the party's support if circumstances required. Tandjung knew full well what the "circumstance" would be: the MPR had to take a vote on a formal accountability speech delivered by Habibie last Thursday.

Under Suharto, such speeches were little more than an occasion for sycophantic applause and unanimous votes. Habibie, however, came under sustained attack over his 16 months in office with a number of parties publicly indicating that they would reject the speech. Just to make sure the point was driven home to Habibie, who continued to insist on his candidacy, Defence Minister and TNI chief General Wiranto publicly rejected an offer to be Habibie's vice-presidential running mate.

The debate culminated in a vote at around 2 am on Wednesday morning rejecting Habibie's speech by a margin of 355 to 322. Several media reports indicate that the crucial factor was a block of between 30 and 40 Golkar members, led by Tandjung, who supported the rejection. A bitter and acrimonious confrontation then took place between Tandjung and Habibie, who announced shortly after that he would be withdrawing his candidacy.

One of Habibie's aides indicated today that the ex-president was going to devote himself to philanthropic work through the establishment of a non-government organisation, modestly named the Habibie Centre for Democracy and Human Rights.

Subsequent events took on the character of high farce. With Habibie out of the way, Golkar was free to substitute another candidate or to support one of the existing ones from other parties—Wahid or Megawati. Tandjung was pressed to accept the Golkar nomination and the decision was promptly relayed to the press, only to be reversed hours later when the MPR session convened on Wednesday morning.

Golkar was to have no candidate for the presidency. A minor political figure, Yusril Ihza Mahendra from the Islamic Crescent Star Party, was also prevailed upon to step down, leaving just the two major candidates to contest the presidency.

Wahid had only accepted the nomination in recent weeks. During

the elections his PKB was part of an electoral alliance with Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) and after the vote had voiced his support for her as president on numerous occasions. The key instigator of his candidacy was Amien Rais, another so-called opposition leader, who with the support of Golkar and his own "axis" alliance of small Islamic parties, had leveraged himself into the powerful position of MPR chairman.

Nominated by Rais and his "axis force," Wahid began his own behind-the-scenes negotiations, and announced over the last week, that he had reached an arrangement with Tandjung and Golkar to share out the presidency and key government posts. Right up until the last moment, PDI-P strategists were counting on Wahid to withdraw and throw his support behind Megawati for president.

The media and governments around the world clearly thought that Megawati's win was a foregone conclusion. Typical was Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, which carried the bold prediction in the headline of its afternoon edition, "Habibie Out: Megawati set to rule Indonesia as president exits". Australian prime minister John Howard went so far as to publicly declare that Megawati would win. "From a democratic point of view, her party won the most seats and that, in the end, should be a very decisive factor," he said.

Wahid's victory clearly came as a shock not only to Howard but to all the pundits and politicians who had been counting on a Megawati win. The financial markets also reacted sharply: in the morning, the Jakarta composite index jumped by 10 percent and the rupiah rose 8 percent against the US dollar on the news that Habibie had pulled out of the race. But as it became clear that Wahid had won, both the index and the rupiah slumped sharply back to previous levels.

Wahid, however, has already sent a clear signal that he will support the IMF's program of economic restructuring, declaring in his brief acceptance speech that "we are resolved in our commitment to free trade". The IMF and World Bank are demanding that Indonesia press ahead with measures to reduce its huge debt burden, drastically restructure its banking and financial system, and cut back on the country's limited social services—measures which will certainly further raise the already high levels of poverty and unemployment.

Wahid won the presidency with the support of his party's 51 members and as many as 125 from the so-called axis force of Rais. But the key bloc of votes that secured his victory came from Golkar and the army. Exact figures are unavailable but estimates put the proportion of the 185-member Golkar faction voting for Wahid at between 80 and 90 percent.

What becomes clear from an examination of these intrigues is that Golkar had been manoeuvring with both political camps. Tandjung has already declared his candidacy for the position of vice-presidency, due to be decided later today. However, whether he wins it or not, Golkar and the army will receive key ministerial posts in the new Wahid government and will play a central role in determining policy.

No doubt there were a number of personal and political considerations that led the ruling elite to swing its support behind Wahid. It was not that Megawati was not prepared to do a deal with Golkar and the military—for months she had been courting the army and has a number of ex-generals in PDI-P's leadership. Like Wahid, she has also pledged on a number of occasions to implement the IMF's policies.

Wahid, however, has a number of characteristics that may make him an easier figure to manipulate. The 59-year-old Wahid is virtually blind after two debilitating strokes and may not even last out his term of office. He is also renowned for his political adaptability and has

had close relations not only with Megawati and Rais but with the Suharto family, Golkar and the army.

Moreover, his lack of a substantial political base of support among the Indonesian masses is a positive advantage in conditions where the ruling class are concerned about the pressures that may be exerted on the next government by a growing opposition movement to its economic and social policies.

No one in ruling circles doubts that Megawati can be counted upon to carry out the same measures. She is part of the same thin wealthy social strata and has numerous ties to the military and bureaucratic apparatus. Moreover, her obvious political ineptitude—a matter for open comment even among her closest supporters—makes her just as susceptible to pressure and manipulation as Wahid.

But millions of workers, small farmers, students, intellectuals, petty traders and storeowners supported Megawati and the PDI-P in the false hope that she would be able to bring about genuine democratic reform and an improvement in living standards, devastated by two years of economic crisis. The decision to reject Megawati has the character of a provocation. The ruling class is delivering a clear message that the new government backed by Golkar and the military will make no concessions to the Indonesian masses and will meet any opposition with repression.

The disappointment of PDI-P supporters over the defeat of Megawati has already erupted in protests and demonstrations across Indonesia. In Jakarta, thousands of protesters, many of whom had been chanting "Megawati or revolution" over the previous week, battled some of the 40,000 riot police and troops assembled in the capital to guard the MPR session. Two people were killed and eight others injured when a bomb exploded in the midst of a demonstration in central Jakarta.

Angry protests occurred in the cities of Surakarta, Denpasar, Surabaya, Medan, and Semarang. In Surakarta, protestors set ablaze the office of the Central Java governor's assistant, the city penitentiary, and the Golkar branch office. They also targetted Amien Rais for his role in elevating Wahid, wrecking the home of his mother. In Yogyakarta, regarded previously as Rais's stronghold, all of his family members were evacuated to a local hospital and his own residence was put under guard.

Immediately after his win, Wahid appealed to Megawati for support in addressing protesters outside the national parliament building in Jakarta. She promptly appealed to "all of the Indonesian people to guard the unity of our country" and to "respect the result of the vote". However, the political intrigues that led to her defeat are a bitter lesson not only for her immediate supporters but for millions of people who expected significant reforms following the resignation of Suharto last year.

Far from opening up a new period of democracy in Indonesia, the election of Wahid sets the stage for new confrontations as his government, backed by the old Suharto apparatus, prepares to implement a political program diametrically opposed to the interests of the vast majority of the population.



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