

Indonesian parliamentary session marked by collaboration between 'reformers' and Suharto's Golkar

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The annual two-week session of Indonesia's Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) from August 7 to 18 witnessed growing collaboration between Golkar, the political machine of the former Suharto military dictatorship, and the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), led by Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Only 10 months ago, Golkar and the military used their numbers in the last MPR to prevent Megawati becoming President and install Abdurrahman Wahid. Last Friday, in one of the final acts of the session, they supported a decree instructing Wahid to formally transfer the day-to-day running of the government to Megawati.

The PDI-P won 34 percent of the vote in last year's election, presenting themselves as reformers and playing upon the popular illusions that Megawati, the daughter of Indonesia's first president Sukarno, was an opponent of the old regime. At this MPR session, the PDI-P functioned as the driving force behind legislation that revamps the political role of the military and protects those who enforced and benefited from Suharto's 32-year rule.

Among the most significant is Clause 28 I (1), an amendment to the 1945 Indonesian constitution specifying what rights are upheld by the state. Containing a phrase that translates as "the right not to be prosecuted based on a law which can be applied retroactively," the clause amounts to constitutional immunity from prosecution for crimes committed by state and military personnel under Suharto.

The human rights group, the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras), immediately denounced the MPR in a statement to the press: "The MPR members cannot say they lack knowledge of human rights affairs or are not aware of the clause's impact. The article was deliberately made so as to benefit certain people. This is all about protecting the political position of the military."

Prosecutions over the military's complicity in last year's militia violence in East Timor and atrocities against advocates of a separate state in the oil-rich province of Aceh

are now in doubt. Moreover, as long as Clause 28 I (1) stands, it rules out bringing Suharto and his inner circle to trial for the 1965-66 coup, during which an estimated 500,000 Communist Party members and supporters were slaughtered, the murder and torture of democratic and labour activists in the subsequent decades and the more recent shootings of students during anti-government demonstrations.

Suharto is scheduled to appear in court next week, not on human rights charges, but on corruption allegations that he channeled some \$US570 million from charities into his personal wealth. As with Chile's Pinochet, he has pleaded ill-health to avoid any trial.

With vocal PDI-P support, the MPR also passed legislation that extended the right of the military and police to maintain their 38 non-elected seats in the lower house of parliament, the DPR, until 2004, and their representation in the MPR until 2009. Ending the political role of the armed forces was a central demand during the 1998 anti-Suharto protests.

A Golkar spokesman dismissed the outrage of student organisations and democratic campaigners. "The existence of the military and the police is not a matter of like and dislike. The two institutions, with their guns, are needed to maintain security and handle the country's defense."

The constitution has been amended to define the role of the military as defending "national integration" and to stress that Indonesia is a unitary state "based on an archipelagic concept". These amendments flow from concerns in the ruling elite at an MPR decree granting special autonomy to Aceh and Irian Jaya, and greater powers to all provincial governments from next January 1. Both PDI-P and military legislators warned that instead of undermining separatist agitation, such concessions could, in fact, fuel demands for a federal-type state structure or outright independence from Indonesia. Where such struggles do erupt, the military has been constitutionally empowered to crush them.

Colonel Syarifuddin Tippe, an army commander in Aceh,

responded on Monday by stating that a three-month truce had failed to stop separatist activity and that the government should declare a state of emergency to enable a military crackdown. This prompted Rosita Noer, head of an Independent Commission on Aceh, to warn that the province was “only one step away from an East Timor situation.”

Out of similar concern for the maintenance of the Indonesian nation state, the PDI-P and Golkar prevented any vote in the MPR on a proposed constitutional amendment, sought by some Islamic parties, that would compel Indonesia's majority Muslim population to adhere to Islamic law. Known as *syariah*, such an act would undermine the secular character of the constitution, raise fears of Islamic fundamentalism and strengthen separatist sentiment in non-Muslim regions.

The two parties also blocked an amendment calling for direct presidential elections, as opposed to the selection of the President by the MPR. Factional dealing in the parliament, not a vote by the general population, will continue to determine who holds executive power.

Behind the coming together of the PDI-P and Golkar are the interests of the major sections of the Indonesian ruling class, as they attempt to maintain control amid a staggering social and political crisis that extends across the Indonesian archipelago.

The currency and stock market have barely recovered from their collapse during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. The Indonesian government is still dependent upon loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international agencies to shore up the crippled banking system and meet interest payments on its \$US134 billion debt. In exchange, it is being compelled to carry out a sweeping restructuring of the economy in the interests of transnational corporations and investors and slash the limited social spending on health, education and subsidies for the poor.

Under the banner of eliminating Suharto era “crony capitalism”, the IMF has dictated the dismantling of obstacles to foreign competition and investment such as monopolies, nationalised industries and trade barriers. Large numbers of firms have been bankrupted, shattering the personal fortunes of significant sections of the business elite and middle class in Indonesia.

The next stage of IMF-dictated restructuring, spelt out on July 31 by Wahid's former economics minister, involves the fire-sale of over 20 bankrupt large corporate groups and banks, the downsizing of the public service and the recovery of “off-budget funds” raised by government agencies, including the military. Preparations are underway for the privatisation of the state-owned airlines and ports, as well as oil, telecom, electricity and plantation corporations. More

areas of the economy will be opened up to foreign investment.

However much Golkar and the PDI-P resent and fear subordination to the IMF, they have no alternative program. While sections within their ranks are seeking to slow down the pace of restructuring, they have little choice but to implement the IMF demands if Indonesian big business is to receive the international financial backing and investment it needs to revive the economy.

A factor in the turn by Golkar toward supporting Megawati's elevation is the lack of investor confidence in Wahid and his political capacity to push through the IMF's measures. In May, with Wahid's presidency under criticism from numerous quarters, the rupiah slumped 10 percent to 8,760 to the US dollar and is still hovering at around 8,300—a quarter of the value before the Asian crisis.

After its precipitous 13 percent contraction in 1998, the economy is registering only small growth. Unemployment stands at 30 million and living standards are half the 1997 level. Enormous social tensions, and the weakening of the centralised state since Suharto's fall, are being exploited by separatist and religious demagogues seeking to lay claim to portions of the national wealth previously dominated by the traditional ruling elite in institutions like Golkar and the military.

The MPR session indicates the basic orientation of the new alliance between Megawati and Golkar. Its first priority is to rely on remaining illusions among the Indonesian masses in Megawati to preserve the unitary state. If that fails it will turn directly to the military.



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