

Indonesian president endorses ex-Suharto crony for re-election as Jakarta governor

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Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri has triggered sharp protests inside and outside her own party—the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P)—through her endorsement of the incumbent Jakarta governor Sutiyoso for the same position in upcoming elections in September.

Megawati backed Sutiyoso, a former general with close links to the Suharto dictatorship, for re-election in opposition to her party's own candidates, who she forced to stand aside. Megawati's support of the military's preferred candidate is yet another indication of her political dependence on the armed forces (TNI) leadership and the growing influence they wield in Jakarta.

Her support for Sutiyoso is particularly striking as he is implicated in the crackdown against the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) in 1996. Party members and supporters had occupied the PDI headquarters in Jakarta after Suharto engineered Megawati's removal as party leader. On July 27 1996, gangs of state-organised thugs and police invaded the building, setting off widespread protests in the capital that were ruthlessly suppressed by the military. Several people were killed, while hundreds were injured and arrested. A number of party members simply "disappeared".

Sutiyoso held the powerful post of Jakarta Military Commander at the time and is widely regarded as the man entrusted by Suharto to organise the repression. Megawati, however, has not baulked at endorsing this military thug for another term as city governor. When the commander of military police, Major General Sulaiman announced in late July that Sutiyoso was a suspect in the 1996 incident, Megawati reacted by reaffirming her support for the general in the election.

Megawati's stance has added to the growing alienation among her supporters who regarded the

president as a champion of "reformasi"—that is, an opponent of the Suharto junta and the military's domination of political life. About 1,000 people demonstrated on July 27 to mark the anniversary of the 1996 attack on the PDI headquarters. Senior PDI-P figures were in attendance, including Tarmidi Suhardjo, chairman of the party's Jakarta branch and its original candidate for the post of governor.

One PDI-P legislator commented: "The nomination of Sutiyoso hurts the victims of the July 27 incident. We are all disappointed about the emergence of authoritarianism within the party's central board." He was referring to a statement signed by Megawati and PDI-P general secretary Soetijipto, instructing all the party's members on the Jakarta City Council to support Sutiyoso and threatening sanctions against anyone who failed to do so.

The previous day a group of students burnt effigies of Megawati in protest. Nineteen demonstrators were detained. One student, Kaistono, was kept in detention and could face up to seven years in jail for insulting the head of state by burning Megawati's effigy.

Open opposition to Megawati inside the PDI-P has already resulted in a series of resignations over the past year by top PDI-P leaders. Some of these are in the process for forming new political parties to contest national elections due in 2004.

Former PDI-P leader Eros Djarot recently joined other former party members in 14 provinces to form the Bung Karno Nationalist Party (PNBK)—"Bung Karno" was the nickname of Indonesia's first president Sukarno, Megawati's father. As Eros explained: "We think they [the government] have failed to build on the reform spirit and have departed from the ideas of our founding fathers. As a friend I don't even recognise Megawati anymore."

Megawati's support for Sutiyoso has underscored her own right-wing politics and the mounting tensions within the PDI-P. While Megawati has been widely promoted in Indonesia and internationally as a Suharto opponent and a "reformer," she has always had the closest relations with the upper echelons of the ruling elite, including the military, both before and after Suharto was forced to resign in 1998.

When Megawati joined the PDI, it was one of the three legally sanctioned parties in Indonesia, all of which were virtually state-run organisations. The PDI had encouraged her to enter political life to take advantage of her family connection to Sukarno and his populist politics. Under conditions where anyone who voiced any serious opposition to the junta was jailed or worse, Megawati was permitted to assume the post of PDI president.

Megawati's transformation into a Suharto "opponent" was not any of her own doing. Suharto orchestrated her removal from the PDI leadership out of concern that she would benefit from the mounting opposition to his rule. Megawati responded timidly to her ousting in 1996 and gave little support to the protestors occupying the PDI headquarters. She attempted to distance herself from the "riots" that erupted following the July 27 attack.

Despite herself, however, the events of July 1996 made Megawati a focus for the hostility of broad layers of workers and the poor towards the Suharto regime. She has always acted unerringly in defence of the interests of the privileged ruling elites and in opposition to any independent movement of the masses.

During the turbulent months leading to the ousting of Suharto in May 1998, Megawati was virtually silent but sought to capitalise by transforming her PDI faction into a separate party. She welcomed all manner of political opportunists into the PDI-P—former generals, state bureaucrats, businessmen and others—who were seeking "reformasi" credentials in the post-Suharto era.

When she failed to secure the parliamentary vote for president following the 1999 elections, despite the PDI-P winning the largest portion of the vote, Megawati concluded that it was necessary to establish even closer ties with the military and Golkar—Suharto's old party. She finally took the post of president last year after a protracted and bitter factional fight to impeach her predecessor Abdurrahman Wahid on a series of

trumped up charges.

In her battle to oust Wahid, Megawati depended heavily on the military top brass. In the key weeks leading up to the convening of parliament, Wahid attempted to declare a state of emergency in order to block the parliamentary session and prevent his impeachment. The military refused, effectively handing Megawati the presidency—a favour that has put her in debt to the generals ever since.

One key reason why the TNI leadership backed Megawati was that she had opposed Wahid's attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with separatist movements in Aceh, West Papua and elsewhere. Since assuming the presidency, Megawati has stressed the need for "national unity" and given the military a free hand to step up its repression, particularly in Aceh in northern Sumatra.

Megawati's obvious support for the military has raised sharp tensions within her PDI-P, which remains a rather heterogeneous organisation. As her support among layers of students, workers and the poor has begun to wane, sections of the party leadership have broken away in an attempt to set up new political safety valves amid signs of a mounting economic and social crisis in Indonesia.

Megawati, however, has not altered course. She has continued to implement the economic dictates of the IMF, which have deepened the social divide between rich and poor. Her close relations with the military are a warning that in the event of a social upheaval she will have no hesitation in using the security forces against any opposition. That is spelled out most clearly in her embrace of Sutiyoso, the man who just six years ago unleashed the police and gangs of thugs against her own party members.



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