



After Indonesia's Wahid, Megawati Could Look Worse by Donald K. Emmerson

If A stands for Appalled, and B is for Bearish, early comments on the nature and future of Megawati ("Mega") Sukarnoputri's new presidency in Indonesia are running the gamut from A to B. Few dare to be to Neutral. No one is Optimistic.

Neither am I. But before her barely begun tenure is declared to be the disaster that it could in time become, the consensus against her bears examination.

An intellectual heavyweight Mega is not. She enjoys cooking, gardening, and watching cartoons. Her father, Sukarno, had led the movement for independence against the Dutch before becoming Indonesia's first president. It was her lineage not her talent that caused a nationalist party to recruit her as a candidate in the elections sponsored and controlled by the country's autocratic second president, Suharto.

Her service in Suharto's tame legislature was undistinguished. But he took her seriously enough to try to undermine her, and wound up making her a political martyr. He resigned in 1998, and her party won a plurality of the votes in the uncontrolled election of June 1999. In assembly voting for president four months later, however, she lost at the last minute to her seeming ally but actual rival, Abdurrahman Wahid. Her aversion to the deal-making needed to sustain a coalition contributed to her failure to translate popularity into power.

As vice-president - her consolation prize - she did not particularly shine. In public she was mostly silent. What she does say is rarely memorable, including her brief speech accepting the presidency to which the assembly finally did elect her on 23 July 2001. No wonder her critics have dismissed her as a housewife in over her head.

But compared with the verbal grenades, vindictive maneuvers, and divisive interventions of Wahid, who turned his presidency into a tragic equivalent of stand-up comedy, Mega's reticence has the potential to become healing relief. At least her advisers are less likely than his were to have to spend precious time dousing fires ignited by their own boss.

As for her inability to build a coalition, she was smart enough as president to throw her party's weight successfully behind the least controversial of the three leading candidates for vice-president. Two of them would have linked her administration too visibly to the party or the army that had helped keep the now reviled Suharto in power. The man who won, Hamzah Haz, is a pious but tolerant Muslim whose links to Islam

are an important political asset in a country with more Muslims than any other.

Also feeding pessimism toward her administration is Mega's closeness to the military. As a nationalist loathe to preside over the shrinkage of her country, she is likely to give the generals a freer hand to repress secession. That will mean more bloodshed not less. But it does not follow that she will grant the army the political power it enjoyed under Suharto.

At the grotesque end of his presidency, Wahid demolished his reputation as a champion of human rights. He begged the military to execute by force an antidemocratic and unconstitutional scheme to dissolve elected bodies and rule by emergency decree. Fortunately for the country, the armed forces declined this virtual invitation to a coup. Military reform is far from complete, but the generals do seem, at least for now, to have accepted the notion of rule by civilian institutions using democratic procedures.

Could the suppression of rebels in Aceh lead to the abrogation of press and other freedoms in Jakarta, as many observers fear? In theory, yes. That fear will intensify if Mega revives the Department of Information that Suharto used to censor the media. But Mega does not want to mimic Suharto, and no one wants her to. Having already survived dire conditions since 1998, freedom of expression will not easily be extinguished, short of full-scale civil war.

It will be far easier for Mega, through indifference and inaction, to fritter away her chance to achieve stability and reform. Critical in this context is the need to reinstall confidence in the economy. If responsibility for economic policy is divided among squabbling politicians, or given to those who confuse cronyism with nationalism, expect the worst. If it is entrusted to internationally respected professionals, success will be possible, though hardly guaranteed. Depending on which signal she sends, the IMF should consider speeding up its decision to release - or retain - the \$400 million in support funds for Indonesia now blocked for noncompliance on reform.

I remain pessimistic. But observers cringed when B. J. Habibie became president in 1998, and he did better than expected. Conversely, Wahid eventually dashed the high hopes that greeted his inauguration in 1999. The most important short-term asset Megawati brings to her presidency may be the modesty of the expectations she faces - and the modest chance that the conventional wisdom could again be wrong.

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