

Former generals dominate Indonesia's presidential election campaign

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Campaigning by the five candidates contesting the politically powerful post of president of the Indonesian Republic officially ended on Wednesday. Voting in the country's first-ever direct presidential election is due to take place on Monday.

An air of unreality marked the entire campaign. All the candidates share the same basic right-wing nationalist outlook and belong to the country's privileged ruling elite. Yet they attempted to present themselves as representatives of the common folk, disassociated themselves from any responsibility for the economic misery and rampant corruption that has blighted the lives of the vast majority of the population, and studiously said as little as possible about their past political records and future policies.

The electoral rules enacted in 2003 effectively prevented any challenge to the status quo. The legislature restricted the April 5 parliamentary elections to just 24 parties of the more than 140 that attempted to stand. Tickets for president and vice president were limited to those carefully vetted parties that obtained 3 percent of the seats, or 5 percent of the vote for the House of Representatives (DPR).

According to opinion polls, the leading presidential contender is the Democratic Party's Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a former general, who until March was the coordinating minister for political and security affairs. Various pollsters have put Yudhoyono's support as high as 48 percent with his closest rivals on just 11 percent, but the gap has narrowed over the past two weeks.

The Jakarta-based Institute for Social and Economic Research pegged Yudhoyono back to 35.8 percent with incumbent president Megawati Sukarnoputri on 17.5 percent. Former armed forces chief Wiranto, the candidate for the Golkar party—the Suharto dictatorship's political machine, was on 16.5 percent. Amien Rais of the National Mandate Party rated 13 percent, after making significant gains in the past fortnight. Current vice president Hamzah Haz, the United Development Party candidate, remains a distant last.

It appears increasingly unlikely that Yudhoyono will gain the necessary 50 percent to win in the first round. If he fails, a second round runoff will take place in September against Wiranto, Megawati or Rais. But none of the candidates has a solid base of support in a highly volatile electorate and the polls themselves are only rough indicators of popular sentiment. Most are compiled in the country's urban areas, while a majority of the country's 140 million voters live in rural regions.

The Yudhoyono camp has attempted to present its candidate as independent and honest. His campaign has been based on exploiting the widespread dissatisfaction with Megawati's failure to address the continuing fall in living standards. In the April 5 parliamentary poll, the vote for Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDP-I) plunged from 37.4 per cent in 1999 elections to just 18.5 percent.

Yudhoyono has attempted to distance himself from the Suharto dictatorship, which he loyally served for decades. His recently formed Democratic Party is presented as a new start and the retired senior general parades himself as a man of the people, crooning songs at his rallies and mingling with the crowd.

In reality, Yudhoyono was a key figure in both the Suharto junta and Megawati's administration. Like Wiranto, he is implicated in orchestrating the militia groups that attacked pro-independence supporters in East Timor in 1999. He was instrumental in maintaining Megawati's close relationship with the military and in initiating the brutal offensive against separatist guerrillas in Aceh last year. He only broke from Megawati this year as the elections were looming.

Yudhoyono's vice presidential running mate Jusuf Kalla was another senior Megawati minister who left the cabinet at the last minute. He considered running as Golkar's candidate but pulled out of the contest just 48 hours before its nominating conference to join Yudhoyono. He remains a Golkar member. Of all the current candidates, Kalla, a well-connected businessman, is the wealthiest.

Yudhoyono and Kalla have promised to reduce the poverty rate to 8.2 percent and almost double the country's per capita income by 2009. Neither has presented a coherent economic policy. Knowing full well that the next administration will come under immediate international pressure to implement austerity measures, they have kept their statements to vague references about boosting domestic investment.

Despite having nothing to offer the majority of the population except empty promises, Yudhoyono has headed the polls and generally attracted the largest audiences at rallies. The biggest of the campaign involved 70,000 Democratic Party supporters at Jakarta's Senayan stadium on June 27.

A glimpse of Yudhoyono's underlying contempt for democracy was revealed in comments by Democratic Party chairman Subur Budhisantoso cited in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on June 26. Budhisantoso criticised the limited democratic reforms that followed the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 as

“democracy without order... it’s relative anarchy”. He warned that protests could become violent and called for “a collectively controlled democracy”—comments that hark back to the autocratic “guided democracy” of President Sukarno and the blatant manipulation of elections under Suharto.

The ability of a former Suharto general and a Golkar businessman to head the field in the 2004 presidential elections is an indictment of all the political figures—Megawati, Rais and former president Abdurrahman Wahid—who postured as democratic reformers in 1998. Having stifled the mass movement that brought down Suharto, they all failed to guarantee genuine democratic rights and improved living standards for the mass of ordinary working people. As a result, they have opened the door for the elements of the Suharto junta to step back onto centre stage.

