

Suharto's cronies make significant gains in Indonesia's elections

John Roberts
21 April 2004

Only six years after widespread protests forced military strongman Suharto from power, the main beneficiaries of the April 5 vote for Indonesia's House of Representatives (DPR) are individuals and parties closely associated with the former US-backed dictatorship.

The DPR poll paves the way for the second stage of the elections for the powerful post of president. Two of the leading candidates will now be former Suharto generals—ex-armed forces (TNI) chief Wiranto and retired general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—both key operatives in Suharto's repressive apparatus and heavily implicated in the massacre of pro-independence East Timorese in 1999.

The main political responsibility for the return of Suharto-era cronies and thugs to centre political stage rests with the so-called "reformers", including current President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who, unable to resolve the country's intractable social and economic problems, has increasingly relied on the military, the state apparatus and Golkar.

Megawati's National Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) has been the heaviest loser in the elections. The final results are not due until April 28. But with most of the votes counted, the PDI-P's share has fallen from the 37.4 percent in 1999 to just 19.5 percent. In 1999, the PDI-P was presented to voters as a party of democratic reform and the one most concerned with the economic plight of the impoverished masses. In the last five years, these illusions have been largely shattered.

The other "reformers" fared no better. The vote for Abdurrahman Wahid's National Awakening Party (PBK) slipped from 12.6 percent to 11.9 percent and Amien Rais's National Mandate Party (PAN) dropped from 7.3 to 6.5 percent.

By default, Golkar, the political vehicle of the Suharto dictatorship, has emerged with the largest share of the vote—up slightly from 20.9 percent to 21.1 percent. Under new electoral laws governing the first-ever popular vote for the presidency, only parties that gained 3 percent of seats or 5 percent of the vote for the DPR can stand a candidate. The DPR vote makes the Golkar candidate one of the frontrunners for the presidency.

The selection of Wiranto by a special Golkar conference yesterday is a clear indication that the old Suharto machine is back in business. Wiranto's arrest is currently being sought by UN prosecutors who published a 90-page document in March outlining "overwhelming" proof of his direct involvement in organising militias in East Timor to attack pro-independence supporters in August 1999.

At this stage, the leading contender for the presidency is Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. An opinion poll published in Jakarta last week by the Soegeng Sajadi Syndicate put Yudhoyono ahead of Megawati as preferred president by 44 percent to 21 percent. His newly-formed Democratic Party was one of the main beneficiaries in the April 5 election, gaining 7.5 percent of the DPR vote. He has been joined by Jusuf Kalla, wealthy businessman and longtime Golkar member, who will run as the vice-presidential candidate.

Like Wiranto, Yudhoyono was deeply involved in the TNI's atrocities in East Timor. He was part of the Indonesian force that invaded East

Timor in 1975 and served several tours of duty there, suppressing continuing opposition to Indonesian rule. Until October 1999, he was one of Wiranto's principal deputies as Chief of Territorial Affairs with direct responsibility for East Timor and the militia violence.

From August 2000 until March this year, Yudhoyono served as Megawati's Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security and was responsible for launching the bloody counter-insurgency against the GAM separatist movement in Aceh in May 2003.

The immediate reason for the hostility of voters to Megawati and the PDI-P is the program of economic restructuring which her administration has carried out. In the wake of the Asian economic crisis in 1997-98, Indonesia is still mired in economic stagnation and the vast majority of the population is struggling to survive from day to day.

A recent *New York Times* article cited figures showing most people are worse off six years after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship. Child health has deteriorated to the point where 25 percent of children are underweight. The immunisation rate is below that of 1990. While unchecked corruption allows the ruling elites to continue to enrich themselves, it is estimated 42 million people are unemployed or underemployed out of a total work force of 100 million.

In comments to the media, ordinary Indonesians invariably pointed to their social plight when explaining their dissatisfaction with the PDI-P. *Bajaj* driver Tarjontar from an impoverished area in Jakarta told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "In Indonesia under Megawati there is no justice, so this time I voted for the Justice Party... I am one of the little people Mega promised to help but she did nothing for us ... I have two kids and a wife and I only make 15,000 to 30,000 rupiah (\$US1.75 to \$US3.50) a day."

Tarjontar referred to the high prices for sugar, rice, cooking oil and kerosene after cutbacks to previous government subsidies. Life was easier under Golkar, he said, but he could not bring himself to vote for that party. A housewife who voted for the PDI-P in 1999 but was changing to Golkar told the *Herald* that while "there was a lot of corruption in Golkar, at least you could eat."

The fact that Golkar and the military are set to benefit from disaffection with Megawati is an indictment of her administration and the role of all of the "reformers" over the last six years. Far from carrying out any genuine democratic reforms, Megawati, Wahid and Rais preserved the previous state apparatus intact and failed to prosecute those responsible for the crimes of the Suharto dictatorship. Confronted with popular opposition, the advocates of *reformasi* invariably sided with Golkar and the state.

Under Suharto, Megawati, Wahid and Rais were all part of the officially tolerated opposition, which made limited and timid criticisms of the dictatorship, while maintaining close ties with the military and state apparatus.

In May 1998, Suharto was forced to resign after demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of workers, students and middle class layers demanding an end to the junta, democratic reforms and decent living

standards. Pressure also came from the US to dump Suharto after he stalled on implementing the IMF's comprehensive economic restructuring plan to open up the economy to foreign capital.

