

THE END OF THE SUHARTO ERA

*Indonesia Minus East Timor,
Plus a New President*

The election of Abdurrahman Wahid as President of Indonesia on October 20 and of Megawati Sukarnoputri as Vice-President a day later has brought to an end the era of Suharto politics.

Abdurrahman Wahid beat Megawati Sukarnoputri by 60 votes for the presidency. Megawati's party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), had won the biggest proportion of votes (34 per cent) in the House of Representatives (DPR) election held on June 7 but she needed allies in the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), which chooses the president. Before the presidential election was held, the former president, B.J. Habibie, had been the leading candidate and was supported by Golkar, the then ruling party. When he failed to persuade the MPR to back his stewardship of the country from the time that Suharto had resigned on May 21, 1998, he withdrew his candidacy.

Megawati's inability to turn her popular support into votes in the MPR has been put down to three main factors. She seemed not to have a comprehensive plan for Indonesia's future and tended to hark back sentimentally to the days in which her father, Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, ran the country. She failed to seek support from parties that could be allies. She may also have suffered from the fact that she was a woman because many Muslims in this, the world's largest Muslim country, considered it in-appropriate that it should be led by a woman.

After the presidential vote there were major street demonstrations by her disappointed supporters but her election as vice-president makes it unlikely that there will be a campaign in the streets to have her declared president.

Although Abdurrahman Wahid, better known by his nickname Gus Dur, is a Muslim cleric, he seems likely to lead a secular, not an Islamic, Indonesia. Right-wing Muslims regard him as being too close to non-Muslims. In a strong speech after his election he pledged to continue a commitment to free trade, the pursuit of prosperity, the defence of national honour and territorial integrity, and the promotion of democracy. The DPR election had been the fairest in Indonesia's history.

The elections of the president and vice-president were the most momentous actions by the MPR but several other highly significant moves were taken. The results of the referendum on East Timor's independence were endorsed and the 1978 decree, which incorporated East Timor as Indonesia's 27th province, annulled. Ten articles of Indonesia's 1945 Constitution were amended to curtail the powers of the president, the chief one being that the president and the vice-president are now limited to two five-year terms. The new Government was also told that it must confer special autonomy on the provinces of Aceh and Irian Jaya and seek to resolve the problems in the province of Maluku.

The extent to which the military will play a prominent role in Indonesian politics has not been

resolved but the military certainly seems in no position to play a dominant role. For one thing, the constitutional processes have a momentum of their own. For another, it is recognised that too great a prominence of the military is likely to cause public demonstrations. For a third, the military leadership is becoming conscious of a need to appear to observe human rights. General Wiranto, the military commander, withdrew his bid for the vice-presidency, which is an indication that the military eschews an overt role in politics.

While the rest of the world absorbs its lessons from the tragedy of East Timor, Indonesia absorbs its own, which is that it lost part of its territory. That loss, rather than the appalling events in East Timor, seems to have preoccupied the MPR. The Indonesian perspective on East Timor always differed greatly from that of much of the rest of the world. The Portuguese colony was seized in 1975 because Indonesia did not want to tolerate an independent, possibly Marxist, country as a near neighbour. It also considered that an independent East Timor might worsen divisions within Indonesia and might encourage fragmentation of the Republic of Indonesia. Outsiders might deplore the subjugation of the East Timorese, the brutalities of the Indonesian military and the assaults on human rights. However, Indonesia is a country of 300 ethnic groups, diverse languages, and a considerable number of religions, diversity and dissent and, it must be added, a level of violence that is part of the fabric of the country. What was different, an Indonesian might ask, about East Timor?

The results of the referendum came as a humiliation for the notion of Indonesia, forged (mainly) out of the remnants of the Dutch empire. It was a notable loss of face. Added to that are the old fears of fragmentation. These fears are not idle because calls for referenda elsewhere grew as the plan for a referendum in East Timor developed. The loss of East Timor seemed to make the loss of soldiers' lives in East Timor count for nothing. Military pride, and the traditional dual social and defence roles of the military, made the stakes over East Timor even higher.

