

Censure of President Wahid reveals shifting political alliances in Indonesia

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The decision of Indonesia's lower house of parliament (DPR) on February 1 to formally censure President Abdurrahman Wahid marks a major shift in political alignments in Jakarta.

Fifteen months ago in the wake of the 1999 national elections, the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) narrowly supported Wahid as president over Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) had won the largest vote in the poll. Megawati was eventually installed as vice president after the decision provoked widespread protests.

Last week the DPR voted 393 to four to endorse the report of a parliamentary committee into two scandals allegedly involving Wahid. Before the vote, members of the president's own National Awakening Party walked out in protest, saying the move was politically motivated. As a result, the tiny Love the Nation Democratic Party was the only grouping to vote against the motion.

The vote was the first step in a complex process that could eventually lead to Wahid's impeachment and removal from office. The parliament has to send two warning letters to the president before it can convene a special MPR session to decide his future. The president has three months to respond to the first and a month to the second. A two-thirds MPR majority is required for his impeachment.

MPR chairman Amien Rais, who played a key role in the backroom deals in October 1999 that enabled Wahid to defeat Megawati, has called for the process to be bypassed by immediately convening the MPR to consider the president's future. Rais heads the so-called Axis group of Islamic parties, which has been active in organising student protests in Jakarta calling for Wahid's resignation.

The two scandals surrounding Wahid amount to little more than a pretext for moving against him. Wahid is accused of being implicated in the fraudulent withdrawal of 35 billion rupiah (\$US3.7 million) from the State Logistics Agency (Bulog) by his former masseur. It is also alleged that the president misused a \$US2 million donation from the Sultan of Brunei that was destined for humanitarian relief in Aceh.

The parliamentary report provides no substantive evidence that Wahid misappropriated money in either case however, and appears to rest mainly on supposition, innuendo and gossip. It

concluded that although he may not have personally benefitted, the president had known that people around him had profited and that his "inconsistent" statements on the Brunei donation amounted to misleading the public.

Wahid has consistently denied the allegations, challenged the legal validity of the parliamentary committee and disputed its right to question him. Under pressure to reach an accommodation, he finally appeared before the committee on January 29 but walked out, claiming that it had failed to clarify whether the questioning would be political or legal in character. The following day he appeared on national TV emphatically declaring: "All of the allegations are false. I was not involved in anything whatsoever."

Increasingly desperate, Wahid hinted to a group of journalists on January 27 that he may be prepared to dissolve parliament even though constitutionally he appears to lack the powers to do so. Following violent clashes between police and anti-Wahid demonstrators on January 29, Defence Minister Mohammad Mahfud, a close Wahid ally, suggested that the armed forces (TNI) might step in. "There are two things that could lead to the TNI taking over. If the politicians fail to lead this country and secondly if there is chaos which cannot be controlled then the TNI can take action," he said.

Megawati and the PDI-P, which holds the largest bloc of seats—152—in the DPR, played the key role in last week's vote. Until last week, the party had continued to back the president despite widely reported divisions within its leadership over the issue. On January 31, Wahid had breakfast with Megawati, several ministers, military and police chiefs and then declared: "Sister Mega supports me".

Later in the day, however, a meeting of the PDI-P executive decided to accept the parliamentary report. An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Megawati "burst into tears and rushed from a party meeting when cadres decided only hours before the special parliamentary session to accept the report on the scandals". The vice president has made no public statement on the vote or indicated whether she is willing to take over if Wahid is removed from office.

Significantly, leading PDI-P figure Laksamana Sukardi was the first MP to attack Wahid in parliament last week, saying that the party "fully accepted the investigation result". Wahid

dismissed Laksamana as trade and industry minister last April, accusing him of corruption but producing no evidence. His sacking, along with that of another economics minister Yusuf Kalla, came as the International Monetary Fund was applying pressure to Indonesia to speed up economic restructuring.

