

Megawati's support for US war drive exacerbates tensions in Indonesia

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The stakes were high for both sides when Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri landed in the US last week. For the Bush administration, the support of the world's most populous Muslim nation for its "war against terrorism" is a key element in its diplomatic offensive to isolate the Taliban regime prior to any military strikes against Afghanistan. Behind the scenes the US undoubtedly exerted considerable pressure to ensure not only that Megawati ignored calls at home to postpone her planned visit, but also that she unambiguously endorse the US campaign during her trip.

Megawati, however, is walking a precarious tightrope. She is desperate for financial assistance to bolster the heavily indebted Indonesian economy, which has been floundering since the 1997-98 Asian financial collapse and now faces the impact of a global downturn. US support is essential for securing aid from the IMF and World Bank as well as encouraging foreign investment in Indonesia—a fact that would have been bluntly spelled out to the Indonesian president and her retinue in Washington.

At the same time, Megawati's grip on power is fragile. She only came to power last month after a drawn-out and bitter parliamentary impeachment of the former president Abdurrahman Wahid. While her own party is the largest in parliament, it does not have a majority and is itself riven by factionalism. Her nominal allies in the removal of Wahid—the army, Golkar (the ruling party of the Suharto junta) and various Islamic parties—could just as easily turn on her.

As in predominantly Muslim countries elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East, Megawati's support for the US military preparations threatens to fracture her cabinet and become a focus for widespread grievances and anger, engendered by Indonesia's deteriorating social conditions. Three decades of US support for the brutal Suharto dictatorship and its crimes remain deeply etched into the consciousness of broad masses of Indonesians.

Small protests have already taken place against US plans to attack Afghanistan.

Megawati immediately condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, but, as was noted in Washington, failed to offer concrete support for the Bush administration's military preparations. Intent on securing her positive support for US plans, Bush undoubtedly used a mixture of the carrot and the stick in his discussions with her.

Two joint statements were released—one outlining a package of US financial assistance to Indonesia, and the other pledging co-operation between the two countries in combatting terrorism.

In what amounts to a thinly disguised bribe, various US trade finance agencies will provide Indonesia with \$US400 million to promote trade and investment, particularly in country's oil and gas sector. Bush has also promised to secure Congressional support for another \$130 million to help prop up the Indonesian budget and provide funding in areas of education and legal reform.

In addition, the US is seeking to reestablish connections with the Indonesian military. The measures outlined so far are largely nominal as a result of a Congressional ban on US military aid to Indonesia put in place following the terror campaign unleashed by pro-Indonesian militia in East Timor in 1999. Washington announced \$400,000 for a program of expanded international military education and training, an end to the embargo on sale of non-lethal defence items to Indonesia and the establishment of a bilateral security dialogue.

The meaning of the second statement was spelled out by Megawati on Tuesday when she addressed the American Indonesian Chamber of Commerce. To the applause of business leaders, she denounced the attack on the World Trade Centre as "the worst atrocity in the history of civilisation" and then stated: "Indonesia is ready to cooperate with the United States and other civilised

countries in the fight against terrorism.”

The previous day her foreign minister Hassan Wirayuda signed the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and indicated that Indonesia would increase its intelligence coordination with the US and countries in South East Asia. Other Indonesian support for the US is yet to be announced but the Bush administration has already made clear that Megawati has to crack down on organisations that it regards as having possible links to Osama bin Laden.

Inside Indonesia, a potential split is already opening up between Megawati and Vice President Hamzah Haz, who is head of the Islamic-based United Development Party. Haz condemned the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington but then, in a remark interpreted as justifying the attacks, added that the tragedy might “cleanse the sins” of the US. Both he and Amien Rais, speaker of Indonesia’s parliamentary upper house and the leader of an alliance of Islamic parties, warned the US administration not to immediately blame Muslims as had been the case in the Oklahoma City bombing.

On Tuesday, the influential Council of Ulemas [Muslim scholars] called for a holy war or *jihad* if the US launched an attack on Afghanistan and warned Megawati not to give any support to the US war plans. In its statement, the council said: “We call on the government of the Republic of Indonesia not to fall to US persuasions to support plans for the said aggression in all forms, political or moral, including by not allowing Indonesian territory to be passed by the US armada or fighter planes.”

Already a variety of groups have organised protests against US military preparations. Over the weekend, groups of 20-25 men from several Islamic organisations entered a number of international hotels in Solo, Central Java, and warned Americans to leave if the US started military action against Afghanistan. Last week the Islamic Defenders Front threatened to attack the US embassy and round up Americans for expulsion if Washington carried out its military plans.

In line with Megawati’s statements in Washington, Defence Minister Matori Abdul Jalil has promised to crack down on anyone threatening foreigners or foreign property, particularly belonging to the US. Police action, however, will not be limited to Islamic extremist groups but will be extended to other opposition groups, particularly if the protests against US actions continue to mount.

According to reports in the *Jakarta Post*, not all demonstrations have been organised by Islamic

extremists. Last Friday around 200 women from the Muslim Women’s Sisterhood organisation held a rally outside the UN office in Jakarta to register their opposition to terrorism and also to any US plan to attack Afghanistan. Dozens of students held a protest outside the US consulate in Medan in northern Sumatra. Its spokesman declared: “We condemn the brutal attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, but the tragic incident must not be used as an excuse for attacking Afghanistan.”

On Saturday, several hundred students took part in anti-US rallies in Surabaya, East Java and Pulu, Central Sulawesi. In Surabaya, several hundred students from the Indonesian Muslim Students Association unfurled banners which read “America is the Great Terrorist” and “Bush, Big Boss of Terrorists”. In an official statement, the protest deplored all terrorism and demanded that America protect the rights of Muslims. Further protests were reported yesterday in Jakarta, Bandung, Banjarmasin and Yogyakarta against any US attack on Afghanistan.

There is deep concern in Indonesian ruling circles that any US strike against Afghanistan will rapidly lead to unrest under conditions where there are broad grievances over job losses, rising prices and declining living standards. The country’s economic and social crisis following the financial collapse of 1997-98 has already produced communal tensions and clashes, in particular in the Malukus where thousands have died in fighting between armed Muslim and Christian militias.

US aggression against Afghanistan could well be the trigger that sets off the social and political time bomb that has been developing in Indonesia since the fall of Suharto.



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