

Indonesia: Rebuilding the Republic

by Michael O. Billington

A new stage in the battle to rebuild the Indonesian nation was achieved in August, with the successful completion of the first annual legislative session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) to take place since the historic elections in 1999. Despite the threat over the past months that President Abdurrahman Wahid's coalition partners might move to impeach him, or otherwise undermine his power, the President emerged from the session with a broad base of support. All the major political factions called for, and displayed through their actions, a new commitment to nationalism and unity, to defend the nation against the continuing severe economic and social crisis. However, President Wahid's announcement on Aug. 23, one week following the close of the MPR session, of a new Cabinet composed almost entirely of his closest allies, and excluding any major representation from his coalition partners, has provoked renewed attacks, foreign and domestic, which could exacerbate the already fragile situation in the world's fourth most populous nation.

Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of the changes taking place in Indonesia occurred on Aug. 17, the 55th anniversary of Indonesia's Declaration of Independence from colonial rule by the nation's first President, Sukarno. The current Vice President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of Sukarno, assisted President Wahid in raising the first official flag of the Republic, which had been personally sewn by Megawati's mother, Fatmawati. The significance of this event was heightened by the fact that the flag had not been publicly used since 1968, when General Suharto, having bloodily crushed Sukarno's base of popular support and replaced him as President, removed the flag to his residence.

During the ceremony, President Wahid handed over to Sukarno's descendants the title to land and buildings in Bogor, which had been seized from Sukarno by General Suharto in 1967. Sukarno's request to be buried in Bogor had been denied by Suharto, at least in part in order to prevent the site from becoming a shrine to the deposed nationalist hero.

President Wahid's role in the ceremony was particularly poignant, due to the fact that he and his ancestors founded and ran the Nahdlatul Ulama, the mass-based Islamic organization whose membership composed a major portion of the mobs which were armed by the military in 1965 and 1966 and

turned loose to slaughter the mostly defenseless communists and others who had been Sukarno's base of support. President Wahid has already issued a formal apology for that black page of Indonesian history, and has proposed a "truth and reconciliation commission" to investigate the long-suppressed truth behind the entire period—an investigation which could potentially expose the British/American/Australian role in instigating and supporting the atrocities. The just-concluded MPR session has resolved to create just such a commission.

The Legislative Session

The renewed nationalism of the flag ceremony was also displayed by all major factions at the MPR itself. Despite the dramatic transformation in Indonesia following the overthrow of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, and the first open elections in 1999, the major parties still represent the historical institutions of free Indonesia: Golkar, which was Suharto's party; the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the multi-ethnic party associated with the tradition of Sukarno and led by his daughter Megawati; the National Awakening Party (PKB), the party of President Wahid, built largely from the Islamic Nahdlatul Ulama; and a group of smaller Islamic parties representing various strains of orthodox Islam, whose most prominent leader is MPR Chairman Amien Rais, former head of the Islamic Muhammadiyah organization, and who nominally ran the student uprisings which precipitated the overthrow of Suharto.

These four factions came together at last year's MPR session to elect Wahid as President and Megawati as Vice President, with Golkar Chairman Akbar Tandjung becoming Speaker of the House of Representatives and Amien Rais becoming Chairman of the MPR. Indonesia's continued economic, ethnic, and separatist crises have fed dissension amongst them, to the point that impeachment proceedings were contemplated in some quarters.

However, in the week preceding the MPR session, the four leaders were brought together by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, one of the nation's most respected leaders, where they pledged to put the interests of the nation ahead of the factional power struggles, and to back Wahid's Presidency. Akbar Tandjung opened the MPR session with the declaration, "Nationalism is needed to reach the goal of independence, to uphold the unitary state." He called for Independence Day to be a "moment for introspection, to find wisdom. . . . Conscience is the eternal voice of truth and justice, which cannot be suppressed by anyone, and will always guide us in our struggle to achieve the ideals of the Proclamation [of Independence]."

Closing the session, Amien Rais (who had earlier publicly mooted the possibility of impeachment) called on everyone to work together to meet the crisis in the land, and evoked the memory of Sukarno: "During this critical moment, let us remember *Bung Karno's* [Father Sukarno's] teaching about

the nationalism of Indonesia.”

