

Indonesian military emerges as powerbroker in Megawati's installation as president

Peter Symonds
24 July 2001

A great deal of effort is being expended in Indonesia, with the support of the international media and major powers, to give an aura of democratic respectability to yesterday's replacement of President Abdurrahman Wahid by Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri. But it is difficult to hide the fact that the real powerbrokers, in what has been a bitter factional dispute in the ruling elite between two so-called democrats, have been the instruments of the former Suharto dictatorship—the military and Suharto's Golkar party—along with the “Axis” alliance of right-wing Islamic parties.

This political line-up not only ensured an overwhelming vote in the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) to oust Wahid after less than two years in office, but also defeated a last-minute attempt by the president to declare a state of emergency. Megawati has yet to appoint a cabinet or announce any policies but both will undoubtedly carry the heavy imprint of the Suharto-era forces that put her in office and to whom she is now beholden. Already a string of former generals and right-wing politicians are lining up for the vice-presidency.

The vote yesterday followed four days of behind-the-scenes political manoeuvring, which was in turn the culmination of a six-month process of parliamentary impeachment. Last Friday MPR members gathered in the parliamentary building in order to thwart threats by Wahid to impose a state of emergency if his political opponents did not end their plans to impeach him in a special MPR session scheduled for August 1.

Wahid backed away from his threat, temporarily, but he did proceed to swear in a new acting national police chief—a further attempt to undermine the current head, General Bimantoro, who for weeks, with the backing of parliament, had been defying the president's decision to sack him. The following day Wahid's critics seized upon the president's manoeuvre as the pretext to bring forward the MPR special session to Monday and to insist that Wahid appear before it to answer allegations of corruption and incompetence.

Both political camps spent Sunday in frenzied preparation for the showdown. Megawati met the leaders of major political parties at her private residence. She appeared before reporters outside her house flanked by MPR speaker Amien Rais, who is also head of the “Axis” group, and DPR [lower house] speaker and Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung.

The military top brass put on a display of force outside the presidential palace, reinforcing its previous declarations that the armed forces (TNI) and police would not back any attempt by Wahid to impose a state of emergency. More than 1,000 heavily armed troops backed by dozens of tanks massed in a park opposite the palace on Sunday afternoon, in what General Ryamizard Ryacudu, commander of the Army Strategic Reserve Command (Kostad), disingenuously

described as “a routine exercise”.

Increasingly isolated, Wahid announced that he would not resign and declared once again that the MPR's moves to impeach him were unconstitutional. Several reports indicate that he made last-ditch efforts to replace the TNI chief Admiral Widodo Adisucipto. But the writing was on the wall—the officers that he approached as replacements refused.

At 1am on Monday morning, Wahid made a nationally televised speech declaring a state of emergency, dissolving both houses of parliament and banning the Golkar party. Shortly afterward, flanked by the heads of the army, navy and air force, Widodo announced that the armed forces would not obey the president's orders. A number of senior ministers in Wahid's cabinet resigned, including his top security minister Agum Gumelar and cabinet secretary Marzuki Darusman. In the early hours of Monday morning, Megawati appealed for the MPR to proceed and urged the military to protect the parliament. More than 42,000 police and soldiers were deployed throughout Jakarta, including 6,000 security personnel at the parliament building.

Wahid refused to attend the MPR, which rapidly pushed through its business with little or no debate—just over 100 of the president's own supporters boycotted the session. Parliament formally rejected the president's declaration of a state of emergency. The decision was reinforced by the country's Supreme Court, which announced that Wahid's decree was unconstitutional. By mid-afternoon, with the discussion over, the MPR voted 591-zero to remove Wahid. Significantly the 38 armed forces and police appointees voted for the motion—on previous occasions they had abstained to maintain a semblance of neutrality. Half an hour later, Megawati was sworn in as president.

So far Wahid has refused to step aside or leave the presidential palace. He presents a rather forlorn spectacle—deserted by most of his ministers and closeted with a handful of advisers. MPR speaker Rais has threatened to have him arrested if he fails to quit the palace in a week or so.

His appeal on Sunday for his supporters to converge on the palace to defend his presidency came to very little—a few hundred kept vigil throughout yesterday. At the parliament building there were no protests. The coming days and weeks may see demonstrations, particularly in his base in East Java. But his lack of support yesterday indicates that even within his own National Awakening Party (PBK) and Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), there are divisions and Wahid has lost support.

The question has to be asked: how is it that the military and its political allies are openly determining the course of events in

Indonesia just three years after Suharto was forced from office? Above all, their political re-emergence has depended directly on the so-called reformers—Wahid, Megawati and Rais—who, deeply fearful of the emergence of the masses, have opposed demands for genuine democratic change and have intrigued with those they once claimed to oppose.

