Indonesian elections: an overwhelming vote against the ruling Golkar Party

Peter Symonds
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As of Friday morning, official figures in the counting of votes for the Indonesian elections showed a clear vote against the ruling Golkar Party and in favour of opposition parties headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, which are part of a loose alliance.

Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) headed the list with 38.5 percent of the vote, followed by Wahid's National Awakening Party (PKB) with 20 percent. Golkar had secured only 16 percent of the vote, the United Development Party (PPP) 9.2 percent and Rais' National Mandate Party (PAN) 6.5 percent. These results were based on 12 percent of the total vote.

Unofficial tallies show Golkar edging into second position as votes are counted in more conservative rural areas and in the outlying islands and provinces. Golkar claims to have 27 percent in its own count and, according to party chief Akbar Tanjung, it would end up with 30 percent.

Whatever the final outcome, the elections have been a rejection of Golkar and its military-backed regime headed by President B.J. Habibie. In the last elections in 1997 organised under Suharto, Golkar used its control of the state apparatus to ensure that it achieved its stated target of more than 70 percent of the vote. Only two opposition parties—the PPP and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI)—were permitted to stand and all candidates, speeches and campaigns were vetted by the state apparatus and the intelligence agencies.

In these elections most people cast their ballots for anti-Golkar parties. Even the PPP was compelled to try to distance itself from its legacy of abject subservience under the Suharto regime as the official Islamic party. It declared itself in favour of "reformasi" and pledged to oppose the selection of Golkar's candidate Habibie as the next president.

Even before the process is completed, the elections have been heralded by international observers, the media and foreign leaders as "fair" and "democratic". Australian Prime Minister John Howard claimed that the poll was "a real celebration of democracy, and New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Don McKinnon said the elections were "free, fair and peaceful". Former US president Jimmy Carter, who led a team of foreign observers during the poll, declared that democracy had come to Indonesia.

Local poll monitors have expressed their concern at such uncritical proclamations. Referring to Carter's statements, the University Rectors Network for a Fair Election (UNFREL) said it was too early for foreign observers to be breaking out the champagne. "We regret the statement made by Carter straight after he looked at a few polling stations in Jakarta. He shouldn't have said that because the votes are not all counted yet," UNFREL co-ordinator Todung Mulya Lubis said.

"UNFREL monitored 2,590 villages in 620 regencies, and discovered that violations occurred in 21 percent of those villages. Intimidation occurred in 7 percent of those villages; indelible ink was not actually indelible in 8 percent; and fake ballots were used in 18 percent," Lubis said. (Indelible ink was used to mark the fingers of those who had voted in order to ensure against multiple voting.)

An estimated 112 million or 96 percent of eligible voters went to the polls on June 7. But the counting and tallying of votes by the National Election Commission (KPU) is proceeding at a snail's pace and is itself becoming a political issue as political leaders and observers warn of the possibility of vote rigging.

According to an article on Friday in the *Kompas*

newspaper: "Reports from the Independent Monitoring Committee of the Election (KIPP) of Jakarta indicate that many vote countings changed in numbers on their way from the polling stations to the district committees and up to the provincial government."

The precarious character of the political situation was underscored when Abdurrahman Wahid warned that he would move to establish an emergency government if there was evidence of electoral interference. "I will take action to set up an emergency government if the KPU is being intervened by outside forces. I have reported this to armed forces commander Wiranto and Megawati," he said.

On Tuesday, the day after the elections, the Jakarta Stock Exchange reacted positively to the immediate apparent success of the poll by shooting up 12 percent in value. Similarly the Indonesian rupiah which last year collapsed to less than 20 percent of its value, rose against the US dollar by 6 percent. But the initial response by international finance capital quickly evaporated with share values falling by 3 percent on Thursday after a decline of 1.2 percent on Wednesday.

All of the major parties have pledged to implement the IMF austerity measures drawn up last year in return for a $US43 billion bailout. But sections of the ruling class both in Indonesia and internationally clearly favour a government headed by opposition leader Megawati in order push through the drastic restructuring measures required and to suppress unrest over declining living standards. The credit ratings agency Standard & Poors recently estimated that the cost of repairing Indonesia's debt burdened banking system to be $87 billion or 82 percent of the country's GDP.

A comment by foreign editor Greg Sheridan in Rupert Murdoch's the *Australian* newspaper warned: "The greatest danger now is that President B.J. Habibie and the ruling Golkar Party will try to steal the election from Megawati Sukarnoputri and her PDI-Struggle party". Any attempt by Habibie to manipulate the vote in the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR), due to choose the president and vice-president in November, would result in protests and social unrest. "Habibie should recognise that he has lost this election and leave office voluntarily, the sooner the better, to save Indonesia needless months of instability and possible violence," Sheridan wrote.

Having praised the election as an "enormous achievement," Sheridan unwittingly pointed to the highly undemocratic nature of the entire process. The next government will be formed by a president chosen by an MPR with 700 seats—only 462 are elected, the rest are military, state and provincial appointees. To achieve an absolute majority in the MPR, a party would have to win 76 percent of the elected seats—a near impossibility.

There will undoubtedly be a frenzied round of closed-door discussions in coming months, as parties, the military and the state apparatus wheel and deal to obtain a majority in the MPR. Already commentators are pointing to the possibility that Golkar, although rejected by the majority of voters, will use its entrenched position in the military and state bureaucracy, as well as bribes of various sorts, to woo newly elected parliamentarians to vote for its presidential candidate and cling onto power.

Megawati cannot even count on her allies—Rais and Wahid—with any degree of certainty. Both of them, like Megawati herself, had close ties under Suharto with different sections of the military and state apparatus. Wahid is notorious as a political manoeuvrer—at the last elections held under Suharto in 1997 he backed away from his previous alliance with Megawati to offer his support to one of Suharto's daughters. Rais was a key figure in the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) established in 1990 by Habibie at the behest of Suharto to widen the regime's base of support. Megawati has been cultivating her own close relations with sections of the military to secure their support for the November vote.

Most people have voted for the so-called reformers in the expectation that a government will be formed to extend democratic rights and improve living standards. But the outcome will be a government beholden to sections of the military, big business and the state bureaucracy. It will implement the demands of the IMF, leading to a further deterioration in the country's high levels of unemployment and poverty.

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