

Indonesian parliament votes for impeachment proceedings against the president

By Peter Symonds
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After weeks of political turmoil in Jakarta, the Indonesian lower house of parliament voted on May 30 to censure Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid for a third time and convene a special session of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) on August 1—the final step in the lengthy impeachment process set in motion in February. Ringed by thousands of heavily armed police and troops, the DPR voted 365 to four for the special MPR session at which Wahid will be called to account for his presidency. If the MPR votes not to accept the speech, he will be formally impeached and removed from office.

Those parties voting for the motion included the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) of Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri; the party of the Suharto dictatorship, Golkar; and a number of rightwing Islamic parties, including the National Mandate Party (PAN) headed by MPR speaker Amien Rais. Members of Wahid's own National Awakening Party (PKB), which holds just 52 seats, walked out prior to the vote in protest, leaving only the obscure Nation Love Democracy Party to vote against.

PKB members insisted that the vote be delayed so that parliament could consider a letter from Attorney General Marzuki Darusman which cleared Wahid of any wrongdoing in relation to two corruption scandals. The original censure of the president on February 1 was based on accusations that he was involved in the misappropriation of 35 billion rupiah (\$US3.9 million) from the State Logistics Agency (Bulog) and the misuse of a \$US2 million donation from the Sultan of Brunei.

The allegations against Wahid were always threadbare pretexts for his removal from office. The response of Wahid's opponents to Darusman's report simply makes clear that the move to oust Wahid had nothing to do with corruption but is entirely political in character. One of the president's opponents, DPR chairman and Golkar head Akbar Tandjung, baldly declared that the focus of concern was not simply corruption but Wahid's "performance, attitude and policies".

The 38 police/military appointees abstained from the vote, with their spokesmen making the farcical claim that the military were apolitical. Far from being "above politics," the armed forces (TNI) have proven to be the kingmakers in the situation. In parliament, TNI spokesman Lieutenant General Budi Harjono indicated the military's clear preference for the replacement of Wahid by Megawati, saying: "The TNI expect Megawati, if she becomes president, to make it her priority to form a professional and efficient government, which should be supported by a majority of political parties".

Moreover, throughout the events of the past weeks, the military have played the pivotal role. Desperate to avoid impeachment, Wahid indicated his intention to declare a state of emergency in order to stop the vote, dismiss parliament and call fresh elections. Senior military

figures have repeatedly opposed such a move both in private and public.

After a fortnight of political shadow-boxing, a number of reports indicate that a crucial showdown between Wahid and the TNI top brass took place on May 28. Not only did the military refuse to back the president's plan for a state of emergency but Wahid was compelled to "order" his security and political affairs minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono take "the necessary and special steps... to overcome crisis and restore order, security and law".

A state of emergency would have concentrated power in Wahid's hands. Instead his "order" has strengthened the position of Yudhoyono, a former three-star general, who, under Suharto, held a political post as the officer in charge of the army's territorial affairs. The military immediately exploited Yudhoyono's new authority to put on a display of force directed against pro-Wahid protestors in Jakarta and East Java, the president's main base of support.

Police officials warned that the 27,000 police and troops stationed around the capital would have the option of using live rounds, as well as water cannon and rubber bullets, against demonstrators. On the day of the vote, several thousand Wahid supporters marched through the centre of Jakarta and attempted to enter the parliament building but they were held back.

The number of pro-Wahid protestors was substantially less than prior to the first parliamentary censure on February 1, and the second on April 30. Ansor, the youth wing of Nhadlatul Ulama (NU), the Islamic organisation that Wahid used to lead and from which he derives most of his support, indicated that it would not send its supporters to Jakarta to protest against parliament.

The military very publicly dispatched 800 heavily armed paratroops to the town of Pasuruan in East Java to break up demonstrations by hundreds of Wahid supporters. At least one protester was shot dead and five others injured in clashes with troops. Pro-Wahid protesters in a number of East Javan centres, including the provincial capital of Surabaya, attacked buildings linked to the president's opponents, and in Pasuruan torched two churches.

The political crisis over the last four months has greatly strengthened the hand of the Suharto-era apparatus—the military and Golkar. Far from making any significant changes to the political and state structures established under the Suharto junta, both of the so-called reformers Wahid and Megawati have actively sought the backing of the armed forces to consolidate their own position. As a consequence, as the events of recent weeks demonstrate, the generals have emerged as the key powerbrokers.

In the international media, commentators invariably describe the bitter factional struggle in the Indonesian ruling elite as "the

difficulties of a fledgling democracy.” But what is taking place in Jakarta bears no relation to democracy, even in a formal sense, and neither Megawati nor Wahid can claim any democratic legitimacy for their actions. The parties that took part in the May 1999 elections were carefully vetted and selected. Only two thirds of the MPR which selected Wahid as president in October 1999 and may remove him from office in August, is elected. The remainder are appointed representatives of the military, regional parliaments and so-called special interest groups including military veterans associations.