Under the Suharto dictatorship, Wahid, Megawati and Rais maintained a posture of very cautious opposition while at the same time establishing high-level connections with the military, Golkar and the state apparatus. In the course of events that finally forced Suharto out of office in May 1998, all three sought to rein in student protests, fearful that they would spark a broader movement that would slip from their control. While Suharto's former allies were forced onto the back foot, they remained in place, along with the state apparatus, and were even able to parade in public as "democrats" and "reformers".

With the departure of Suharto, these so-called reformers collaborated closely with his successor B.J. Habibie to stabilise the political situation and end the protests. The crucial turning point came at the end of 1998 when large demonstrations erupted in Jakarta demanding that the MPR make significant changes to the Suharto-era political structures. Instead of backing the protests, Wahid, Megawati and Rais agreed to the very limited modifications proposed by Suharto's former functionaries and effectively gave the green light for a police crackdown in which several students were shot dead.

As a result, the outcome of the national elections held in mid-1999 was a travesty from the beginning. Only a half of the political parties that applied were permitted to stand candidates for the lower house or DPR, which retained a group of military appointees. The upper house or MPR comprised the DPR together with 200 representatives appointed by provincial parliaments and special interest groups. When the MPR met in October 1999 to appoint a president and vice-president only two-thirds were elected members—the rest were appointees—and the entire affair was a sordid exercise in political horsetrading.

Megawati had assumed that because her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) had won 35 percent of the popular vote she would become president. But there were concerns in ruling circles that if Megawati became president she would come under pressure from her supporters to make concessions. The PDI-P, trading on Megawati's family connection as the daughter of Indonesia's first president Sukarno, was the only party that had a significant base of support among layers of workers and the urban and rural poor.

In a series of backroom deals, Tandjung and Rais put together a loose coalition of votes to block Megawati and insert Wahid as president. Following the outbreak of protests by her supporters, Megawati was made vice-president. In the past 20 months, Wahid's opponents have frequently accused the president of being "erratic" and "incompetent". But Wahid's failings were never simply personal—they stemmed from the fact that he had no significant base of his own and was compelled to manoeuvre to retain the support of others.

Once in office, Wahid came under pressure from the IMF and major powers to implement economic restructuring and to limit the involvement of the military and the state apparatus in the country's economic and political life. He rapidly came into conflict with the military, Golkar and others when he made tentative moves to put Suharto and his associates on trial for corruption and to take action against the military for its involvement in the anti-independence violence in East Timor. The president was also sharply criticised for

his failure to crack down on separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua.

For her part, Megawati concluded from her defeat in October 1999 that she had to establish closer ties with the military and Golkar. Under the banner of defending the Indonesian nation, she drew around her those who were demanding tougher action against separatism, and were critical of the IMF's demands for privatisations and restructuring of the country's financial system. She has become a thinly disguised figurehead for the very political forces that she claimed to oppose prior to the fall of Suharto and that prevented her from winning the presidency in 1999.

The first moves against Wahid were made in late 2000 on the basis of two trumped-up corruption scandals and in early 2001, the formal process of impeachment began. Despite the lack of evidence against Wahid, the DPR voted overwhelmingly on February 1, April 30 and May 30 to continue the moves to oust Wahid. The threadbare character of the allegations were exposed in May when the attorney general's office found that Wahid had no legal case to answer. In response, his political opponents simply shifted the emphasis to the president's "incompetence".

The whole period since the fall of Suharto has underscored one important political lesson—the complete incapacity of so-called reformers such as Wahid and Megawati to meet the aspirations of ordinary working people in Indonesia for genuine democracy and improved living standards. Megawati now assumes office at the beck and call of the military and Golkar, who will in all likelihood have prominent roles in her new administration. She will be compelled to implement an economic agenda that will inevitably lead to a widening of the gulf between the country's tiny elite and the impoverished masses.

The very fact that Megawati, an inarticulate and shallow political figure, who by her own admission would far rather have remained a housewife and a gardener, has come to centre stage in Indonesia speaks volumes about the political weakness of the national bourgeoisie. Having relied on an outright military dictatorship to prop up its rule for 32 years, the ruling class is compelled to turn to one of Sukarno's children in the hope that his undeserved reputation in the struggle for Indonesian independence will buy a bit of time. In the background, the military has greatly strengthened its hand over the last three years, and is being refashioned and groomed to deal with the opposition that will inevitably develop to the government's policies.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact