

# Ex-general wins Indonesian presidential election

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Retired general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won the second round of the Indonesian presidential election in September, defeating incumbent President Megawati Sukarnoputri in a landslide. While the official result will not be declared until October 5, Yudhoyono, also known as “SYB”, had received 60.9 percent of the more than 109 million votes counted as of last weekend, as against 39.1 percent for Megawati.

The result was even more significant considering that Yudhoyono only launched his bid for the presidency in March when he quit as coordinating security and political affairs minister in Megawati’s cabinet. He had no independent political base and had to form his own Democratic Party from scratch. By contrast, Megawati was not only the incumbent but also secured the support of Golkar, the political arm of the former Suharto dictatorship, and several other parties.

Yudhoyono’s victory was not so much a sign of positive support for the former general, but of hostility toward Megawati and the political establishment. Six years after the Asian financial crisis, the Indonesian economy has still not recovered. Ordinary working people have been hit by rising prices and high unemployment: the official jobless rate is nearly 10 percent and an estimated 35 million people are classified as underemployed.

Megawati, the “reformer” and “democrat”, was widely viewed as responsible for the continuing slide in living standards. Typical of many, Missusita, a storeholder at a Jakarta market, told the *Washington Post*: “I think Megawati’s presidency has failed, so why should I keep supporting her? I see a lot of unemployment, and there’s no solution. She’s made a lot of promises, but they are only promises.”

In comments to the *Australian Financial Review*, Meri, a 41-year-old foodstall owner, declared that Megawati had “betrayed the people”. “Everything is so expensive now we cannot afford it. I believe that SYB will change that.” Her neighbour Titi, a 35-year-old housewife, said that their lives had become more difficult. “At least SYB has promised us a better future with cheap education and cheaper rice.”

Yudhoyono cashed in on this dissatisfaction by parading an “independent”—a man of the people who would fix their problems. His pledges, however, are just as vague as Megawati’s and, while he has not spelled out his program, he is committed to continuing the same program of economic restructuring as the previous regime. The Jakarta stock exchange responded with a modest 1.1 percent rise—mainly because his victory had been regarded as a

virtual certainty.

Remy Sjahdeini, a prominent banking lawyer in Jakarta, told the *New York Times*: “The business community is happy. They expect that there will be a great change in the climate.” Corporate leaders have been desperate to boost lagging foreign investment, which fell by one third to \$3.3 billion for the seven months to the end of July, compared to the same period last year. Demands include not only legal and tax reforms but further savage cuts to living standards, including to wage rates and fuel subsidies.

The media has attempted to paint Yudhoyono as a “moderate” and a “reformer”. But the former general is above all a product of the Suharto dictatorship which he loyally served from 1973, when he was commissioned, to its collapse in 1998. He served several tours of duty in East Timor during the military’s decades-long repression of the island’s independence movement and was chief of staff in the Jakarta region in 1996 during the army’s crackdown on Megawati and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI).

In 1998, Yudhoyono held the powerful post of head of the military’s head of political and social affairs and was no doubt involved in the efforts to crush the rising anti-Suharto movement. Like many others, he rapidly switched sides when he saw the writing on the wall and proclaimed his “reform” credentials following Suharto’s resignation. But he was deeply implicated in the military-organised militia violence in East Timor in 1999 and played the central role in launching last year’s bloody offensive against GAM separatists in Aceh last year.

As coordinating security minister under Megawati, Yudhoyono was directly responsible for the flagrant breaches of democratic rights in Aceh and West Papua. A Human Rights Watch report released yesterday found that hundreds of prisoners had been systematically tortured in Aceh to obtain forced confessions, which formed the basis for summary conviction in court. Yudhoyono will undoubtedly deal just as ruthlessly with any opposition or threat to his administration.

Just six years after a mass movement of students, workers and the middle class brought down the Suharto dictatorship, one of Suharto’s former generals will be installed as the new president on October 20. The political responsibility for this situation rests with the so-called reformers—above all Megawati—who shut down the protests and blocked popular demands for genuine democratic rights.

The opposition of the three “reformasi” figures—Megawati, Abdurrahman Wahid of the National Awakening Party (PKB) and

Amien Rais of the National Mandate Party (PAN)—to Suharto was always very limited. All three had close ties to sections of the military and state apparatus, which, following the fall of Suharto, they sought to preserve. While they had their criticisms of the junta, Megawati, Wahid and Rais were far more fearful that the protest movement would slip out of their control.

