

Megawati inserted as Indonesian vice-president to head off social unrest

Peter Symonds
22 October 1999

Another day of sharp political twists and turns in Jakarta on Thursday resulted in Megawati Sukarnoputri being selected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) as vice-president to serve alongside the newly-elected president Abdurrahman Wahid.

Megawati, who had been defeated by Wahid for the presidency the previous day, initially refused to stand for the position. She only agreed to stand after being assured of a smooth path to the vice-presidency.

She was nominated for the position by Wahid's National Awakening Party (PKB) rather than her own Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) and was guaranteed the support of the army and Golkar Party, which only the day before had been instrumental in her defeat for the top position.

Megawati defeated Hamzah Haz, leader of the Islamic United Development Party (PPP), by a margin of 396 to 284 after her only serious opponents—Golkar Party chairman Akbar Tandjung and Armed Forces (TNI) chief General Wiranto—withdrew their nominations before balloting began.

Reflecting the visible relief in ruling circles, leading PKB member Matori Abdul Djalil commented in the *Jakarta Post* yesterday: "Thanks to Allah, we have succeeded in lobbying the Golkar and Indonesian military factions to lend their support to Megawati."

Of immediate concern to the ruling elites were the protests and demonstrations that broke out on Wednesday after Megawati's failure to win the presidency. Even though Megawati joined Wahid in appealing for calm, PDI-P supporters engaged in violent clashes with the security forces across Indonesia.

In central Jakarta, thousands of protesters fought pitched battles with heavily-armed riot police and troops in the vicinity of the National Parliament

building. At least two people were killed and dozens injured as demonstrators replied to police tear gas and batons with stones and petrol bombs.

Early on Thursday morning, 50 army troops, their faces covered with gas masks, stormed into a Jakarta hospital and seized some 20 injured protestors who were receiving medical treatment. The troops rampaged through the hospital firing several tear gas canisters, and heavily damaging rooms and equipment including computers, sterilisers, and an ambulance.

In Surakarta, also known as Solo, in central Java, government offices, the Golkar Party branch office, businesses and dozens of cars were damaged or destroyed during clashes between PDI-P supporters and the police that left one person dead and scores injured.

On the island of Bali yesterday, protestors attacked banks and government buildings, including the Badung Regent's Office, Badung Council, the Golkar branch office and cut down trees to block roads in the provincial capital of Denpasar. Other protests occurred Thursday on Sumatra where PDI-P supporters destroyed the facilities at Sekupang seaport in Batam and attacked the North Sumatra Provincial Legislative Council building in Medan.

Immediately after winning the vice-presidency, Megawati appealed for national unity behind the government. "To my children across the nation, I ask you to sincerely return to your work and not to engage in emotional acts, because as you can see for yourself your mother now stands on this podium," she said in her acceptance speech.

The concerted push to install Megawati by the same political forces that had the previous day blocked her bid for the presidency reveals great nervousness and anxiety in ruling circles. Such is the huge social gulf between the privileged elites that hold power and the

worsening conditions of poverty and unemployment facing millions of Indonesians that the ruling class cannot afford to have any opposition figure who, no matter how meek and accommodating, might become a focus for anti-government discontent.

A comment on the *Time Daily* website bluntly stated: "In the end, it was either Megawati or Mega-riots: Indonesia's elites keep the populist leader out of the top spot, but they make her vice-president in order to head off unrest."

Megawati's election as vice-president is a kind of political insurance policy for big business not only immediately but in the longer term as opposition develops to the social and economic program that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international finance capital have laid out for the next government.

The key faction leaders in Jakarta will also have been influenced by Wednesday's sharp dive on the Jakarta share markets and slump in the value of the rupiah after Wahid's election. On Thursday, the rupiah rose more than 7 percent and the Jakarta Composite Index gained 5.5 percent, as it became evident that Megawati would be elected vice-president.

It is also more than possible that a number of powerbrokers received phone calls from Washington and other major capitals following Wahid's win, which was greeted with a degree of surprise and consternation internationally.

Speaking in Singapore at the East Asian Economic Summit on Wednesday, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth, was decidedly non-committal in his remarks about the new president. "We need another 24 hours to begin to know what the effect is on stability... We have to see how the political process plays out in Indonesia itself and this is after all an Indonesian election. I think the next 24 hours are quite critical in terms of how the vice president process plays out."

The US administration carefully groomed Megawati as an opposition figure over a number of years under the Suharto regime. In 1992, even before she became leader of the then Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), Megawati was invited to attend Clinton's inauguration. She regularly met with visiting US diplomats, officials and Democrats such as Jesse Jackson. In the lead-up to Suharto's resignation in May 1998, the US ambassador in Jakarta made a point of attending a number of her

political gatherings.

US support for Megawati is partly due her close personal connections with the Indonesian military, state bureaucracy and business executives. She speaks for layers of big business and the upper middle class who were frustrated by the Suharto regime's monopoly of political power and economic life. Her chief economic advisers Kwik Kian Gie and former Citibank executive Laksamana Sukardi are known for their unabashed support for the IMF's "market reforms" demanded by the US in particular.

The last 48 hours have demonstrated just how fragile the political situation in Indonesia is. The international press has been busily hailing the new combination of Wahid and Megawati as a sign of political maturity and stability. In reality, it reflects the panicky response of a tiny ruling elite determined to hang on to its wealth and privileges in the face of the mounting hostility of masses of people who had virtually nothing under Suharto and Habibie and now will have even less.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact