

Suharto's political machine backs Megawati in Indonesian poll

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With the second round of the Indonesian presidential elections just a month away, the incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri last week signed a formal coalition agreement with Golkar, the United Development Party (PPP) and several smaller parties.

On paper at least, the deal should have clinched the presidency for Megawati against rival Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the September 20 run-off. In the first round, Yudhoyono won 33.6 percent of the vote as against 26.6 percent for Megawati. But if she could count on the 22.2 percent of people who voted for Golkar's candidate, Wiranto, and another 3.0 percent for the PPP's Hamzah Haz, she would have more than the 50 percent required to win.

The problem for Megawati is that these calculations are unlikely to have much value. The support for all the parties is unstable. The very fact that Yudhoyono is the frontrunner is a sharp sign of the volatility of the electorate and the hostility of voters to the establishment parties. The retired general was Megawati's senior security minister until March when he resigned, formed his own Democratic Party and announced his intention to stand for the presidency.

In fact, Megawati's deal with Golkar, the political instrument of the ousted Suharto dictatorship, could easily cost her votes. Her image as a "reformer" has already been all but destroyed by her close collaboration with the armed forces (TNI), firstly during the protracted impeachment of the previous president Abdurrahman Wahid in 2001, and then by her support for the military's repression in Aceh and Papua.

Megawati's economic policies have also made her highly unpopular. She has attempted to carry out the restructuring demands of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which have given her

limited praise for stabilising the currency and reducing the state budget. These measures, however, have not resulted in any significant economic growth and have fallen hardest on the poorest sections of society.

By relying on the support of Golkar, Megawati has further alienated voters who are looking for an alternative to the political establishment. To secure its support, she had to guarantee Golkar eight cabinet posts and reportedly paid the party around \$US20 million. She signed the deal with Golkar, PPP and the small Christian-based Prosperous Peace Party at a lavish ceremony last Thursday.



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