Although Megawati's PDI-P won a clear majority of seats in the elections, sections of the ruling class were concerned that if she became president she would come under pressure to make concessions from layers of workers and the poor who had voted for her. In a series of backroom deals, in which Amien Rais played the key role, Golkar and the military threw their numbers behind Wahid, whose PKB had won only a small fraction of the seats. When angry protests by PDI-P supporters erupted, Megawati was offered, and accepted the post of vice-president.

Wahid's position as the head of a fragile “government of national unity” was uncertain from the start. He came under immediate pressure from the major powers, the IMF and World Bank to open up the economy to international investors, which in turn meant at least a partial curbing of the role of the military in economic and political affairs. In doing so, however, Wahid increasingly came under fire from layers of business opposed to economic restructuring and from the military, who were critical of his attempts to negotiate a settlement with separatist groups in the resource-rich provinces of West Papua and Aceh.

Throughout the last 19 months, Megawati has increasingly ingratiated herself to sections of the military. Her stance as a “defender of national unity” has enabled Megawati to garner support from the army by supporting a crackdown in Aceh and West Papua, and from business people—in particular those connected to the military and the state bureaucracy—threatened by the implementation of the IMF demands. If she does become president over the next two months then she will be beholden to these political interests.

Earlier in the year Megawati blocked attempts to speed up the impeachment process and insisted that constitutional procedures be adhered to. She is clearly concerned that the methods being used now against Wahid could easily be directed against her in the future.

While some of his supporters are justifiably concerned at the prospect of a Megawati presidency resting on the support of Golkar and the army, Wahid is no defender of democratic rights. Under the Suharto dictatorship, like Megawati, he retained the closest ties with sections of the military, the state bureaucracy and the Suharto family itself. His oppositional “criticisms” always remained within the narrow confines of what was officially permitted and, as a result, he was allowed to retain the NU leadership.

In October 1999, Wahid was not averse to intriguing with Rais, the military and Golkar against Megawati. Now that he finds himself on the receiving end of the same treatment, he is seeking through a series of increasingly hollow threats to convince the ruling elites—the army in particular—to retain him in power.

In the weeks ahead, Wahid could still attempt to impose a state of emergency. But he confronts the opposition not only of the military but some of his closest supporters in cabinet, including Defence Minister Mohammad Mahfud who has warned that “issuing an [emergency] decree carried great risk”. His opponents Tandjung and Rais declared this week that if the president issues an emergency

decree then the MPR special session will be rapidly convened and he will be impeached and removed from office.

Even though he could only muster a few thousand supporters in Jakarta this week, Wahid is threatening to hold “a rally of millions” in the capital to protest against the impeachment proceedings. While Wahid retains support among the estimated 30 million NU members concentrated in East Java, his ability and willingness to mobilise these social layers, which include sections of the rural poor, are both in doubt.

Despite the sharp differences in the ruling elites, both camps are fearful that any attempt to involve masses of people in the political conflict could rapidly get out of control and threaten the stability of capitalist rule. The crisis has already compounded the country's economic problems—the falling value of the rupiah, lack of international investment, high levels of bad debt and flagging growth rates—which in turn has produced rising levels of poverty and unemployment, and heightened social tensions.

The prospect of a compromise between the president and vice-president is remote. In recent weeks, there have been a series of attempts to strike a deal whereby Megawati would take over the running of government and allow Wahid to retain a largely ceremonial role. A similar arrangement last year fell apart. The latest proposal was discussed last Friday and rejected by Megawati, who was reportedly concerned that the arrangement was not clear, had no constitutional basis and therefore no guarantees.

Wahid has repeatedly refused to resign. But with the prospect of two more months of political upheaval, there are increasing signs that those in ruling circles internationally would prefer Wahid go sooner rather than later. Moreover, support is shifting not so much behind Megawati, whose abilities are regarded as highly questionable, but towards the military.

A comment by Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, is symptomatic. Entitled “Suharto forces are moving in,” he openly points to the fact that “Operation Get Wahid is a military grab for power.” Although admitting to being a little disturbed by the anti-Wahid campaign, he goes on to write: “Notwithstanding all of this, it may still be that Megawati, backed by the TNI, now offers Indonesia its best, albeit problematic, chance at stability.”

Sheridan muses that the “greatest political shortcoming” of the Suharto dictatorship was not its “failure to cultivate electoral democracy as such”, nor presumably the brutality of its rule which goes unmentioned, but rather its “failure to nurture real institutions”. He then offers the following high praise for the TNI: “The only national governmental institution of real consequence is the military, and the TNI has handled the politics of the last 12 months brilliantly.”

Sheridan is not the only commentator commending the role of the military in recent weeks. Clearly sections of the international ruling class are concluding that the Indonesian military, which the major powers actively supported in the form of the Suharto junta for 32 years, may offer the only viable means of ensuring the stability of bourgeois rule in the political crisis ahead.

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