Megawati’s own campaign based on right-wing nationalist appeals and vague promises has nothing to distinguish it from Yudhoyono’s. Before the campaign officially began, she made a two-hour trip to Ambon during an outburst of communal violence to call for the crushing of all separatist movements. On May 31 she released an economic plan pledging jobs, services and improved infrastructure but gave no indication how the goals would be achieved or why her administration had done nothing to address poverty and unemployment.

As her campaign faltered, Megawati made a rather desperate appeal to popular sentiment by promising to put the 83-year-old Suharto on trial. For three years, however, her administration has done nothing to challenge the threadbare ploy of Suharto’s lawyers that he is too old and ill to stand trial for the crimes of his regime.

In what appeared to be another election gimmick, the attorney-general’s office announced an investigation into the Suharto regime’s attack on the offices of Megawati’s party in 1996. Five people were killed by military-organised thugs, provoking angry protests in Jakarta. Conveniently, any investigation would have to scrutinise the role of Yudhoyono, who was Suharto’s second in command in Jakarta at the time.

Megawati’s rallies have not attracted anywhere near the crowds in the 1999 election campaign. Her largest rally was 40,000 strong in the Senayan stadium on June 20. The *Jakarta Post* reported that in Bali less than half of an expected 50,000 turned up for the Megawati rally in the Tabanan regency, whereas, following Suharto’s fall in 1998, 500,000 had flocked to hear her in the Balinese capital of Denpasar.

There are some indications that Megawati has alienated not only the electorate but substantial sections of her own party. PDI-P officials told the *Straits Times* that she was not utilising the PDI-P to mobilise support. A friend of her husband Taufik Kiemas explained: “The PDI-P machinery is sleeping. She prefers to use NGOs and other grassroots organisations and not be affiliated too closely with the party.”

Wiranto’s campaign has also been marked by rifts inside Golkar. While sections of the party have attempted to distance themselves from the Suharto era, Wiranto maintains close relations with the circle of businessmen and generals closely associated with the former dictator and his family. At the Golkar convention held after the April 5 elections there was a bitter split between those

supporting Wiranto and those backing Golkar chairman Akbar Tanjung, regarded as more moderate.

In the final vote Wiranto won the nomination with 315 votes to Tanjung’s 227. An account of the convention on the *Asia Times* website makes it clear that Wiranto was anointed by the pro-Suharto clique. The article described divisions as being between Tanjung as a “vote for the new Golkar” and Wiranto as “a vote for the Golkar that served the strongman at the top”.

The divisions have persisted after the vote. As his campaign managers, Wiranto appointed two retired generals—Suaidi Marasabessy and Fachrul Razi—both known for their right-wing views and links to Islamic fundamentalist groups. In the course of the campaign, Wiranto openly complained about the half-hearted support of the Golkar leadership and the lack of assistance from party branches. Two of Golkar’s central committee members have been expelled for disloyalty.

Despite these internal splits and charges pending in East Timor, Wiranto has remained neck and neck in the polls with Megawati. He has appealed in particular to a certain nostalgia among layers of the population for the relative economic and political stability that existed under the dictatorship before the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Like the other candidates, however, he would do the bidding of the IMF and World Bank for further economic restructuring if he came to office.

The only other candidate who appears to have a chance of contesting the second round is Amien Rais. Significantly, his rise in the polls is associated with attempts to resurrect his credentials as a democrat. Rais visited the war-torn region of Aceh and appealed for peace. He was also the only candidate to condemn the recent decision to expel the Jakarta-based staff of the International Crisis Group, which has been critical of the role of the Indonesian military.

Like Wahid and Megawati, Rais had close associations with the Suharto junta and has over the past six years blocked demands for real democratic change. But the fact that he has raised the issue of democratic rights in the campaign, if only in a very limited way, demonstrates that there is a strong undercurrent of democratic sentiment among broad layers of voters. The chief political problem is that these carefully managed elections provide no avenue for expressing the aspirations of ordinary working people.

None of the candidates have any answers to the country’s continuing economic malaise or the deteriorating living standards of most people. About half of the population lives on \$US2 a day or less, and, of Indonesia’s 40 million people who are officially unemployed, two thirds are between the ages of 14 and 25. The prominence of the military in the presidential campaign is a sharp warning that the ruling class is once again preparing to use the most ruthless measures to suppress any opposition to these intolerable conditions.



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