

Phase-Change Toward Unity in Indonesia?

by Gail G. Billington

In the last week of May, Indonesia's House of Representatives met in plenary session, with its top priority being to vote whether or not to convene a special impeachment session against President Abdurrahman Wahid in the upper house of Parliament, the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). On May 30, the 365 out of 408 House members present, representing 7 of the 11 political factions in the House, voted for a special impeachment session. The entire 38-member military faction in the House abstained, as did one MP from a small Christian party. The 54 members of Wahid's PKB party walked out of the session in protest. The impeachment session is tentatively scheduled for Aug. 1, MPR Chairman Amien Rais informed reporters.

Since the May 1998 overthrow of the Suharto government, Western-based news services have frontloaded their Indonesia coverage with hair-raising stories of mob violence, atrocities, and gore. So they did, again, around the May 30 House session, focussing on destructive protests in East and Central Java, where President Wahid's political base in the 30-plus-million member Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim social organization in the country, is located.

The NU was founded by Wahid's grandfather, headed by Wahid's father, and then by Wahid himself for 15 years. Its loyalty stems from the relationship of a religious holy man to his followers, and the social safety net the NU provides to an overwhelmingly rural population, including much of the minimal education they receive in NU schools, or *pesantren*. That loyalty has a quality of spiritual depth far beyond mere political allegiance.

The Violence Was Confined

The news-hounds were intent only on finding violence in the protests that erupted in Java. What they failed to report is that the violence was confined to these Java strongholds. There were *non-violent* demonstrations in the immediate perimeter of the Parliament building in Jakarta, where some 5,000 Wahid supporters, bussed in from Java, pushed and shoved and jostled their way through outer barricades, but with no casualties reported, no counter-demonstrations, no university students leading the protests, not even significant traffic jams. At the end of the day, the demonstrators loaded onto their buses and drove away—a far, far cry from the

horrors Indonesia has sustained at many points and places since May 1998.

Indeed, some 300 meters away from Parliament, heads of state and representatives of the 19-member Group of 15 developing nations opened their annual summit. Those dignitaries had a ring-side seat to the goings-on at Parliament, and possibly shared hotel facilities with some of the demonstrators and legislators.

The irony is that the press may have cheated themselves of one of the best stories this year: Just maybe, Indonesia's institutional leaders, political and military, are fed up with being played against one another and against the greater good for the Indonesian people and their nation. In the run-up to the May 30 House plenary session, the Indonesian political class and, especially, the Indonesian military, acted with a higher degree of unity of purpose in opposing Wahid's threats to declare a state of emergency and dissolve Parliament before it could impeach him, than has been seen in the country since the May 1998 resignation of President Suharto. If consolidated, that would be a victory for Indonesia, but one that may choke those in the West, who have learned to love to browbeat and harangue Indonesia.

Of Liars and Bullies

The extent to which Indonesia's leaders are able to act for the best interests of the nation is still severely restricted by the real and de facto economic sanctions imposed from the outside. The U.S. Bush Administration has continued the Clinton Administration's policy of banning sales of spare parts for Indonesia's military, which has nearly grounded the use of military aircraft for humanitarian purposes in any crisis situation, in any part of Indonesia.

On the economic front, the International Monetary Fund continues to withhold a \$400 million tranche, which was due to be released in December 2000, but has been held up, among other reasons, by a dispute over a government-proposed amendment to the law governing the central bank, Bank Indonesia. The government insists the current leadership team be replaced. The IMF, upholding its nearly religious fervor for "central bank independence," nonetheless insists on keeping the current team in place, denying Indonesia's government the right to decide upon the leadership of its own central bank!

On May 25, in the heat of the political brinkmanship over whether or not the House of Representatives would vote in favor of impeachment, the Coordinating Minister for the Economy, Rizal Ramli, found an unusual avenue to release tension. The May 26 *Jakarta Post* reported that Minister Ramli took issue with statements made to the press by the IMF's Indonesia representative John Dodsworth while releasing a report on the recommendations of an independent panel on the amendments to the central bank law. Of Dodsworth's statement that the government was "not transparent" regarding the report, and that it "did not adopt many of the panel's

recommendations,” Ramli announced that “all of this is complete lies!”

Ramli continued, “We sincerely want to maintain good rapport and good relations with the IMF as an institution. But its executive here should stop blackmailing the country. They should not play politics here. . . . Why did the IMF allow the central bank to be politically independent without first cleaning up that institution?” he asked, referring to the 1999 central bank law that established the bank’s independence. Ramli noted most of the alleged malfeasance or wrongdoing at the central bank that was uncovered by the Supreme Audit Agency, took place when Bank Indonesia was under close IMF scrutiny.

