

Wahid's position as Indonesian president looks increasingly shaky

By Peter Symonds
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All the signs indicate, both inside and outside Indonesia, that Abdurrahman Wahid's tenure as president is rapidly coming to an end—more than three years before his term of office is formally due to expire.

The ethnic violence in Central Kalimantan, which has claimed at least 450 lives and forced tens of thousands of Madurese settlers from their homes, has become the focus for the latest battery of criticisms. Politicians and commentators again highlighted Wahid's penchant for overseas travel, calling on him to cut short his recent tour to the Middle East to deal with the situation.

Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who is being actively promoted as Wahid's replacement, pointedly raised her own profile by visiting the strife-torn area on the island of Borneo. Only hours after returning from overseas, Wahid flew off on March 8 to Central Kalimantan to make his own inspection and to shore up his political position.

The president has repeatedly dismissed calls for his resignation and expressed confidence that moves to oust him will fizzle out. Yesterday he declared that he would not revamp his cabinet and that his opponents “will get bored eventually”. During his two weeks absence, Wahid's opponents have, however, consolidated their support for Megawati as president.

An informal meeting of representatives from Indonesia's main parties took place on March 2 at the Al Azhar mosque in Jakarta. Those present included Megawati's husband Taufik Kiemas and lower house of parliament (DPR) speaker Akbar Tandjung, who is also Golkar party chairman, along with leaders from a number of Islamic parties—upper house (MPR) speaker and National Mandate Party (PAN) head Amien Rais, United Development Party chairman Ali Marwan Hanan and Justice Party president Hidayat Nur Wahid.

Rais emerged from the meeting to declare: “I guess the people of this nation should mentally prepare themselves to face another change of national leadership.” In October 1999, Rais was at the forefront of the manoeuvring to make Wahid president and block Megawati, whose Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) had won the largest share of the vote in the national election in May.

Various Islamic parties and groups connected to Rais vehemently argued at the time that a woman should not be the country's president. Like Rais, these organisations have made an abrupt turn, dropped their former objections and offered to back Megawati as president until the 2004 elections. Justice Party

leader Hidayat, for instance, commented after the meeting on March 2: “Muslim people would never have a problem with a female leader, particularly if she were Muslim too.”

In reality, the political about-face has nothing to do with Megawati's gender, nor with concerns about Wahid's erratic style and his overseas trips. In 1999, the opposition to Megawati was not so much to her personally—she had never seriously challenged the Suharto regime when it was in power. Rather Golkar, the ruling party under Suharto, and the sections of the army were worried that Megawati, as the only leader with any substantial social base, might be compelled to go further than she wanted in making inroads into their position and privileges.

Since 1999, however, Megawati has sought to ingratiate herself with the military top brass and Golkar heads. A de facto alliance has emerged between the PDI-P, Golkar and the army for a tougher line by the government in dealing with separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua. Moreover, Megawati has become the focus for nationalist opposition in the ruling elites toward the IMF's program of restructuring for Indonesian economy.

The formal machinery for the removal of Wahid has already been set in train. On February 1, the DPR voted overwhelmingly—393 to four—to formally censure the president over his alleged involvement in two scandals—a \$US2 million donation from the Sultan of Brunei and fraudulent withdrawal of 35 billion rupiah (\$US3.7 million) from the State Logistics Agency (Bulog) by his former masseur. But impeachment is a lengthy procedure in Indonesia taking at least four months.

Initially Rais attempted to short circuit the impeachment process by calling for the early convening of a special MPR session. However, following protests by Wahid's supporters in East Java, both Golkar and the PDI-P—the two largest parliamentary factions—backed away from any early move against Wahid. Last week Rais publicly dumped his plan and indicated that the likelihood of another DPR censure—the second stage of the process—was “very high” in view of Wahid's continued mismanagement.

Until recently, Megawati has been reluctant to make any move against Wahid. Some sections of the PDI-P leadership are concerned that the removal of Wahid could set a precedent that would be used against her. A PDI-P parliamentarian Dimiyati Hartono warned last week: “Because they don't like Gus Dur [Wahid's nickname] they now push Megawati. I am afraid they

will change their minds after Megawati's rise.”

