

Why the Far Eastern Economic Review has opened its pages to the radical left in Indonesia

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One of the most significant articles to appear about Indonesia in the international press recently was an interview with Budiman Soedjatmiko, chairman of Indonesia's leftist People's Democratic Party (PRD), in the June 22 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

What was striking was not simply that the business magazine should devote two pages to the PRD, but that the tone of the interview was decidedly deferential. Entitled "Quiet Revolutionary," the article reported Budiman's warnings about IMF policies, his "democratic socialist" principles and the PRD's history with the same gravity it might have accorded a government minister or a corporate chief.

That Budiman should be interviewed at all highlights mounting concerns in bourgeois circles, in Indonesia and internationally, over the political stability of the country. Several articles have pointed to the falling value of the rupiah, share values and levels of foreign investment; continuing religious and separatist conflicts particularly in the Maluku; and fractious political infighting directed in particular against President Abdurrahman Wahid. The fear is that none of the major leaders are capable of implementing the IMF's economic restructuring policies without provoking a social backlash.

The interview with Budiman is part of the process of sizing up and cultivating new points of political support for capitalist rule in Indonesia. It appears that the *Far Eastern Economic Review* sees the PRD as a potential safety valve should protests begin to emerge against Wahid, or, in the event that his administration falls, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the only political figure who commands any significant support among workers and the poor.

As the magazine noted, the PRD has a certain standing among layers of radicalised students because of its participation in the movement against Suharto in 1998. Moreover its reputation has been enhanced by various radical groups around the world that routinely hail the PRD

as "revolutionary" and "socialist". But the critical issue for those in ruling circles is whether Budiman and his organisation can be relied upon to keep opposition to the regime within the bounds of capitalist politics.

In this regard, the PRD has already proven its credentials. Soon after the party's formation in 1994, there were growing signs of opposition among students, workers and the poor towards the junta. The opportunity existed to begin to educate the working class on the necessity of establishing its political independence from all representatives of the ruling class including opposition figures such as Megawati. The PRD, however, formed an alliance with Megawati on the grounds of pure political expediency. As the *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented: "By 1995, Budiman and his colleagues realised that working outside the established framework of politics was not getting them very far. So they hooked up with Megawati's PDI."

Matters soon came to a head in 1996. Concerned at any potential rival, President Suharto organised the ouster of Megawati as head of the Indonesian Democratic Party—one of the three state-run parties legally permitted to operate—provoking opposition that culminated in violent clashes in Jakarta. Taking fright at the first signs of active political involvement by working people, Megawati rapidly called off any further rallies and retired to her house in the suburbs, declaring she would fight in the courts. Suharto then turned on the PRD, making it the scapegoat for the protests, illegalising the party and jailing Budiman and other PRD leaders.

What lessons did the PRD draw from this experience? Far from breaking with Megawati, the PRD drew even closer, extolling her virtues uncritically in a bid to maintain their alliance with her party.

A statement written by Budiman in August 1996 gives the flavour of the PRD's extravagant praise: "Holding the leadership in the PDI, Megawati Sukarnoputri express[ed] the gentleness of a mother, [the] wisdom of a stateswoman.

Without any desire and personal ambition, she is struggling together with the people for people's sovereignty and brings the party as a party of the poor. It is this love and sincerity she gets from the people, which others cannot bribe or persuade with functions and positions."

The PRD's relations with Megawati expressed the petty bourgeois character of its politics. Deeply sceptical in the viability of a socialist perspective, the PRD has repeatedly sought to shackle the working class to bourgeois political formations and to sections of the state apparatus, claiming that reforms could be achieved through such "progressive" elements.

In the lead-up to the downfall of Suharto in May 1998, Budiman was interviewed in the *Green Left Weekly*, the newspaper of the Democratic Socialist Party in Australia. He held out the possibility that the Clinton administration and sections of the military would support a "coalition of progressive classes". In November 1998, huge demonstrations took place in Jakarta during the parliamentary session held to determine the framework for national elections. Many students became disillusioned with the "reformers," Wahid and Megawati, who failed to support the protests and all but accepted the proposals set out by Suharto's former political cronies. Only then did the PRD rethink its ties with Megawati. Its conclusion, however, was to look for a new "tactical alliance" with Islamic forces in Aceh and elsewhere.

In conditions where there is a growing interest in Marxism in Indonesia, especially among students, the PRD still maintains it is a socialist organisation. But its "socialism" is of a completely cosmetic character—something to be relegated to the future, while the party pursues the day-to-day *realpolitik* of tactical manoeuvres within the framework of capitalist politics in Jakarta.

Budiman summed up his orientation in an interview with the *Green Left Weekly* during a tour of Australia in May. "We need to give a socialist perspective," he said, "not as something that is attainable in the near future, but as our longer-term perspective... We cannot defeat imperialism and advocate socialism at the same time... It is not a question of delaying the tasks of achieving socialism, but ending the most reactionary elements of the present system."

This is a repeat of the "two-stage" theory, advocated by various Stalinist parties throughout Asia, which has sacrificed the struggle for socialism in the name of fighting for immediate gains through an alliance with sections of the "progressive bourgeoisie". If pressed, Budiman would no doubt rationalise his opportunist relations with Megawati and others in the same manner as the Stalinist Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) justified its coalition with her father President Sukarno in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such

alliances, he would say, are necessary in order to prevent the return to power of the military and other "reactionary elements".

But, by preventing a complete political break with the bourgeoisie and blocking the emergence of an independent movement of the working class fighting for its own class interests and rallying the poor and oppressed to its side, the PRD only strengthens the hand of reaction. Before, during and after Suharto's military coup of 1965-66, the PKI leadership paralysed the working class by insisting that it put its faith in Sukarno and progressive sections of the army. As a result, Suharto was able to consolidate his power, butchering at least half a million PKI members, workers and peasants and imprisoning many more. While the PRD's policies have not as yet produced a disaster of the magnitude of Suharto's massacres, the party's support for Megawati has already boosted the Wahid government's ability to impose the demands of international finance capital.

The value of the PRD's services is beginning to be recognised in ruling circles. In the run up to the national elections last May, 141 parties applied for official electoral status. The PRD was one of just 48 parties that were eventually recognised after an exhaustive vetting process. Since the elections, the PRD has integrated itself even more closely into the political mainstream. Budiman told the *Green Left Weekly* in May: "We have already met with parliamentary members and presented our proposals," adding with a touch of pride that one of his suggestions had already been accepted by the body of conservative legislators.

Budiman's interview in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* marks the entry of the PRD onto the international political stage. The magazine is not alone in its interest. As the article reports, in mid-May Budiman was given an audience with the IMF's representative in Jakarta "to protest at the fund's support for the government's removal of food and transport subsidies". The magazine noted: "The fact that Budiman was received at all indicates that he is taken seriously."

For anyone impressed with the PRD's radical-sounding rhetoric, such compliments should serve as a timely warning.



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