A key turning point came in November 1998 when huge protests besieged the parliament building in Jakarta demanding extensive reforms. Far from championing these demands, Megawati, Wahid and Rais cut a deal with the Suharto-era legislators to allow limited changes and an election in 1999. The agreement effectively gave the green light to the military and gangs of armed thugs to crack down on the protest, resulting in the deaths of at least seven demonstrators.

Megawati and her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) won the 1999 elections but failed to achieve a parliamentary majority. Concerned that Megawati faced pressure to make concessions to her supporters among the poor, Golkar and the military combined with other parties to ensure that Wahid was installed as president. Wahid timidly mooted democratic reforms, at one point even floating the idea of lifting the 30-year ban on the Indonesian Communist Party. He also made token concessions to separatist sentiment in Papua and Aceh, and in doing so fell foul of the military and its allies.

Wahid was finally removed from office in July 2001 through a protracted impeachment process on trumped-up corruption charges. The military played the crucial role in Wahid's ousting—refusing to obey his order to impose a state of national emergency and thus allowing the parliament to push through the final impeachment vote. Megawati, who had been the vice-president, was installed as president, now with the backing of the military and Golkar.

From the outset, Megawati was beholden to the military. She reversed Wahid's policies on Aceh and Papua, giving the go-head for stepped up repression. After the Bali terrorist bombings of October 2002, under the banner of the fight against terrorism, Megawati reintroduced Suharto-style laws providing for detention without trial. Last year, she imposed a state of emergency in Aceh, allowing for a full-scale invasion involving more than 50,000 troops and paramilitary police.

The reformers have played the crucial role in rehabilitating the military, which was widely despised for its three decades of brutal rule. While various cosmetic changes have been made, the armed forces (TNI) with its territorial structures reaching down into every town and village, remains intact. Neither Suharto nor any of his generals have been found guilty for their crimes. The failure of Wahid and Megawati to implement democratic rights and improve living standards has only emboldened the military to take a more assertive stance.

The election of Yudhoyono is being widely hailed inside Indonesia and internationally as “step toward democracy”. The US State Department declared that the vote “set a strong example for the region and emerging democracies everywhere.” But while the poll was less restrictively managed than the “elections” that were held under Suharto, the vote was nevertheless carefully stage-managed.

Only 24 of the 140 parties that sought to stand in the April parliamentary election were permitted to do so. Any party advocating socialism was automatically ruled out. Only those parties or coalitions that registered 5 percent of the vote or secured 3 percent of seats were permitted to stand a candidate for the presidency. As a result, the first round in July was limited to five right-wing candidates, all of whom are part of the political establishment. Yudhoyono and Megawati went into the second round with 33.57 and 26.6 percent of the vote respectively.

Now that the election is over, Yudhoyono's populist posturing will rapidly vanish as he is compelled to press ahead with economic measures that will further erode living standards. He is also likely to seek closer political and military relations with Washington. He already has close ties to the US military, having twice travelled to the US to undergo military training and study for a master's degree in business management.

While the Bush administration did not overtly back Yudhoyono, there is no doubt where its sympathies lay. The *New York Times* commented: “The United States did not publicly express its preference in the election, but Washington officials made it clear that they believed that the general had a better grasp of how to control Jemaah Islamiyah, the radical Islamic group held responsible” for the terrorist attacks in Indonesia.

The Bush administration has for some time been seeking to circumvent a Congressional ban on ties between the US and Indonesian militaries. The “war on terrorism” has proven a convenient device to build close intelligence and other forms of cooperation. Under Megawati, while Indonesia did not commit troops to either Iraq or Afghanistan, there was no official criticism of these illegal invasions.

Under Yudhoyono, the Indonesian military is likely to resume the three-decade long relationship with the US, cemented after the bloody 1965-66 coup. Such a move will only heighten anti-US resentment which has already been fuelled by the heavy-handed IMF intervention in Indonesia during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Far from inaugurating a period of stability in Indonesia, the installation of Yudhoyono as president is likely to lead to further political unrest as hopes for a better economic future are rapidly dashed, further inroads are made into democratic rights and opposition grows to US aggression.



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