These factors help explain, but nothing can excuse, the final days of the Indonesian military in East Timor. There is incontrovertible evidence that the military created and supported, and may be continuing to support, the paramilitary groups who slaughtered pro-independence East Timorese. These militia also devastated the land. Why was that done? Vindictiveness seems the most likely explanation. Similar patterns are to be observed elsewhere. In Aceh, for example, hundreds of schools and other public buildings have been destroyed by mysterious groups in way reminiscent of the damage wrought in East Timor.

Four other regions in Indonesia have been notable for separatist or other unrest. Aceh, a province in the west of the island of Sumatra, and Irian Jaya, which shares a border with Papua New Guinea, have long been centres of separatist sentiment. One complaint in Aceh is that the area's resources go mostly to Jakarta's coffers. Aceh has the largest offshore gas field in Southeast Asia and is a centre for growing aromatic and expensive Arabica coffee. Irian Jaya is rich in minerals. These valuable resources make it unlikely that Jakarta would countenance secession. Civil rights groups estimate that in the nine-year struggle between the military and the separatists 2000 Acehnese

have been killed, 200 of them since May of this year. Brutalities from the military, especially in Aceh, have made the situation much worse. A nine-year military operation has been brought, at least officially, to an end but has left bitter feelings in Aceh. In West Kalimantan, in Borneo, the issues have also been religious because of the presence of migrant traders from Madura, the island close to and north of Java, and the indigenous Dayak and Malay peoples. Some of the most savage incidents have occurred in this region and thousands of people have been moved to safer regions. On Ambon, one of the Spice Islands in the province of Maluku, the clashes have been largely between Muslims and Christians, though ethnic Chinese have also been badly affected. Secession in these two regions, however, is not the burning issue it is in Aceh and Irian Jaya.

Preventing other regions from breaking away will be one of the most demanding of the tasks faced by the new administration. The possibility of fragmentation or the "Balkanisation" of the Indonesian archipelago cannot be dismissed. It would not be in the interests of the region to see this occur for five reasons.

The first reason is protection of international waterways. Indonesia lies alongside the sea-lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is alongside or straddles important shipping straits, particularly the Malacca and the Lombok Straits.

The second reason is control of crime. Fragmentation of the country would mean even less control over piracy and drug running. Already, many of the increasing number of pirates in the region are Indonesian.

A third reason is ethnic and religious stability. Indonesia is the country with the largest number of

Muslims in the world. A unified Indonesia is more likely to be a moderate Indonesia. Balkanisation would inevitably bring much more ethnic and religious intolerance and violence. Despite the outbreaks of violence over the last two years, and the appalling attacks on ethnic Chinese, the ideal of Indonesia has been a secular and multi-ethnic state.

The fourth reason lies in Indonesia's international connections. Indonesia is by far the largest country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries and a host of other international organisations. ASEAN is a stabilising influence in the region and gains some of its strength from its largest member. A group of smaller countries would detract from that stabilising influence and increase other threats to stability.

The fifth reason lies in protection of the environment. Fires in Borneo have created bad effects in Indonesia itself and in its neighbours over the last few years. Such fires would be likely to proliferate in a number of smaller countries.

To conclude, most pessimistically, the tensions over wealth and poverty, between Muslim and non-Muslim, and between indigenous Indonesian and ethnic Chinese in Indonesia might not be confined within the borders of the constituent parts of a Balkanised Indonesia, but spill over into war involving neighbouring states.

The price of an unified Indonesia in the future, however, is likely to be increased low-intensity conflict and a prominent internal security role, with all of its implications, for the military. The challenge is to acknowledge the desires for autonomy, and find the compromises that will meet those desires while ensuring Indonesia's unity.