

The new Indonesian cabinet: a precarious government of 'national unity'

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30 October 1999

The Indonesian cabinet, announced on Tuesday and formally sworn in yesterday, has been generally hailed in the international media as a “break from the past,” ushering in a new period of democracy led by newly-installed President Abdurrahman Wahid and Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

In fact, any careful examination of the new ministerial line-up reveals precisely the opposite: that behind the façade of democracy, the Armed Forces (TNI) and the Golkar Party—the two pillars of Suharto's military-backed regime—have a powerful presence and continue to hold all the key security ministries.

The cabinet itself is the product of deals by Wahid with Golkar, the army and a coalition of Islamic parties known as “axis force” led by National Mandate Party (PAN) chairman Amien Rais in order to win the presidency. Wahid duly paid his political debts at a meeting with the key powerbrokers—Rais, TNI head and Defence Minister General Wiranto, Golkar Chairman Akbar Tandjung and Megawati—who parcelled out ministries to their supporters.

Wahid had initially announced that he would substantially cut the number of cabinet posts to 25. But as a result of the political wrangling, he was forced to appoint a 35-member cabinet, just one less than the previous government, to accommodate all the demands of various party factions, and business, regional and other interest groups. His only major change was to abolish the Ministry of Information, which under Suharto was responsible for strict media censorship.

Much has been made of the fact that Wiranto has been replaced as TNI chief by Admiral Widodo and as Defence Minister by a civilian, Juwono Sudarsono. But both of these appointments were made at the request of Wiranto who was appointed to the powerful position of Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs and Security, which oversees the security forces.

Moreover, Juwono Sudarsono is a state bureaucrat with longtime connections to the military and to the Suharto regime. He was deputy governor of the military thinktank known as the National Resilience Council, served as Minister of Environment under Suharto and then was appointed Minister of Education and Culture last year under Habibie. In taking the education post, his prime concern was the fact that students had been in the forefront of the anti-government protests against Suharto and Habibie.

The cabinet contains four other generals, either serving or retired. Lieutenant General Surjadi Soedirdja, who held the important post of Jakarta governor under Suharto, was made Minister for Home Affairs. Lieutenant General Agum Gumelar, known for his crackdown on student protestors when in charge of security in Sulawesi, was appointed Minister for Transportation. Lieutenant General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Rear Admiral Freddy Numeri were also given posts.

The Golkar Party received at least four ministries, including one for former party secretary-general Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, who served in Suharto's cabinets for 10 years. The party can also count on the support of some of the long-serving state bureaucrats who were appointed to ministerial posts. Under Suharto, it was obligatory for all state officials to vote for Golkar and many senior bureaucrats owed their jobs to the party.

Golkar deputy chairman Marzuki Darusman, a close ally of party chairman Akbar Tandjung, was appointed to the important position of Attorney General. He immediately announced the reopening of the corruption investigation of Suharto. The case will no doubt be carefully managed to ensure that neither Golkar, the military nor any of the existing cabinet is implicated in the financial wheeling and dealing of the Suharto family's huge business empires.

It is also significant that Golkar member Bomer

Pasaribu has been made Minister of Manpower. He was chairman of Indonesia's state-run SPSI trade union apparatus, which under Suharto operated as a virtual arm of the police and military in gathering intelligence and suppressing any opposition or protest by workers to low wages and sweatshop conditions.

In contrast to Golkar and the military, Megawati's party, the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), which won 34 percent of the vote in the national elections, received only five ministries. The most significant were the appointment of economist Kwik Kian Gie as Coordinating Minister for Economy, Finance and Industry and former Citibank executive Laksamana Sukardi as Minister of Investment and State Enterprises. Both are key advisers to Megawati and hold senior PDI-P positions.

Kwik and Laksamana are vocal advocates of "market reforms" and the restructuring policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Immediately after his appointment Kwik announced that his first job was to mend relations with the IMF and other international financial organisations. The IMF and World Bank cut off loans to Indonesia when the Habibie government refused to release an auditor's report into the Bank Bali scandal that involved close Habibie supporters.

Both Wahid and Kwik have identified Indonesia's economy, which is heavily burdened with debt and shrank by 13 percent last year, as the top priority. Kwik will undoubtedly accelerate the implementation of IMF demands for bank restructuring, the removal of price subsidies, further cutbacks to government spending and the opening up of opportunities to foreign investors. He will be assisted by Laksamana who will preside over the privatisation of large sections of state-owned enterprises.

Megawati was only inserted as vice-president after widespread protests by her supporters over her defeat for the presidency by Wahid. She has been given the responsibility for quelling religious conflicts in Maluku and separatist movements in Irian Jaya and Riau. In the wake of the referendum in East Timor, both Wahid and Megawati have made clear that no other provinces will be permitted a vote to decide their status.

A substantial portion of the remaining cabinet positions went to the Islamic "axis force" parties. Hamzah Haz, head of the United Development Party (PPP), one of the three state-run parties legally permitted to operate under Suharto, joins Wiranto and Kwik as the third coordinating minister in charge of social policy and welfare. Nur Machmudi Ismail, founder of the Justice Party (PK),

and Yusril Ihza Mahendra, founder of the Crescent Star Party, were also given positions.

Amien Rais who played the major role in cobbling together the "axis force," pushing Wahid's presidential nomination and obtaining the backing of Golkar and the military, received his pay-off in the form of five ministries for his National Mandate Party and close associates, including the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of National Education.

Nothing underscores the position of Wahid in the new government more graphically than the fact that his party, the National Awakening Party (PKB) and close supporters, hold only four positions in the cabinet, the most important being the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has gone to Alwi Shihab, an academic and PKB deputy chairman.

Wahid is largely a figurehead, balancing precariously between the various factions. His pronouncement that the new cabinet is a government of "national unity" is not only an indication of the weakness of his position but of the unstable and uncertain nature of bourgeois rule as a whole in Indonesia. As the government presses ahead with the IMF policies and social unrest grows, deep divisions will appear in its ranks.

Already there have been small student protests demanding the removal of the military from the government, and by employees of the abolished Information Ministry, who now face an uncertain future. Even before his cabinet was sworn in, Wahid felt the need to respond to criticisms by insisting that there would be no immediate reshuffle of the cabinet posts.

The government has two basic tactics to head off popular opposition and anger. The first is to advance the democratic face of Wahid, Megawati and Rais to appeal for calm, order and time to implement its program. But if that fails, the façade will quickly drop, revealing the mailed fist of the military on which the Indonesian ruling class has always ultimately relied. This regime, which represents the interests of the country's tiny wealthy elites and upholds the framework of the profit system, is utterly incapable of meeting even the most basic social needs and democratic aspirations of the vast majority of working people in Indonesia.



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