

Megawati continues balancing act in Indonesia

John Roberts, Peter Symonds
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Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri continues to walk a fine line over her government's response to the US attacks on Afghanistan. In late September the leader of the world's most populous Muslim country flew to Washington and, in return for an economic assistance package, gave her support to the US "war against terrorism". At the same time, however, she confronts a volatile political situation at home where, despite the relatively small size of the anti-war protests so far, there is wide hostility to US aggression.

In deference to the position of Megawati, as well as the Malaysian government, the final communiqué issued from last weekend's forum of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders in Shanghai condemned the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington and supported action against terrorism in general terms. But it was silent on the US-led bombing of Afghanistan. For their part, neither Megawati nor Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammad made any public criticisms of the US actions and dutifully agreed to the communiqué.

Comments by Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirayudha in Shanghai underscore the political fragility in Indonesia. He warned of an "explosive" reaction in the Islamic world if the US attacks on Afghanistan continue into the traditional Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan that begins in mid-November. Hassan said that he had told US Secretary of State Colin Powell that prolonged military conflict would have a destabilising effect in Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan.

Just a week before the APEC forum, Megawati had made a statement that was interpreted as a condemnation of the war. In a nationally-televised speech at Jakarta's main mosque on October 14, an

important Muslim holy day, she called for the punishment of terrorists in accordance with the law. Without mentioning the US or Afghanistan by name, the president continued: "It is unacceptable that someone, a group or even a government—reasoning that they are searching for perpetrators—attack a people or another country for whatever reason... Blood cannot be cleansed with blood."

The meaning was obvious but, as Megawati's silence at the APEC forum demonstrates, her criticism of the US military action was largely meant for internal consumption. The response in Washington was decidedly muted. Several newspapers quoted unnamed US officials as saying that Megawati's comments were "not helpful". US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage downplayed the remarks, saying: "It is our view that Indonesia had been generally supportive of the US activity. And we are counting on that to continue."

Indonesian Trade and Industry Minister Rini Soewandi was also at pains to explain that Megawati's comments did not indicate any fundamental shift in government policy. "It has been wrongly perceived. We never said anything against the attacks," she said. "The US understands that the perception of the media or some of the media was not the intention of Indonesia." A close adviser to the Indonesian president, Frans Seda, commented: "Realpolitik in Indonesia dictates caution in accepting attacks on a fellow Muslim country."

Megawati's veiled criticism of the US is part of a strategy to contain the protests and opposition. The day after she made her speech, police attacked an anti-war demonstration outside the parliament building in Jakarta involving about 700 people. Hundreds of heavily-armed police used tear gas, water cannon and

batons to disperse the protesters, injuring about a dozen people and arresting 20. According to one Islamic group, more than 100 of its members were missing after the police action. US diplomats had been urging the government for some time to crack down on Islamic extremist groups.

A number of political figures inside Indonesia had been urging Megawati to make a statement against the US bombing in order to placate public sentiment. On October 12, parliamentary speaker Akbar Tandjung said: "The government's position seems unclear. The government should ask the US to stop its attacks." The following day, at a meeting of his Muslim-based United Development Party (PPP), Vice President Hamzah Haz also called for an end to the US military action.

To date the anti-war demonstrations have been relatively small. A mass prayer rally near the US Embassy on October 12, called under the auspices of the Muslim Students Action Front, attracted about 1,000 people instead of the hundreds of thousands predicted by the organisers. Police had expected a bigger turnout moving in 3,500 police and 2,500 civil defence personnel.

But clearly there are fears in ruling circles that the demonstrations will grow and turn against the government if it is perceived as supporting the US too closely. While the protests have been small and the majority of Indonesians do not support Islamic extremist groups, a recent survey by *Tempo* magazine found 88.5 percent of interviewees opposed the US air attacks.

Despite the police crackdown last week, more than 10,000 people took part in a protest in Jakarta on October 19. The demonstrators chanted: "We are angry, our blood is boiling" and carried banners attacking US President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The demonstration went ahead notwithstanding an appeal by Vice-president Haz for an end to protests. Underscoring the precarious position facing Indonesia, he said: "If we continue demonstrating, our country will become a poorer country. Many foreigners have left the country and the impact has been felt by our hotel industry and business community... We are facing an extraordinary dilemma. If we make a wrong step we can fall into a ravine... therefore I'm asking our Muslim people to stop demonstrating."



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