The military under Wiranto played the key role in installing Suharto's vice-president and loyal ally B.J. Habibie as president. In carrying out this manoeuvre, the political establishment depended at every stage on the "reformers"—Megawati, Wahid and Rais—to contain the mass movement against the junta and to shore up the state apparatus.

A key turning point took place in November 1998 when the Suharto-era Peoples Representative Assembly (MPR) met to establish the basis for national elections the following year. Jakarta was turned into an armed camp as huge protests gathered around the assembly building demanding an end to the political role of the military, the trial of Suharto and genuine democratic reforms. Amid these growing tensions, Wahid, Megawati and Rais quickly gave their imprimatur to cosmetic changes drawn up by the Habibie regime, clearing the way for a bloody crackdown on the protesters.

The limited amendments to the political laws ensured that the military and state apparatus retained a substantial presence in the new parliament and thus were a major factor in determining the presidency. One third of the MPR was made up of appointees, including 38 from the security forces. The PDI-P won the largest share of the vote in the June 1999 general elections, including from layers of the oppressed who believed that Megawati would bring democratic rights and improved living standards.

While Megawati had proved herself a conservative defender of the status quo, sections of the ruling elite were concerned that she would be susceptible to pressure from those who had voted for the PDI-P. In October 1999, Golkar and the military came together to block Megawati and to install Wahid as president, despite the fact that his PKB had been outpolled by the PDI-P by three to one. The decision provoked angry protests by PDI-P supporters, forcing the MPR to offer Megawati the role of vice-president.

However, Wahid's policies soon brought him into conflict with his backers. Under pressure from Washington and the IMF, he attempted to cut spending and subsidies, carry through the privatisation of state-owned industries, restructure the banking sector and wind back various protectionist measures. While he did not go far enough for those demanding sweeping economic restructuring, these measures provoked opposition from business figures, including the military, who had thrived under Suharto's system of monopolies and cronyism.

Wahid also angered the military for failing to take the tough stand against separatist movements, particularly in Aceh and Papua. The military was incensed by the loss of East Timor in 1999, which like other resource-rich areas of Indonesia provided lucrative profits for their own legal and illegal businesses. Wahid attempted to negotiate with separatist groups in Aceh and Papua, but the TNI was hostile to any, even symbolic, concessions, such as permission to fly independence flags.

After her humiliating political defeat in October 1999, Megawati concluded that she needed to accommodate herself even further to the military and state apparatus. As Wahid increasingly came under fire, she promoted herself as the defender of the nation, pledging a tough uncompromising stance on the separatist movements and gaining support from Golkar and the military.

In August 2000, after talks with Megawati, Rais and the Golkar leader Akbar Tandjung, Wahid was forced to agree to a compromise and restructure his cabinet. He promised to leave much of the day-to-day running of the government to Megawati. The Golkar faction made clear that, in return for backing Megawati, they expected a much greater say in government policy.

The compromise did not last long. By the end of 2000, Wahid faced trumped-up charges of corruption that became the basis for a protracted

and bitter battle over his impeachment beginning in early 2001. Despite the fact that the attorney-general's office ruled that Wahid had no case to answer, the impeachment process went ahead. Wahid twice threatened to declare a state of emergency and dissolve the MPR, but he deliberately avoided making any appeal for mass support against the plot.

The MPR finally ousted Wahid in July 2001 and installed Megawati as president the next day. Along with Golkar and various right-wing Islamic parties, the TNI played the key role. In the last days of the standoff, the military refused to carry out the president's order to impose a state of emergency, allowing parliament to meet and take a vote on his removal. Megawati came to power beholden to these backers. She increased Golkar's representation in the cabinet and appointed Yudhoyono to the key post of coordinating security minister.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the discredited Golkar and the military were compelled to make a tactical retreat and to revamp themselves with "reform" credentials. Three years later, however, the TNI was able to go on the offensive using the "reformer" Megawati as a convenient political front and reassert itself in Aceh and Papua. In November 2001, the military's notorious special forces, Kopassus, assassinated the prominent Papuan separatist leader, Theys Eluay. While a military court subsequently convicted six Kopassus soldiers, there was no investigation into who ordered the killing.

In May 2003, the TNI, with Megawati's approval, launched its own "war on terrorism"—a full-scale counter-insurgency operation in Aceh involving tens of thousands of troops backed by tanks and warplanes. Under the martial law proclaimed by Megawati in the province, the military has extraordinary powers to round up, detain and interrogate suspected separatist supporters. Despite a media blackout on the continuing operation, there have been a number of reports of torture and summary executions as the military attempts to intimidate and terrorise the entire population.

The military's increasingly assertive role was encouraged by its behind-the-scenes collaboration with the Bush administration and its "war on terrorism". Fearful of growing instability in Indonesia and the region, Washington was anxious to reestablish a working relationship with its old allies in the Indonesian military. The barrier has been a Congressional ban preventing US military ties with Indonesia until those responsible for the atrocities in East Timor are brought to justice.

Having operated in the background for six years, those associated with the Suharto dictatorship now feel they are in a position to make an open bid for power in their own right. The so-called reformers are directly to blame. Far from dealing with the criminals of the Suharto era, Megawati, Wahid and Rais have worked with them, appointed them to official positions, including cabinet, and, in that way, rehabilitated the political careers of those who were regarded as pariahs six years ago.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact