

IN BRIEF: POLITICAL

Red becomes green?

Currently riding high in the polls, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) is not resting on its laurels. On March 30, the party officially launched a new organisation, *Baitul Muslimin*, with the aim of attracting the Muslim vote. With a long history as an exclusively secular-nationalist party without a Muslim wing, the move came as a surprise to many observers. Does it represent a major shift in the party's philosophy?

The launching ceremony of *Baitul Muslimin*, which literally translates as "Muslim home," was bursting with Islamic symbolism. All of those in attendance, including party chairwoman Megawati Soekarnoputri and a number of top PDI-P executives, wore Muslim attire and were accompanied by influential figures Hasyim Muzadi from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Din Syamsuddin from Muhammadyah. The new organisation's official emblem is the grand mosque in Bengkulu, which was designed by none other than Megawati's father, the first president of Indonesia, Soekarno.

The party also dug up several retired military figures for the occasion. These included Gen. (ret) Fachrur Razi, and Lt. Gen. (ret) Suady Marasabessy, who are both known as having developed a network with Muslim hardliners in their days as active soldiers.

However, despite the all the pomp and ceremony, sources close to the party's leadership told the *Report* that the new body did not represent a change to the party's secularist platform. "The organisation is the brainchild of only a couple of figures within the party ... it was pushed mainly by Taufik Kiemas and Pramono Anung" the source said, referring to Megawati's ambitious husband and the party's deputy secretary general respectively.

Another source added that Megawati was in fact unenthusiastic about the new organisation, despite her apparent endorsement of it. "I don't think the Muslim wing has much of a future. Megawati has left the matters in the hands of Kiemas and Anung as she seems to be reluctant to go into further talks with leaders of Muslim groups," the source, who is part of Megawati's inner circle, told the *Report*.

Indeed many senior members of the party remain unimpressed by the attempt to court the Muslim vote, worrying that it may backfire come election time. "PDI-P remains popular among Indonesian people because of its genuine platform, and most Indonesian Muslims are nationalist, so they can still feel at home when they cast their votes for the party," one senior politician said.

Bitter experience shows that in today's politics the nationalist card may not be enough to secure power. In 1999, after Indonesia's first free elections Megawati failed to gain the presidential spot when a number of legislators from Muslim-based parties grouped under the so-called "Central Axis" blocked her nomination in parliament. Despite the PDI-P having the largest number of the seats, legislators voted for then NU head Abdurrahman Wahid as president.

Since then, Megawati has been careful to include an Islamic figure on her

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ticket in the direct presidential elections. In 2004, she chose the NU's Muzadi as running mate and she is likely to pick another prominent Muslim for the 2009 polls. Muhammadyah's Din Syamsuddin is tipped by some for the position.

However, political analyst Sukardi Rinakit from the Sugeng Saryadi Syndicate thinks the PDI-P's top priority should be to resolve its leadership question. Since Megawati lost the 2004 elections to President Yudhoyono, there have been rumblings from some of the party's senior members concerning her future.

“Although more than 80 percent of Indonesians profess to be Muslims, the PDI-P has still been able to do very well in the polls. That seems to say that the voters, most of whom are Muslim, do not see the party's nationalist platform as a problem,” he told the *Report*. □