



## **Déjà Vu in Indonesia**

by Donald K. Emmerson

In the streets, rising frustration. In the banks, a tumbling currency. In the palace, a beleaguered president - increasingly removed from reality but resisting removal from office. In the cafes, rising talk of a showdown between rivals. It sounds like mid-May 1998, the eve of the downfall of Indonesia's second president, Suharto. But it's now, mid-May 2001, as another confrontation looms between the opponents and the supporters of the country's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid.

Recently I took part in some thirty interviews in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, mainly with members of the political elite. In these conversations, two scenarios recurred. The most widely anticipated outcome is that within four months Wahid will lose the presidency, by resignation or impeachment, and be replaced by his Vice President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the country's first president, Sukarno. Some think Wahid can remain in office, but only with his role reduced and hers enhanced. Nearly all of my sources doubted that Wahid could retain both his office and his power. Among the exceptions was Wahid himself, who spoke harshly of his perceived enemies and confidently of his ability to prevail.

One view of this struggle for power in the country's cockpit is that it further endangers the entire plane - 220 million Indonesians already jolted by economic turbulence. The rupiah has tumbled to dollar lows not seen for more than two years. Interest rates have swollen to double-digit size. The budget deficit seems out of control. The urgency of stabilization has begun to eclipse the priority on reform. But if the economy is in not reformed, how can it merit the confidence of sorely needed investors and lenders?

Nor is the challenge only to prevent another recession. (The last one, in 1998, shrank the economy by 13 percent.) The very identity of Indonesia is at stake - witness the spiraling violence in Aceh and the unsolved problems that continue to bedevil Jakarta's relations with other parts of its diverse periphery. Under such conditions, the contest for power in Jakarta seems to illustrate the triumph of short-term political ambitions over long-term public interests. If my more pessimistic informants are right, Indonesians are in for what they can least afford: more instability, less relief.

But there is more to this story than a spectacle of venal and arrogant elites arm-wrestling one another while their country burns. Some of Wahid's critics are self-serving. But not all. The president has become one of the problems that Indonesia faces, where he should have been unambiguously part of their solution. I say this with sadness of a man whom I have known and admired for years. I would like to argue that his two strokes and near-blindness have not impaired his performance. But they have, and to an apparently increasing degree. Not known for consistency

even when healthy, Wahid has grown more and more erratic since October 1999, when he adroitly acquired a presidency that was Megawati's to lose, given her party's plurality in national elections that June.

Wahid deserves full credit for his courage as a liberal intellectual who struggled for democracy under Suharto. But his penchant for making and remaking policy in casual and sometimes conflicting remarks has tended to compound rather than alleviate the multiple uncertainties faced by his country. Nor has he used his office to reach beyond the claustrophobic politics of Jakarta and the petty details of personalities - who should be hired or fired, who is his friend or his foe - to address Indonesians directly on their nation's welfare and survival. If he himself has lacked vision, so has his presidency.

Would Megawati be an improvement? Most of my informants expect her to behave more consistently than Wahid, and based on her performance so far, she would be less visible and voluble. Where he has allowed his legitimacy to diminish in a welter of quixotic moves, she might enhance the impact of her interventions by reserving them for key occasions. It is easier to imagine her speaking directly to her fellow citizens on issues of the day. But she carries a reputation for passivity and aloofness. If she removes herself from day-to-day governance, the success of her administration - if there is one - will depend heavily on the caliber and performance of her appointments. And as with Wahid, not everyone who has her ear can be expected to give her good advice.

Alongside the curious mixture of pessimism and complacency that marks the outlook of the Jakarta elite, pockets of optimism do exist, especially among younger Indonesians. Despite the failure of civilian politicians to overcome their country's many crises, the military has not taken over - and almost no one thinks it will. Decentralization has not been well managed, but it has begun to reduce the dominance of the center over the regions. To the extent that local officials are acquiring power and resources and being made locally accountable for their use, Jakarta's self-regarding machinations need not destroy the potential for more responsive rule.

I return from Indonesia this time more than normally aware of the limited scope of my evidence. Conversations with elites are becoming less and less reliable guides to what is happening "out there" in the regions where nearly all Indonesians live. That may be good news. But how much longer will Indonesians tolerate instability for the sake of democracy?

Déjà vu? Not necessarily. Since May 1998, circumstances have changed - for the better and for the worse. And more is at risk in May 2001. Alongside the fate of its economic recovery and democratic experiment, the very identity of Indonesia as a nation-state now also hangs in the balance.

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