

Indonesia's political crisis deepens as Wahid orders the arrest of police chief

By Peter Symonds
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The protracted political crisis surrounding Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid is rapidly coming to a head following his sudden decision yesterday to order the arrest of the national police chief, General Bimantoro. Last night the ranks of the police were sharply split with three police tanks and three truckloads of police parked outside Bimantoro's home as a mark of defiance. The general was reportedly in Singapore for a medical check-up.

Wahid ordered Bimantoro's arrest on charges of insubordination after he refused to obey a presidential directive last month to step down from his post. The standoff has been brewing for weeks after the police chief and top military leaders opposed Wahid's plans to declare a state of emergency as a means of avoiding looming impeachment proceedings.

After trying to sack Bimantoro, Wahid offered him the post of ambassador to Malaysia. The police chief declined the offer and insisted that he could only be removed with the agreement of parliament, which passed a law to that effect this year. Chairman of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) Amien Rais warned yesterday that the special MPR session scheduled for August 1 to consider Wahid's impeachment and removal may be brought forward.

Wahid's political isolation was highlighted by the fact that his arrest order seems to have been ignored. His spokesman Yahya Staquf announced that Wahid had given orders to the chief security minister, Agum Gumelar, and the acting national police chief "to take firm legal action against those guilty of insubordination". Last night, however, it was not clear whether either had taken any action to arrest Bimantoro or the Jakarta police chief Sofjan Jacob, also accused of acting against the president.

Cabinet Secretary Marzuki Darusman further

questioned Wahid's authority. At a late night press conference, Darusman stated: "The president does want Bimantoro to be arrested, but this was not agreed together [with the cabinet]. Up until now there has not been an effective order." Agum Gumelar told reporters that he had no authority to make the arrests and Sofjan Jacob, in a TV interview, scoffed at the order, challenging police to come and arrest him.

The entire episode throws into doubt Wahid's ability to carry out his repeated threat to declare a state of emergency, suspend parliament and call new elections. His most recent and explicit warning was made on Monday after calling for a meeting of political leaders in Bogor to work out a compromise.

Initially scheduled for last Saturday, the meeting was shifted to fit in with a trip by Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri to Singapore for a routine medical checkup. On her return, Megawati, the likely successor if Wahid is ousted, made clear that she would not be attending and the leaders of most other major parties followed suit. Wahid was left with only one political leader—the head of his own Islamic National Awakening Party (PKB).

Responding to the snub, Wahid announced he would declare a state of emergency if no compromise were reached by July 20. He branded the moves against him as illegal and a threat to the nation. If parliament failed to end the impeachment moves, he warned: "[T]he government will declare the country in a state of danger, the DPR [lower house of parliament] and MPR will be dissolved and elections will be held within one year."

The threat, however, is rather empty. Wahid has made similar statements on a number of occasions and has previously announced a deadline only to allow it to lapse. As was on public display yesterday, the president

can expect little support from military and police leaders.

Previous censure votes—the first on February 1, the second on April 30 and the third on May 30—have confirmed that Wahid has virtually no support in parliament. In the most recent decision, the DPR voted 365 to four to hold the special MPR session. The 52 members of Wahid's PKB walked out in protest. A parliamentary committee announced on Monday night that it had authorised MPR leaders to call a snap special session prior to August 1 should Wahid carry out his emergency threat.

The initial allegations against Wahid involved two so-called scandals—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. No legal charges have been laid against Wahid and in May the Attorney General cleared Wahid of any wrongdoing. His political opponents are using the allegations, along with accusations that Wahid is erratic and incompetent, as a rather flimsy pretext to oust him.

Wahid defeated Megawati in the MPR vote for the presidency in October 1999 with the support of the same parties—Golkar (the ruling party under the Suharto junta), the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and a grouping of rightwing Islamic parties—that are now seeking to remove him. Over the last year and a half, he has been criticised for failing to crack down on separatists in Aceh and West Papua, for bowing to pressures from the International Monetary Fund, and, by a layer of the armed forces and Golkar, for making tentative moves to prosecute members of the Suharto family and military.

Since her defeat, Megawati has sought to accommodate herself to Golkar and the military. By portraying herself as the defender of the nation, she has gathered support from all those layers of the ruling elite who are disgruntled with Wahid. On Monday, Megawati delivered a speech to a military-sponsored think tank, the National Resilience Institute, in which she warned of the dangers of political disintegration, saying, "We have to manage the current transitional process so it will not be the end of the nation".

It is by no means certain that Wahid will be impeached in early August or that Megawati will be chosen to replace him. But that appears to be the most

likely outcome of this bitter dispute within the ruling elites. The current military operations in Aceh are probably the sharpest warning of the rightwing character of a new administration under Megawati.

The death toll in the current military operation against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is rising rapidly. Several weeks ago, 300 members of an elite anti-terrorist unit drawn from the notorious Kopassus special forces troops were sent to the area. In the past week, more than 20 bodies including those of children and civilians were discovered in a remote gorge. A local leader Hasballah Saad told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that there had been 848 confirmed deaths since the beginning of the year, most of them since the military offensive began in April and over half of them civilians.

While it was Wahid, not Megawati, who authorised the offensive, it was only at her insistence and that of top military commanders and political leaders, who have been highly critical of the president's attempts to negotiate with GAM and West Papuan independence leaders. If Megawati becomes president she will be beholden to the military chiefs, who will demand a free hand, not only in Aceh and West Papua but also to crack down on any opposition or threat to their vested interests.

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