

Indonesia's ruling party faces collapse of support

Peter Symonds
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Even before the votes are cast and counted in the Indonesia's national elections, the ruling Golkar party is under considerable pressure with signs of bitter divisions as it faces the prospect of major losses at the polls on June 7.

A recent opinion poll in the *Tempo* magazine put support for Golkar at just over 10 percent, well behind Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI)-Struggle with nearly 25 percent and the National Mandate Party (PAN) headed by Amien Rais with almost 20 percent. Moreover, personal backing for Golkar's President Habibie stands at just 10.1 percent, substantially less than Rais on 21.1 percent, Megawati on 20.1 percent and even the Yogyakarta Sultan Hamengku Buwono X who has 15.1 percent.

The poll figures are just one indication of the widespread hostility to Golkar, the political vehicle through which the military strongman Suharto imposed his rule for more than three decades. Just over a week into the 17-day official election campaign period, Golkar has been forced to call off plans for mass rallies. Officials cite growing attacks on their officials and supporters, but a more fundamental difficulty lies in its inability to attract supporters to its rallies—even when it pays them.

The official campaign began on May 19 in Jakarta with a series of marches through the capital open to all 48 registered parties in the elections. Golkar was forced to pull out of the parades after its five floats decked out in party symbols and the party's yellow colour were set upon and damaged by groups of young people.

On Monday, the formerly omnipotent Golkar was embarrassed when a fight broke out between its supporters and a group of people demanding to be paid the money they had been promised for attending a party rally. Members of a garbagemen's association associated with the party claimed to have been promised food and money but to have been given only yellow party tee-shirts. The police intervened and fired warning shots to break up the confrontation after a car carrying Golkar national chairman Akbar Tanjung was stoned.

The following day a Golkar party official Tadjus Sobrin tried to repair some of the political damage by calling a press conference in Jakarta. Attempting to put the best possible interpretation on the incident, he told the assembled journalists: "Money politics is something normal for a political party. We give staple foods, we give money to the poor people. But I don't force these people to choose Golkar."

The *Financial Times* reported that just 2,000 people turned up to a Golkar rally on Tuesday in the port city of Banjarmasin in Kalimantan to hear chairman Tanjung. "Most left their canary-yellow Golkar shirts at home, for fear of being pelted by opposition supporters, while braver cadres hit them under their coats," the article noted. The port was the scene of a riot that erupted following the last elections in 1997 when aggrieved opposition supporters attacked Golkar. In all 123 people were confirmed dead and 77 were missing.

Golkar was also forced on Tuesday to call off a rally scheduled for the following day in the Kendall district in central Java after the stage constructed for the gathering was burned down overnight.

The lack of support has opened up public divisions within the party. Golkar deputy chairman Marzuki Darusman called into question the party's nomination of Habibie for president, claiming that the decision would come up for review after the June 7 poll. "The underlying problem is that if we nominate him now he is easily depicted as a symbol of a corrupt past and that's a liability for Golkar."

Habibie is under pressure from opposition parties as a result of the release of a *Time* magazine expose revealing the extent of the Suharto family wealth and the failure of his government to prosecute his close mentor. He has been forced to dispatch Indonesian Attorney General Andi Ghalib and Justice Minister Muladi to Europe to investigate the *Time* claims that \$9 billion in "Suharto money" was transferred from a Swiss bank to an Austrian account shortly after Suharto stood down last May.

Golkar chairman Tanjung immediately contradicted

Darusman saying the party would not reverse its decision to make Habibie its candidate. Nevertheless, a disastrous loss at the polls could result in a change. A successor would most probably come from one of the party's four vice-presidential candidates—Tanjung, Hamengku Buwono X, armed forces chief Wiranto and top economic minister Ginandjar Kartasasmita.

The party has already gone through a series of splits. Retired General Edi Sudradjat and his supporters broke away after he failed to win the position of national chairman at an emergency party congress convened last July in the wake of Suharto's forced resignation. His Justice and Unity Party (PKP), as well as two other Golkar splinter groups—the Democracy and Love for Nation Party (PDKB) and the Indonesia National Party-Marhaenis Front (PNI-FM) run by Suharto's half brother Probosutejo—are officially recognised political parties.

Adi Sasono, Minister of Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and still a member of the Golkar party, is closely connected with the creation of the People's Sovereignty Party (PDR). The PDR was formed by the Centre for Information and Development Studies (Cides), a think-tank of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI) which is directed by Sasono. He advocates a so-called “people's economy”—an attempt to appeal to anti-Chinese sentiment by calling for the redistribution of the wealth of large, mainly ethnic Chinese conglomerates to small, indigenous Indonesian businesses.

Sasono is one of the ministers accused of funnelling government money in the form of small, low-interest loans into rural areas to garner support for Golkar—so-called money politics. In the South Sulawesi province, the Independent Election Monitoring Committee (KIPP) recently claimed Golkar had been handing out government rice from the Social Security Ministry as its own. Local officials in the Poasia district distributing the food crossed out the names of those not supporting Golkar.

The decay of the Golkar party has a significance that goes beyond the immediate fortunes of individual political figures. Formed in 1967 in the wake of the CIA-organised military coup that brought Suharto to power, Golkar has been the chief political instrument of the Indonesian ruling elites for the last 32 years. Its origins lie in an association of anti-communist groups organised by the military in 1964 to counter the political influence of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). It was refashioned to include several hundred “functional groups,” including peasants, labour unions and businesses, but the predominant groups remained the armed forces and the state bureaucracy.

Golkar won the stage-managed elections of 1971 with the assistance of Suharto's personal assistant Ali Murtopo and

his Opsus (special operations) unit. Millions of civil servants were compelled to vote for Golkar. District leaders and village heads were given their “quotas” of Golkar votes to fill and it was made clear that development funds would only go to pro-Golkar areas. Golkar achieved 63 percent of the vote.

In 1973, Suharto forced the remaining opposition parties to amalgamate into two state-managed organisations—the United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). All aspects of subsequent elections were closely supervised by the state apparatus and intelligence agencies—candidates, party leaders, speeches, rallies, and advertising. Golkar retained its monopoly over the civil and military services and was the only party permitted to organise in rural areas where the overwhelming majority of the population lived. Just two years ago, Golkar won 72 percent of the total vote in the national elections.

In the aftermath of Suharto's forced resignation, the party has been desperately trying to dress up itself and the regime in democratic colours as the “New Golkar”. But both the junta and the party have lost the unequivocal backing of the US and other major powers that they enjoyed for three decades. Furthermore within Indonesia itself, sections of big business are looking to opposition leaders to preside over a program of economic restructuring which is certain to intensify the country's deep social crisis and provoke considerable opposition.

No doubt Golkar is counting on its extensive apparatus, its personnel within the top echelons of the military and the bureaucracy, ballot rigging and money bribes to boost its vote. Furthermore the election process remains highly restrictive and the parliamentary bodies retain a large number of civilian and military appointees. The election outcome is nevertheless likely to be a severe blow to the Golkar apparatus and result in further political instability.



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