Underlying tensions

The dismissal of Laksamana and Kalla, a member of Golkar, the ruling party of the Suharto dictatorship, pointed to sharp underlying differences within Wahid's broad "government of national unity" and growing ties between the PDI-P "reformers" and the old Suharto-era apparatus. The president had already made enemies in the military when, under considerable international pressure, he confronted and removed co-ordinating security minister General Wiranto and instituted proceedings against those involved in the pro-Indonesian militia violence in East Timor in 1999. The allegations against Wahid emerged shortly after the sackings.

At the same time, Wahid increasingly came under fire from PDI-P, Golkar and the military for "threatening national unity" by failing to crack down on separatist movements in West Papua and Aceh. He was forced to back away from symbolic moves to permit the flying of separatist flags in the two provinces. Following the arrest of West Papuan leaders in December on charges of sedition, security forces flatly refused to carry out a presidential order to release the prisoners.

Moreover, the failure of the police to apprehend Suharto's son Tommy, who disappeared after being convicted of fraud, or to identify and arrest those responsible for a series of bomb blasts that coincided with Suharto's trials, indicate resistance within the security forces to Wahid's attempts, limited though they were, to prosecute the Suharto family, its business cronies and the military.

In early August, Megawati, Rais and Golkar powerbroker Akbar Tanjung met with Wahid to attempt to effect a compromise whereby the vice president would take over the day-to-day running of government affairs. But the deal fell apart later in the month when the president announced a ministerial reshuffle, which, contrary to the expectations of Golkar and the PDI-P, cut the size of the cabinet and reduced their representation. Wahid had inserted his own close political associates in many of the key posts. MPR chairman Rais declared that Wahid had "wasted his last chance" and PDI-P spokesman Laksamana complained that his party's views had not been considered. Shortly afterwards, parliament instituted its investigation into the two scandals.

Less than a year earlier, Golkar, the military and their allies had favoured Wahid over Megawati. Unable to directly take charge because of their role in the Suharto dictatorship, they were compelled to support one of the "reformers". But they feared that Megawati and the PDI-P, the only party with a significant social base among working people, would come under pressure to meet the aspirations of the masses for democratic rights and improved living standards. So, with the

support of Rais, Golkar and the military manoeuvred to prevent the MPR anointing Megawati as president.

One of the major factors behind the shift to Megawati has been that she and the PDI-P have been ingratiating themselves with the old Suharto apparatus. Last August the PDI-P supported an amendment to the constitution preventing "retroactive prosecution," thus protecting military personnel from being tried for their crimes under Suharto. The party also backed moves to retain unelected military nominees in the DPR until 2004 and the MPR until 2009.

On January 14, Megawati told a large PDI-P rally: "We are in the phase of survival of the nation, the existence of our nation is currently being tested. I am calling on all components of the nation to safeguard the unity and cohesion of this free nation." Such nationalist rhetoric meets up with the demands of the military for tougher action against separatist movements and also with the interests of sections of business, protected under the Suharto regime, that face tough times as IMF restructuring demands are implemented.

The PDI-P has explained Megawati's reluctance to openly challenge Wahid by saying that she does not want to create a precedent for her own removal. "We want her to be a president for at least five years, not only five months," PDI-P spokesman Amir Moeis commented recently. Her hesitancy is, however, rooted in a deeper and more intractable political problem: the incompatibility of the aspirations of those who voted for her with the demands of her allies in the old Suharto apparatus and, more broadly, with those of the ruling class in Indonesia and internationally.

While there is growing support in Indonesia for Wahid's removal, there are few signs of any international backing for such a move. Speaking in Europe last week, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told reporters: "I don't think it's inevitable that there will be impeachment proceedings against President Wahid which would lead to his overthrow... We think that he's certainly likely to remain there for some period of time." His remarks take on an added significance following comments by the new US Secretary of State Colin Powell indicating that the Bush administration would look to Australia to provide leadership in political matters related to Indonesia.

All the signs point to a bitter confrontation between Wahid and his political enemies. Since last week's vote, his Justice Minister has publicly called for him to go and an anti-Wahid petition is being circulated among military officers. If the formal impeachment process runs its course, the scheduled annual meeting of the MPR in August could be the venue for a showdown.



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