

A symptom of political instability

Indonesian president's backflip over the fate of General Wiranto

Peter Symonds
17 February 2000

After performing a full political somersault, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid signed a decree on Sunday night “suspending” his Coordinating Minister for Security and Political Affairs General Wiranto from cabinet, pending an investigation by the Attorney General into Wiranto's responsibility for pro-Indonesian militia atrocities in East Timor last year.

Only that morning Wahid had arrived back from a two-week overseas visit, met with Wiranto, vice-president Megawati Sukarnoputri and several other ministers and announced that Wiranto would be able to remain in his post. “I asked him to resign but he said he preferred to be investigated by a legal process and I said ‘Okay’. We have to give him a chance,” Wahid had told reporters.

The President's sudden reversal only hours later was just the latest twist in the protracted confrontation during which Wiranto had repeatedly ignored Wahid's long-distance demands for his resignation. Wahid pledged several times to grant Wiranto a presidential pardon should the general be found guilty of any crimes, underlining the fact that what was at stake in the standoff had nothing to do with bringing the Indonesian military to account for its role in East Timor and elsewhere.

Wahid's press secretary Dharmawan Ronodipuro blurted out the real reason for the about-face when he told the media that Wiranto's suspension was necessary so that foreign aid and investment kept flowing into Indonesia. “To get this aid, one of the requirements is stability in the country,” he said. Under the guise of concern over the East Timor atrocities, the US and other major powers had made clear that the removal of Wiranto was a test case of Wahid's ability to restructure

Indonesia to meet the new requirements of international capital. That means ending the previous dominance of the economy by Suharto, the military and their business cronies.

The US in particular has warned the military against any move to oust Wahid and has made aid and loans contingent on the further opening up of the Indonesian economy to international investors. The US federal budget announced last week put Indonesia at the top of the list of foreign aid recipients with a substantial 50 percent increase in assistance. In her press conference following the budget announcement, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said: “I will make a case that this budget provides good value for America.”

On Monday, as news of Wiranto's removal came to light, it was as if the ruling class in the major international capitals breathed a collective sigh of relief. The markets responded by giving a boost to the Indonesian rupiah. US State Department spokesman James Rubin described the decision as “a significant step forward in the development of democracy” and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who arrived in Jakarta this week, commented favourably on the outcome.

In the wake of Sunday's events, a rash of articles has appeared in the international media attempting to explain Wahid's political acrobatics. In a manner akin to the reading of tea leaves or tarot cards, various commentators have attempted to divine the causes in aspects of his personal history or the cultural idiosyncrasies of Indonesia. Some have even given credence to the notion that Wahid's abrupt shifts were really the cunning manoeuvres of a master tactician aimed at bamboozling his opponents.

All of these explanations obscure the basic facts of the political situation. Wahid came to power last October as the head of a “government of national unity” in a complex trade-off between all the major parties and the military's parliamentary faction. His own National Awakening Party has a limited number of seats in parliament. As a result, Wahid is blown this way and that as he attempts to maintain the highly unstable ruling alliance. At the same time he is being compelled to carry out the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and foreign investors.

According to the account in the *Australian* newspaper, Wahid met at 10 am on Sunday with Wiranto, Megawati, Armed Forces Commander Admiral Widodo Adisucipto, Attorney General Markuzi Darusman and military intelligence chief Lieutenant-General Arie Kumaat. After a three-hour meeting, it was announced that Wiranto would stay on in his post until after an investigation by Darusman. With a compromise reached and matters apparently settled, Wahid went off for a haircut.

But as the news filtered out, the presidential palace began to be inundated with phone calls expressing disquiet. “Palace sources said the feedback came quickly and steadily. By early evening, a number of political associates and retired and serving generals had either phoned or come to the palace,” the *Australian* noted. At 8.30 pm, Wahid hurriedly convened a meeting at the palace with Megawati, the three military service chiefs and the national police chief, and signed a decree suspending Wiranto and appointing Home Affairs Minister Surjadi Sudirdja, in his place. A news conference was held at midnight.

Without giving too much away, Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab confirmed the following day that Wahid had immediately come under pressure after his backdown to Wiranto. “After receiving inputs from many parties, from inside and outside the country, from whom I do not know, he eventually took the decision to suspend Wiranto,” he said.

Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) chairman Amien Rais, who was prominent in the manoeuvring to insert Wahid in power last October, also explained: “Eight hours before he made the decision, the final decision, President Gus Dur [Wahid's nickname] was talking to me over the phone saying that he was under international pressure.” When asked whether he

thought the pressure was coming from other countries, international institutions or foreign investors, Rais responded: “All of them.”

While expressing disappointment, Wiranto acknowledged that Wahid had the constitutional right to remove his ministers. Army Chief of Staff General Tyasno Sudarto preempted rumours of a military coup by issuing a statement emphasising that the armed forces would uphold the president's decision. House of Representatives speaker Akbar Tanjung also backed the suspension, saying: “It was what the House had earlier demanded. It's the right decision.”

The political fallout from Wiranto's suspension is yet to become apparent. What is clear from the affair, however, is that the overriding factor in determining the direction of the Wahid government is the needs of foreign investors and the major powers. Not only must the old relations between the generals and their business cronies be swept aside but a new “democratic” image has to be manufactured for a military that will inevitably be used to quell the unrest produced by the country's widespread poverty and social dislocation.



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