The IMF’s continued withholding of the \$400 million to Indonesia is indeed a threat to the country, as it could jeopardize the nation’s negotiations with its leading creditor group, the Consultative Group on Indonesia. Jakarta is counting on refinancing \$2.8 billion in loans from the CGI at this year’s meeting.

The economic challenges for Indonesia are daunting. Recalling the economic riots that triggered the end of Suharto’s government in May 1998, *Jakarta Post*’s May 28 editorial stated: “We cringe when we imagine the additional suffering that will fall on the people with the series of price hikes, which will be set off by the planned increase of 30% in fuel prices, 20% in electricity and telephone rates, and 2.5% in the rate of the value-added tax in the first half of next month,” i.e., by mid-June. That is on top of the fact that budget estimates on debt and expenditures have been blown out by the collapse of the rupiah from 6,825 per dollar in October 1999, to 11,305 per dollar in May 2001, and the disappointing level of proceeds from sales of non-performing loans and assets held by the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency, still trying to salvage the wreckage left from the 1997-99 Asian financial blowout.

Indonesia’s Blind President

President Abdurrahman Wahid’s election as President of the Republic of Indonesia in October 1999 was the result, largely, of insider political horse-trading, which denied the Presidency to the head of Indonesia’s largest political party, the PDI-P, headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia’s first President, Sukarno.

When the dust settled, Megawati had been sworn in as Vice President to Abdurrahman Wahid, who, it is widely reported, served as her political mentor, up until her party emerged as the champions pushing for the special impeachment session against Wahid.

In the 19 months of his Presidency, Wahid has been accused of erratic and irresponsible behavior, even insulting behavior toward his Vice President; failure to mitigate secessionist pressures in Aceh, East Timor, and Papua; nor economically driven religious-communal violence in Maluku and Kalimantan. His penchant to serve as Indonesia’s leading

roaming Ambassador, making 30 foreign trips abroad, has overtaxed the treasury and his popularity.

But is that grounds for impeachment? The legal basis for the impeachment initiative stems from corruption charges against Wahid in the theft of some \$3.5 million from the pension fund of the state logistics agency, Bulog, and a “gift” of \$2 million to Wahid personally, from the Sultan of Brunei, which was to be used to further peace talks in Aceh. Parliament initiated a special inquiry into “Buloggate” and “Bruneigate” in July 2000, followed by a first and second censure motion against the President on Feb. 1 and April 30, 2001, respectively.

Wahid has consistently challenged the constitutionality of any impeachment proceeding launched by Parliament based on these two cases. The legal case against Wahid was further undermined on May 28, when the Attorney General issued a report clearing Wahid of any involvement in wrongdoing in either case. Members of Parliament responded that the impeachment is about politics, not the law.

In the last days of May, Wahid appears to have exhausted much of his political capital by repeated demands that the military impose a state of emergency, giving him power to dissolve Parliament and arrest his political opponents. He also floated a reshuffle of senior military, and issued a statement that several rebellious regions would secede in support of his Presidency, were he impeached.

Senior military commanders repeatedly warned Wahid against declaring a state of emergency, and even military “reformers” assured the senior command that any change of command would have to follow the military’s internal procedure. A spokesman also confirmed that no region had sworn allegiance to Wahid personally.

The ‘Wayang’ Principle

The assertion of the primacy of his personal political power, over the interests of the nation and *its* survival, has emboldened the political class to move ahead with impeachment and perhaps to seek a power-sharing compromise, including Wahid’s own PKB party. PKB leaders must look beyond Wahid’s Presidency to the future of NU and their constituents. The military, including the Defense Minister, ultimately declined to impose a state of emergency.

Pick up almost any book on Indonesia, and you will likely read about the country’s famous *wayang* shadow puppet theater, which re-enacts the great sagas of the country’s Hindu heritage, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The art of *wayang* itself is a metaphor for the “seen” and the “unseen” worlds, for the “real” puppets and their shadows.

Finding solutions to the multiple challenges Indonesia faces today will undoubtedly be a noisy, messy, and difficult process, full of intrigue and with knotty legal and constitutional challenges. The good news from Indonesia, and the story the Western press have missed, is that, perhaps, real leaders are now emerging from the shadows.