Indonesian president "strongly deplores" US attack on Iraq

John Roberts
26 March 2003

In a rare media conference last Thursday, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri made a formal statement “strongly deploring” the US invasion of Iraq and branding the action as “an act of aggression, which is in contravention of international law”. She expressed “deep regrets” that the UN Security Council had been sidelined, warning that the unilateral US military action “threatened the world order”.

To emphasise the gravity of the situation, Megawati, who is well known for her reluctance to make public statements, was flanked by Vice-President Hamzah Haz and her administration’s three coordinating ministers. She said Indonesia would urge the UN Security Council to call on the US and its allies to stop the war and, if that did not eventuate, demand that the UN General Assembly deal with the issue.

The next day Jakarta rejected demands from the US State Department to shut down the Iraqi Embassy, prevent the destruction of documents and freeze its assets. Officials declared that relations between Jakarta and Baghdad were not Washington’s concern. Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa said no third party had the right to interfere in Indonesia’s bilateral relations with other countries.

The fact that Megawati felt compelled to issue such a statement reflects fears in the ruling elite over the depth of popular opposition to the war. While the protests in Indonesia have been relatively small for the most part, Megawati and her ministers are well aware that an antiwar movement could rapidly grow in size. Her statement was designed to ensure that antiwar sentiment does not turn in an anti-government direction.

Pramono Anung, a parliamentarian from Megawati’s Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), told the *Jakarta Post* the statement may have prevented the president’s opponents from using the war against her administration. Another legislator Ibrahim Ambong explained: “We urged the president to continue taking the lead in responding to the issue to minimise any possibility that the issue could be used as a means to challenge her leadership.”

Antiwar protests took place across the country last weekend. On Saturday and Sunday, rallies of 3,000 and 1,000 respectively were held outside the US Embassy in Jakarta, which was guarded by 600 armed police. At the Sunday demonstration, 400 registered as volunteers to go to Iraq to fight against US troops.

The protests were organised by 40 groups, including student associations and Islamic, Christian and Confucian religious groups. Prominent among the demands were that US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Australian Prime Minister John Howard be brought before international tribunals and tried as “terrorists” and “war criminals”.

On Sunday at Pekalongan in central Java, 2,000 Muslim school students set alight US and British flags. Boycotts and barricades of businesses identified with the US, including fast food outlets, were reported in Surabaya and other locations in Java. Rallies also took place over the weekend in the North Sumatran city of Medan, in Denpasar in Bali, in Makassar in South Sulawesi and other cities and towns.

The government is desperate to ensure that the antiwar movement remains within official channels. Cabinet ministers have attended some of what are becoming daily demonstrations in Jakarta. However, leaders of the major Muslim organisations, which have played a major role in controlling the protests, have warned that Megawati’s antiwar posturing may not be enough.

Solahuddin Wahid, deputy leader of Nahdlatul Ulama

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(NU), the country's largest Muslim organisation, stated: "The government must take real action rather than just deploring the [US] attack [on Iraq]." He called on Jakarta to be more active in the UN. Goodwill Zuber, secretary-general of the second largest Muslim organisation, Muhammadiyah, joined the call, saying: "The people are waiting for follow-up action to the government's recent statement against the aggression in Iraq."

The Indonesian administration is, however, caught between widespread popular outrage over the US invasion and the need to maintain and develop close political, economic and military relations with Washington. The wording of Megawati's statement was the subject of considerable behind-the-scenes debate. According to the *Jakarta Post*, the cabinet meeting held before the media conference changed the original wording from "condemn" to "deplore" in a bid to mute its criticism of the US.

An editorial in the same newspaper on Monday praised the decision, declaring: "The government must be commended for coming out with a firm, yet measured statement... It did not condemn the action, and rightly so. Outright condemnation would have automatically cut all lines of communication with Washington... Condemnation would have seen the severing, or at least straining, of our overall relations, and not just government-to-government, with all its consequences."

The newspaper was particularly concerned to avoid any adverse reaction by US investors—as was the Indonesian cabinet, which spent three hours last Thursday discussing the economic ramifications of the war before issuing a formal declaration.

Megawati's statement continues the precarious balancing act that her administration has pursued since the September 11 attacks in the US. Publicly Jakarta has been forced to be critical of US actions such as the invasion of the Afghanistan and Iraq, while at the same time offering private reassurances to Washington and quietly working with US agencies to back its "global war on terrorism".

Hours after her public declaration, Megawati took a phone call from US President Bush. According to the *Jakarta Post*, neither the foreign minister nor presidential aides would "confirm or deny" that the conversation had gone ahead. No details have been made available and so one can only guess at the content. But on Megawati's part, it can only have been an attempt to justify her strong words as necessary for public consumption and to express concerns over the dangerous consequences of Washington's unilateral action for the UN and international relations.

Megawati is preparing for more political instability ahead. National Police Chief General Da'i Bachtiar told the media that the entire force of 250,000 police officers was being deployed. Jakarta police chief General Makbul Padmanagara declared a high state of alert for the capital and cancelled police leave for the city's 20,000 police. Police spokesman Prasetyo revealed that a special police team had been deployed with authorisation to use live ammunition if the antiwar protests were to get out of control.

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