

A groundswell of antiwar protests in Indonesia

John Roberts
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In the three weeks since the US launched its invasion of Iraq, Indonesia has seen a wave of antiwar protests—large and small—throughout the archipelago.

Government ministers, officials and conservative Islamic organisations have played a prominent role in some of the larger rallies. What is striking, however, is the diversity of groups, organisations and individuals involved, reflecting the broad hostility and anger felt by the majority of the population to the brutal, one-sided slaughter of Iraqis taking place.

Antiwar rallies have occurred on a daily basis. The scope of the political ferment can be gauged from a sample of recent reports in the Indonesian and international press:

Tuesday, April 8: A group of 10 Iraqi refugees staged a protest in Central Jakarta and declared their “deep concern over the manslaughter in Iraq”. In Bandung, West Java, 300 protestors from the Indonesian Muslim Youth rallied outside the City Council Office and called for the “dissolution of the UN as it has proven ineffectual to prevent the war”. In Yogyakarta, Central Java, at least 500 students from the Sunan Kalijaga Islamic University marched through the city demanding a boycott of US products.

Monday, April 7: Thousands of students from the Bung Karno University protesting outside the UN office in Jakarta created a traffic jam. Thousands more students from the Student Movement for [Iraq] Liberation marched through the capital to the Saudi Arabian embassy to protest its support for the US war. In Palu, Central Sulawesi, thousands of students from the Tadulako University held a rally and declared “the US and its allies are the axis of evil and true international terrorists”.

Sunday, April 6: Hundreds of kindergarten teachers from across Indonesia gathered at the Hotel Indonesia

traffic circle in Jakarta to express their sympathy for the Iraqi children who are victims of the war. Ten thousand people, including supporters of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the country’s largest Muslim organisation, held an antiwar protest in Kediri, East Java. In Makassar, South Sulawesi, people donated blood for Iraqi hospitals to express their solidarity with the Iraqi people. Other protests, each numbering in the thousands, took place in the cities of Pontianak, West Kalimantan and Bandung, West Java.

Significantly, the rightwing Golkar Party also felt compelled to hold a protest against the war outside the UN mission in Jakarta. It is probably the first time that Golkar, the political instrument of the Suharto dictatorship, ever held a rally that could be considered in any way anti-US. Some 700 members gathered to convey the party’s “stand of condemning and rejecting the aggression on Iraq” and to appeal to the UN to stop the war.

Indonesia has not witnessed such an extensive political movement since the protests leading up to the fall of Suharto in May 1998. As a result there is considerable nervousness in ruling circles that the demonstrations will take on an anti-government and anti-capitalist character. All the political parties have been compelled to put on an antiwar face in an effort to keep the opposition to the US-led war constrained to official political channels.

The largest demonstration, in Jakarta on March 30, was held under the auspices of the Indonesian Committee for Iraq Solidarity, which includes conservative Muslim-based parties such as the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the Prosperity and Justice Party. PAN chairman Amien Rais, who is also chairman of the national parliament, told the rally: “All of the people of Indonesia, without exception, want

Bush to withdraw his forces from Iraq.”

Police estimated the size of the rally at 250,000 but organisers claimed at least one million participated in the march through the capital to the US embassy. In all, 105 organisations were represented and a range of people, including trade unionists, students, academics and Roman Catholic priests and nuns. The slogans condemned the US-led war and the UN and called for a boycott of US products and for Bush and Blair to be tried as war criminals.

The presence of Rais and other prominent political figures has given the antiwar rallies a semi-official character and helped deflect criticism of the President Megawati Sukarnoputri and her administration. At the same time, the intensity of the antiwar feeling poses political problems for the ruling elite, which is economically, politically and militarily dependent on the US.

Megawati is already under pressure to take a more definitive stance against Washington. Religious leaders who met with Foreign Minister Nur Hassan Wirajuda in late March called for Indonesia to break off diplomatic relation with the US and recall diplomatic staff. Others have called for Indonesia to withdraw from the UN in protest at its domination by the major powers.

The Jakarta administration has, however, bluntly ruled out any action. The Foreign Ministry issued a statement last month declaring that any breach in diplomatic relations with the US would harm Indonesia’s interests. Spokesperson Marty Natalegawa told *Tempo* magazine that “we need to continuously provide input and communicate with the US government in expressing our disagreement as regards its attack against Iraq”.

Megawati has ruled out any protest walkout from the UN, saying that while her father, President Sukarno, might have threatened such a move in his day, “we have to consider many things”. In particular, she listed the weakness of the Indonesian economy, the extent of foreign debt and the weakness of the country’s defence forces.

Finance Minister Boediono cited similar reasons for rejecting the popular demand for a boycott of US goods. US dollars, he explained, were needed for Indonesia’s international transactions. The State Oil and Gas Company, Pertamina, is currently considering

replacing dollars with euros in its oil and gas transactions. But Boediono made clear that such a decision would be based on market considerations, not political ones.

As the fighting continues in Iraq and the humanitarian crisis worsens, Megawati’s balancing act between Washington and the anger of broad masses of people against the US invasion of Iraq will only become more precarious.



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