

A strange standoff in Jakarta:

Top Indonesian general continues to reject presidential calls for his resignation

Peter Symonds
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The incongruous political standoff over the last 10 days between Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and his Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs General Wiranto continues. Wahid, who is still flitting from capital to capital on a world tour, has repeatedly called for Wiranto to resign from cabinet but has failed to exercise his formal authority to sack the general. Wiranto has publicly refused to stand down but despite open press speculation about a military coup, appears to have taken little action in that direction.

Last week, even after Wahid had called on Wiranto to resign, the general was permitted to take his place unchallenged in a cabinet meeting chaired by Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri. Indonesia's Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in East Timor (KPP HAM) released its report holding Wiranto and other generals responsible for "crimes against humanity" committed last year by pro-Indonesian militia in East Timor. But no-one, including Megawati, so much as raised the issue let alone asked the general to leave the room or resign his post.

On the weekend Wahid made a series of conciliatory comments aimed at cooling the situation but managed at the same time to stir up a fresh controversy over the role of the Indonesian military. He told a meeting in Rome: "I believe in Mr Wiranto. Why? It is other people who know nothing about him and make generalisations about him." Then to prove the point, he explained that in 1997 Wiranto had tipped him off that Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) chief Feisal Tanjung had orders to "eliminate" him and Megawati.

Both Wiranto and Feisal have vigorously denied the existence of such an order. According to a report in the *Jakarta Post*, Feisal appeared relaxed and smiling when he said he had done "no such thing," adding that he and Wahid had gone together to Mecca for the haj pilgrimage and that he was "close" to Megawati's husband, Taufik Kiemas.

Speaking in Brussels, Wahid said he would pardon Wiranto if he were found guilty of East Timor atrocities,

adding: "For the past several years we have been good friends, despite whatever he has done in the past." He rejected rumours that Wiranto was plotting a coup, saying: "He protected me when I was persecuted by the last government. I know him. I know he would not do such a thing."

On his arrival in New Delhi on Tuesday, Wahid said the word "sack" in relation to Wiranto was "too heavy". Instead, he would simply "ask him to quit". He described Wiranto as "a respectable and reformist general" who had "encouraged the democratisation process".

But in India, Wahid also added fuel to the feud with Feisal by accusing him of ordering the raid by security forces and thugs on Megawati supporters occupying the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) offices in Jakarta in 1996, and also orchestrating moves to oust Wahid from the leadership of the Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1994.

For his part, Wiranto has repeatedly refused to step down and denied the charges against him. There have been several reports of army meetings in Jakarta. The *Australian Financial Review* reported it had learnt of a meeting last week of army-linked organisations and a Wiranto lawyer. Wahid himself accused army generals of holding a secret meeting in North Jakarta and warned them against taking any action.

In an interview with the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, Wiranto made a pointed stab at the US, which has kept the pressure on Wahid to act against the military by threatening to back the establishment of a UN tribunal into militia activities in East Timor. Wiranto said he could not see why he should be held responsible for the crimes of his troops, then cited the case of the US army massacre of 500 villagers at My Lai in 1968 during the Vietnam War. "I don't think the commander-in-chief of US troops in Vietnam or the Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to be legally responsible," he said.

Yesterday Wiranto walked into a cabinet meeting, again

unchallenged. "I am waiting for the president to return and I will report everything to him, not only my responsibility as... minister... but also... my position over the legal process I face, especially on human rights violations in East Timor," he said. Asked if he would step down, he commented: "I have already said, resign or not resign... let us wait for the legal process which is fair."

What is one to make of this strange, protracted confrontation?

Firstly, it has nothing to do with any form of justice for the families of the East Timorese who were murdered by pro-Jakarta militia last year with the complicity of the Indonesian police, army and civilian government. Not only is Wahid willing to pardon Wiranto in advance but his promise has provoked not the slightest reaction from either the US or the UN.

The National Resistance Council of East Timor (CNRT) leaders have already strongly hinted that they have no objection to Wahid granting a pardon to Wiranto. Jose Ramos-Horta said a presidential pardon was "always the prerogative of a head of state. We would not necessarily be in disagreement with a presidential pardon." Xanana Gusmao commented: "We want to stress again if we ask for justice, we don't ask for revenge."

Secondly, there is deep concern in ruling circles, particularly of course in the military and the Golkar Party, the political instrument of Suharto's rule, that investigations will delve beyond the events of last year in East Timor into the decades of brutality under the military dictatorship. House of Representatives speak and Golkar leader Akbar Tanjung reacted sharply to Wahid's accusations against Feisal by saying the president should "curtail his controversial comments" as they could "disturb political stability here".

Thirdly, despite occasionally bitter remarks, as the intimate relations between Feisal, Wiranto, Wahid and Megawati illustrate, all the major players, "reformers" and generals alike, have the closest of connections and have had for many years under the former Suharto dictatorship. The lengthy and rather tentative character of the standoff derives from the fact that factions of the ruling class are locked in a conflict for power but neither side is prepared to take decisive action. The protagonists are trading carefully because they know and need each other and above all fear that any open break could trigger broader political unrest.

At the same time, Wahid is in no position to back down. An article entitled "Showdown in Jakarta" in the latest issue of the US-based *BusinessWeek* magazine spells out what is at stake in the confrontation for the US, the IMF, major corporations and foreign investors. It makes clear that Wiranto has to go in order to demonstrate to international

finance capital that the Wahid government is serious about implementing market reforms and making a break with the past domination of the military and their business cronies over large sections of the Indonesian economy.

"A successful stand by Wahid also could pave the way for privatisation and restructuring of state enterprises, moves now being thwarted by military-backed bureaucrats. It also would enable Indonesia to begin the long-delayed cleanup of debt-plagued corporations," *BusinessWeek* comments.

The article then points out: "Even pro-Wiranto generals, who have business interests themselves, realise a coup would trigger mass student demonstrations. They also know a regime run by Wiranto, who was just blamed for the East Timor massacres by an Indonesian commission of inquiry, would leave the country without support by international lending agencies and the US."

On February 2, just after news of Wahid's sacking of Wiranto broke, a group of foreign donors led by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Japanese government met in Jakarta and pledged \$4.7 billion in loans for the fiscal year beginning on April 1. The package was tied to further economic reform. "And in January," the article notes, "economic policy czar Kwik Kian Gie and Wahid economic adviser Sri Mulyani reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund that mentioned reining in financial abuses by the military as a key goal."

Neither Wahid nor Wiranto can afford to buck the expectations of the IMF and foreign investors. The message is blunt: under the guise of concern over the East Timor atrocities, Wiranto has to be removed as a step towards the refashioning of the military and the opening up of the Indonesian economy to allow the free flow of capital and profits. All of this has to be achieved with as little friction as possible in the ruling elites in order to prevent the possibility of students, workers, the urban and rural poor intervening in the political situation to express their own grievances and concerns.

Wahid is due to return to Jakarta and will no doubt hold talks with Wiranto. Everything points to a deal being stitched together in which Wiranto will either resign or step down temporarily while legal proceedings are in process in return for the promise of a presidential pardon and other guarantees, not only for himself but other generals and their business associates. In the volatile atmosphere of Jakarta, however, all may not go according to plan.



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