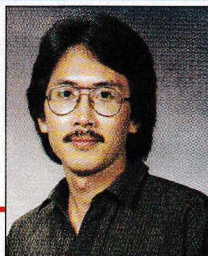


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Shedding Light on Megawati

By Ariel Heryanto

On the north and south ends of Jakarta are two Disney-inspired theme parks, the Dunia Fantasi and the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah. But the believe-it-or-not spectacles don't end there—Indonesian politics offers plenty of them. First there's the story of the Timor, the national car that is made overseas. Then there's the recent capture of "communist" subversives allegedly responsible for the July 27 riot. And one can't forget the coming general election.

At the centre of the political-fantasy spotlight, however, is the rise of Megawati Sukarnoputri. It's neither effort nor pure talent that has placed Megawati centre-stage as the only important political figure, besides President Suharto, in the history of Indonesia's New Order era. The daughter of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, has seen her rise to power constructed without her consent by myriad competing forces. Together they make her appear more important than was desired by her or by the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) from whose chairmanship she has been ousted.

Knowing the Indonesian game so well, Megawati, like Suharto, doesn't have much to say about the recent riots and other events. She isn't so naive as to be seduced by the spectacles that make her appear more important than she thinks she actually is. Indeed, the two figures can scare each other precisely when they have more power to wield than words to say.

A leading force behind Megawati's rise is the New Order government itself. By launching measures intended to undermine her popularity, the government has ironically boosted it. Thousands of dissidents came to defend Megawati as a convenient rallying icon. While uniformly applauding Megawati, they are more interested in expressing discontent with the government than in championing her.

True, Megawati has admirable personal qualities. Without sobriety and perseverance of a special kind, she would not have survived the extended intimidation from foes and the pressure of impatient supporters. She attracted thousands of pro-democracy supporters to her party's head-

quarters. They raised her picture, chanted her name. Thousands of others throughout the country swore blood oaths of loyalty to her. But leading a social transformation towards a post-Suharto Indonesia requires a great deal more than a charismatic leader and youthful enthusiasts.

Indonesian opposition movements appear and disappear swiftly. Indeed, in a matter of days following the July 27 government-backed raid on PDI headquarters, the most significant pro-democracy opposition since Suharto took charge was swept away. At least five people lost their lives and a number more are missing

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following the confrontation with state security forces in central Jakarta. Some survivors are now facing trial on charges that carry the maximum penalty of death. Megawati has been repeatedly summoned for interrogation, and excluded from the list of candidates for the May parliamentary election.

And yet a majority vote for the ruling party, Golkar, is already well assured, as is Suharto's sole nomination for presidency in 1998. So why bother ousting Megawati and raiding PDI headquarters?

To understand the events, one must understand the logic, or illogic, of power in Indonesia. Political theatre rules, overriding events and making substantive content and individuals, such as Megawati and even Suharto, comparatively less relevant. Consider past elections. The

government dubbed them a "festival of democracy." The festival, with its open-air concerts and parades, is a more accurate and sincere description than most observers are prepared to believe. The convivial event, in which the campaign was more important than the vote, can hardly be described as calculated competition among political interests.

The preceding election of 1987 offered even more evidence of how important symbols are. The government banned any display of pictures of the late Sukarno. Since the government felt it necessary to ban the image of the deceased, no one should be surprised with what has happened to Megawati and her party now.

An interview with a former head of Indonesia's State Intelligence Coordinating Body, published in 1993, offers still more perspective: "As intelligence officers, we make up issues, and we disseminate them in the press, radio or television. We treat them as if they were real. When they are already widespread, usually people will talk about them and they tend to add and exaggerate the issues. Finally the issues will come back in reports. What is so funny is that these reports incline us to believe that these issues are real. In fact, we get terrified and begin to think, 'what if these issues are real?'" The officer then laughed.

Megawati lives in a land where an inmate serving a heavy sentence, businessman Eddy Tansil, managed to leave prison without injuring a single guard or scaling a single wall. This is a republic of nearly 200 million in which only one person has been nominated head of state in the past 30 years. Megawati seems to understand only too well the world she is living in and what she is fighting. This is why she survives.

It is also why she has recently filed heaven-knows how many parallel lawsuits, involving 30,000 lawyers across the country and covering numerous claims of wrongdoing against her. Far from seeking legal victory, she is fully aware that nothing can be more subversive to the New Order's fantasy world than an extended series of counter-festivals. ■