Wahid down: Crisis in Indonesia

by Nelly Van Doorn-Harder in the July 18, 2001 issue

"Do we really need these leaders?" a recent article in the *Jakarta Post* asked, referring to Indonesia's four top figures: Abdurrahman Wahid, the president; Megawati Sukarnoputri, vice president; Amien Rais, leader of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR); and Akbar Tanjung, speaker of the House of Representatives.

Wahid came to power when Asia's crippling 1997 economic crisis ended the powerful Suharto regime. That crisis started Indonesia on a downward spiral. A weak economy aggravated deep-seated interethnic conflicts, and political unrest sent the currency and investor confidence on a continuing downhill slide. Some 1.85 million people have been displaced by the ongoing violence.

Indonesia's swift deterioration is all the more shocking given the country's high hopes when Wahid took power. People expected him to replace Suharto's repressive dictatorship with democracy, to end rampant corruption and to make the economy thrive. But within a few months clashes broke out between Muslims and Christians in the Malaccan Islands, and ethnic and religious conflict spread throughout the archipelago. Wahid's attempt to create a democratic system in a patronage-based political culture has failed. His government has been unable to control the military or to restore the economy. Political power is concentrated in Java, a center with which Indonesia's 6,000 remaining inhabited islands are increasingly at odds.

The army, which under Suharto had unlimited power to keep Indonesia's widely scattered 220 million people under control, is unwilling to relinquish that power, as its brutal attempt to suppress East Timor's quest for independence demonstrated. As the crisis worsens, thousands of police and army troops patrol Jakarta, the capital, to restrain demonstrations and riots. People are stocking up on food while shopping malls and foreign embassies request extra protection.

When Wahid came to power Megawati, the leader of the Nationalist Party (PDI-P), commanded the largest number of votes in the country—her party held 156 parliamentary seats out of 500. Despite her popularity, she was passed over for the

presidency because many Muslim leaders did not want the world's largest Muslim country to be led by a woman. Wahid, who had solid credentials as an advocate of reform, democracy and interfaith relations and was a proponent of clean government, seemed an excellent choice. For many years the chair of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a Muslim organization of some 30 million members, and a scholar of Islam, he represented the central Islamic bloc of four parties commanding 154 parliamentary seats.

But Wahid has proven to be ineffective and capricious. He annoyed people with his frequent trips abroad (visiting 29 countries in 14 months), insisted on a wait-and-see attitude in the midst of severe unrest, refused to swiftly bring Suharto to trial, and let the inhabitants of the terrorized island of Ambon know that they should "solve their own problems." Worst of all, he compared the members of Parliament to "kindergartners." Several of the Muslim factions who helped Wahid to power are now rallying to remove him from office. Their voices are a mixed choir of those who are truly disappointed with Wahid's performance, golddiggers, and those who wish to Islamize Indonesia.

A bright thread woven through the disagreements is the almost century-old rivalry between the followers of the traditionalist NU movement, represented by Wahid, and the Muhammadiyah movement, to which Amien Rais belongs. Muhammadiyah seeks a purer form of Islam and aims to eradicate indigenous religions that have intermingled with Islam.

Wahid's ineffectiveness has resulted in a struggle for power among the country's leaders, all of whom seem more interested in furthering their own ambitions than in promoting the nation's welfare. Chief among these figures is Rais, who originally helped Wahid to power. He would have liked the position himself, but knew that the majority would never accept him. Another opponent, Akbar Tanjung, represents the old, corrupt powers of the Suharto era. Megawati, to whom Wahid has delegated some of his day-to-day powers in an effort to silence critics, so far has mainly remained silent and not displayed great aptitude for governing.

Several parties in Parliament are attempting to impeach Wahid. The most prominent lobbyists, such as 35-year-old businessman Ade Komaruddin, emerged from the Student Associations (HMI) that share the aspirations of Muhammadiyah. They were part of the student movement that induced Suharto's downfall, but are disappointed that Wahid so far has refused to push an Islamization. They insist that Wahid has

misused $4 million from the budget of the state logistics agency Bulog and lied about $2 million in relief funds for the Aceh region donated by the sultan of Brunei. Wahid maintains that the allegations are politically motivated. In May the Court of Justice exonerated him, dropping all the charges. But even if the accusations are untrue, they have done irreparable harm to a man whose campaign was based on the promise to fight “collusion, corruption and nepotism.”

On July 9 Wahid anounced that unless efforts to oust him are halted, he will declare a state of emergency, dissolve Parliament and call for new elections. But it is doubtful that he would be able to carry out such a threat. Military leaders say they would refuse to obey a state-of-emergency order.

Wahid also has his fervent supporters. Tens of thousands of young NU loyalists have moved into Jakarta from East Java, ready to hold mass prayer meetings and to defend their candidate “to the death” through “suicide squads.” Wahid’s successor as NU’s chair, Kiyai Hashim Muzadi, regularly wields what he considers the most powerful weapon in Wahid’s defense: massive prayer meetings in the center of Jakarta.