President Wahid, in an effort to bring about unity and collaboration, proposed dramatic changes in the structure of the Executive branch. “The delegation of works or tasks in implementing the technical daily jobs will be held by the Vice President [Megawati],” he said, while decision-making power would reside in a “group of four” composed of the President, the Vice President, and two Coordinating Ministers. A team of three Cabinet ministers, headed by Wahid’s close ally Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, then Minister of Mines and Energy, were assigned to prepare a new, trimmed-down Cabinet. These proposals were received positively by the MPR.

At the MPR session itself, several surprising steps were taken, which frustrated the Anglo-American/Australian financial oligarchy and their numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which spent the last two years attempting to destroy the last vestiges of influence of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), and threatening to convene an “international tribunal” to try military leaders accused of human rights violations in East Timor, in particular. First, the MPR backtracked on its 1999 decision to end all TNI representation in the MPR by 2004 (the MPR is composed of the 500 elected members of the House of Representatives, plus 200 representatives of various social institutions of the nation, including 38 from the military). Instead, the deadline has been extended to 2009. Both Golkar and Megawati’s PDI-P, the two largest parties represented in the MPR, backed this decree, provoking calls of “betrayal” from the NGO nexus.

Also, an amendment to the 1945 Constitution was passed protecting human rights, which included the right to “live free from torture, slavery, and charges based on retroactive laws.” This has infuriated those who have planned to dismantle the military through staged trials against leading officers based on *ex post facto* human rights codes—a process being applied internationally to tear down the military, and the sovereignty, of nations threatening to resist International Monetary Fund financial dictates.

The other important development was the MPR’s decision *not* to act on several highly contentious issues. These included the question of direct elections of the Executive branch (the MPR now chooses the President and Vice President), and the application of Islamic law (*shariah*) for Muslims, supported by some of the Islamic parties, but opposed even by Amien Rais, the Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah. On a less positive note, the recurring reports that Indonesia may follow Malaysia’s lead in implementing currency controls was set back by a constitutional amendment strengthening the “independence” of the nation’s central bank, Bank Indonesia, a move in keeping with the current globalization orthodoxy of preventing sovereign political control over the economy.

Meanwhile, a successful cease-fire in the separatist conflict in oil-rich Aceh has been sustained, and the Christian/

Muslim bloodletting in the Maluku, with multiple international fingers stirring the pot, may have reached a turning point. On Aug. 17, some 3,000 Muslim and Christian local residents joined in Independence Day celebrations in the Maluku provincial capital, Ambon, under the national flag, which is emblazoned with the motto “Unity in Diversity.” The emotional event was highlighted by prayers for peace from two ten-year-olds, one of each faith.

‘Crony’ Cabinet?

The display of unity at the MPR was shaken the following week when President Wahid named his new Cabinet, on Aug. 23. Expectations that he would continue with a “rainbow coalition” of representatives of all the leading political factions (a policy which led to constant dissension and inaction within the administration over the past year), was shattered when the President’s appointments came almost entirely from among his own most trusted allies. The two Coordinating Ministers, who will be part of the “group of four” power structure, are to be Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a close ally of the President, for Political, Social, and Security Affairs, and Rizal Ramli, former head of the national logistics agency, Bulog, for Economic, Finance, and Industry Affairs. The critical ministries for telecommunications, industry, and regional affairs all went to retired Army generals, while defense went to a little-known university professor, who is an expert in constitutional law, and reportedly has military connections. The former Coordinating Minister for Economics, Kwik Kian Gie, a leading economist from Megawati’s PDI-P, was not included in the new Cabinet, while the post of Finance Minister went to Prajardi Praptosuharjo, a Wahid ally, who was denied an appointment to run a state bank, after twice failing a “fit and proper” test by Bank Indonesia.

Both the stock market and the currency, the rupiah, fell by 4-5% after the announcement, and rumors of Megawati’s possible resignation were circulating internationally after Amien Rais, the Sultan of Yogyakarta, and others met at Megawati’s residence. She has denied the rumors and asked media to squelch them.

Indonesia’s crucial role in the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations makes it a primary target for destabilization by those intent on wrecking the momentum of the earlier May 6 Chiang Mai Initiative of the “ASEAN Plus Three,” referring to ASEAN’s “dialogue partners” China, Japan, and South Korea, which called for a united defense against global speculators and joint development policies. Its leaders are struggling to construct a viable republic against internal tensions, exploding after 32 years under authoritarian rule, and against an international financial oligarchy intent on destroying national sovereignty and imposing economic controls to feed the now-exploding bubble economy in the West. They deserve the world’s support in their historic endeavor.