Megawati and the PDI-P leadership are also worried that as president she will be confronted with the same political and economic problems that Wahid faces. The conflict in Borneo is symptomatic of far broader social tensions produced by high levels of unemployment and declining living standards. Ethnic violence has flared in a number of regions, including the Malukus, and there have been protracted disputes by workers over wages and conditions.

While Bank Indonesia optimistically predicts an economic growth rate of between 4.5 and 5 percent for Indonesia this year, there are signs that the country's recovery following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis is fragile. The Indonesian economy shrank by 0.7 percent in the final quarter of last year. Non-oil exports fell by 10.4 percent in January and are likely to fall further as the US and Japanese economies slow. The banking and financial system remains heavily burdened with bad debt and the rupiah has fallen to around 10,000 to the US dollar.

At the end of February, Megawati appears to have made a shift, giving her first clear signal that she intends to replace Wahid. She met with leaders of the Muhammadiyah, the Islamic organisation connected to Rais. Following the discussion, Muhammadiyah leaders reported to the press that Megawati had told them she continued to support Wahid only in her official capacity as vice president. Megawati has not denied the statement.

An editorial in the *Jakarta Post* on March 7 commented: “Megawati Sukarnoputri is looking more and more like a president-in-waiting today than she ever has before, since becoming vice president in October 1999... With President Abdurrahman Wahid facing mounting pressure to go one way or another, many people here and abroad are already analysing the prospect of Megawati becoming Indonesia's next ruler.”

Megawati's more definite stand coincides with an apparent change internationally. A number of editorials and comments have begun to appear openly indicating that patience with Wahid is running out.

An article in the *Washington Post* on March 5 commented: “Wahid's erratic behaviour has turned into his biggest liability, helping to plunge the world's fourth-most populous country into a political crisis that could result in his impeachment and a potentially violent transfer of power with broad destabilising effects across South East Asia.”

Time magazine published a scathing comment on March 6 asking the rhetorical question: “Where's Gus?... His country is on the verge of a conflagration as violence ignited by ethnic conflicts sweeps across the archipelago from Aceh in the west to Irian Jaya in the east.

“With rumours of coups flying around Jakarta and the President's parliamentary opponents plotting his impeachment, political riots pitting Wahid's supporters against his detractors have been breaking out like brushfires in eastern Java. To make matters worse, the World Bank recently warned that Indonesia's economy, seared by the 1997 Asian meltdown, is near collapse.”

Having catalogued Indonesia's political woes, *Time* concluded: “As Wahid flew off to the Middle East, a group of protesters gathered near the airport in Jakarta. Some held signs that read

‘Don't Bother Coming Back'. Where's Gus? Unless Wahid gets his act together and starts taking charge, pretty soon the answer will be: Who cares?”

Most commentators assume that Megawati would replace Wahid if he resigned or were removed from office. But a *Washington Post* editorial on March 2 referred to a more sinister alternative being discussed in the US. After pointing out that Megawati could be “an even weaker actor” than Wahid, the newspaper noted: “This worrisome picture has reportedly prompted some consideration in the new [Bush] administration of renewing once-strong US ties with the Indonesian army, which will be a decisive power broker if, as many fear, the battle over Mr Wahid's impeachment turns violent.”

The article provoked considerable consternation in Indonesian ruling circles. According to the *Jakarta Post*, many had read the article as suggesting that Bush would turn to the Indonesian military “to prevent the country from plunging into anarchy. Others interpreted this as condemning a military takeover amid widespread speculations of a possible coup d'etat in view of the present political crisis engulfing the country.”

The US embassy in Jakarta was compelled to issue a short statement on behalf of the Bush administration asserting that the US “strongly supports a peaceful, democratic, constitutional political process in Indonesia.” Despite this bland denial, the *Washington Post* editorial indicates that some in the US political establishment are discussing military rule as an option in Indonesia.

It would hardly be surprising. After all, the US was instrumental in the 1965-66 coup that brought Suharto to power and relied on his military dictatorship for 32 years throughout its often-brutal suppression of all forms of opposition. The new Bush administration, which came to power through the theft of an election, would have no compunction in using anti-democratic methods to shore up US interests in Indonesia if it felt there were no viable alternative.

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