Indonesia’s ethnic and religious conflicts, suppressed during the Suharto regime, are the result of a complex history. During the 350 years in which Indonesia was a Dutch colony, the Dutch assigned important positions and trade permits to those they favored. The Chinese were preferred trade partners, and higher education was reserved for people who had been converted to Christianity by Dutch missionaries. The Dutch largely ignored the Muslims. As a result, the 200 million Muslims of the world’s largest Muslim country have often felt like a minority group.

Suharto continued the divide-and-rule policy. He concentrated power and intellectual and financial resources in Java and exploited the other islands—especially Borneo, Sulawesi, Sumatra (including oil-rich Aceh) and the Mallacans. Forty-five percent of Indonesia’s population lives in Java, from which the country’s 26 provinces, most of them with far more natural resources than Java has, are governed.

To alleviate Java’s overpopulation, Suharto encouraged Javanese to migrate to other islands—a migration that uprooted local economic and governing systems and upset local rituals. Where immigrants were of a different religion from the local population the conflicts caused by their arrival were interpreted as interreligious. In Borneo, for example, the local Dayaks, many of whom are Christian, were economically

marginalized by Muslim migrants, most of them from Madura in East Java, who got the government jobs and took over commerce. Stripped of their original habitats and traditional cultures and reduced to poverty, the Dayaks responded with an outbreak of brutal violence against the Madurese. Wahid's government has tried to assign greater regional autonomy to the provinces. But the new regulations have not been able to undo the damage of the past quickly enough.

The country's founding fathers promoted the secular state ideology of Pancasila, the concept of unity in plurality—one God worshiped in separate ways by Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. During the 1980s the Suharto government transformed this ideology into a vehicle for national control. Churches were reduced to social organizations and made subject to the same government regulations. At the same time, Suharto courted the Muslim groups as these started to demand more power. And Suharto's government used the threat of religious violence as one of its tools for maintaining control of its scattered country.

Though most Indonesians are averse to religious sectarianism and want their nation to be truly pluralistic, extremist groups keep popping up. The Lashkar Jihad troops are an example. Their founder, Ustadz Ja'far Umar Thalib, had been the head of an obscure little Islamic boarding school in Central Java. He was propelled to prominence by money from former elites like the Suharto family. A massive propaganda campaign was launched to convince people that the Muslims in the Maluccans were greatly persecuted, thus justifying the Lashkar Jihad's massacre of the islands' indigenous Christians. Wahid did not have enough influence over the military to send in troops to protect the local population from Muslim forces.

Indonesians attribute much of the violence throughout the archipelago to instigators supported by the Suharto family, which is struggling to regain power. And the military and police are a large part of the problem. Combined as one force under the doctrine of dual function, which gave it both civilian and military roles and important political influence, it dominated Indonesia until 1999. It never needed to defend Indonesia against outside enemies, but was deployed in suppressing its own people. However, the army has been reforming itself, and police and army now have separate responsibilities.

Poorly trained and underpaid, the police are unprepared to deal with unrest and violence. At times, policemen have battled the military or joined with it to side against one group in a local conflict. With little guidance from political leaders

preoccupied with their own struggles for power, the army has resumed its former role as the force committed to maintaining the country's stability.

Wahid remains defiant, determined to finish his term that lasts until 2004. He has little to hold on to. The economy is still sliding backward and the support from some powerful allies is crumbling. Recently Megawati withdrew her support and now aspires to the presidency herself. Though popular, she has not developed into a strong visionary leader. There is some question whether her silence indicates wisdom or the opposite.

Both Megawati and Wahid are committed to upholding a democratic system that is inclusive of other religions, with a secular and not an Islamic society as foundation. What worries many is that the minority with the loud voice, the more fundamentalist Muslims, will push Megawati around in their quest for an Islamic state. Wahid is a scholar of Islam and is able to comment on the (somewhat narrow) fundamentalist agenda with knowledge from the vast and varied Islamic tradition. Megawati has no such knowledge.

Young, educated activists are confident that nothing can stop the "Reformasi," the structuring of a strong civil society that is democratic and just. They consider that also to be the best answer to fundamentalist Muslims. While the government remains lame, these activists have already started initiatives for reconciliation in the areas with ethnic and religious strife. They keep pushing the government to implement laws of self-determination and fair distribution of natural resources. Wahid was one of their models. They are sad to see the failure of their leader, thinking that "it would have been better if he had remained a teacher for the people." They are realistic, remembering the words of the Catholic writer and priest Mangunwijaya who until his death in 1998 kept pushing the message of justice. He warned Indonesians that it would take several decades of hard work to recover from an abusive past and to shape a truly democratic and balanced Indonesia.