

Indonesia's elections: a stage-managed affair

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Indonesia's 170 million voters are due to vote in national parliamentary elections on April 9 that will set the stage for presidential elections in July. While the local and international media write effusively about the flourishing of democracy in the world's largest Muslim nation, the election is dominated by many of the same right-wing parties and political figures that operated under the Suharto dictatorship prior to 1998.

While the election is not the foregone conclusion that polls were under Suharto, onerous restrictions continue to apply. With the exception of those contesting in Aceh province, parties must meet stringent requirements to demonstrate broad support across the country. Parties defined as Marxist are banned.

For the presidential election, the rules have been further tightened. A candidate must have the endorsement of 20 percent of parliamentarians elected in this week's election or a party that gained at least 25 percent of the popular vote. The requirement ensures that there will be at most four candidates—all from the political establishment.

In all, 38 parties have qualified to stand for the parliamentary elections. Voting is first-past-the post and to win any seats a party must gain 2.5 percent of the national vote. Another six parties are running in Aceh where a peace deal in 2005 that ended a long running separatist insurgency allows for parties that are based only in that province.

The election in Aceh is taking place under a heavy security presence, which is to be boosted by an additional 1,000 soldiers and 260 national police. A string of shootings and grenade attacks have taken place this year, including on the offices of Partai Aceh, the political vehicle of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Three parties dominate the national stage. The Democratic Party formed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono just prior to the 2004 elections is in the lead. A poll by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) last month put support for the party at 26.6 percent, up from 24.3 percent in its previous survey. At the 2004 election, it won just over 7 percent of the vote.

The Democratic Party is heavily reliant on the present popularity of the president, which, according to the same poll, stands at 52.5 percent compared to just 18.5 percent for Megawati Sukarnoputri, his main rival. Yudhoyono, a Suharto era general, was

Sukarnoputri's chief security minister before quitting her administration in 2004 and running in the country's first direct presidential election.

Yudhoyono has significant backing in ruling circles in Indonesia and internationally as a result of his free market agenda. He came to power in 2004 declaring that his administration would be "pro-growth, pro-poor and pro-employment" and announced a series of measures designed to boost foreign investment and assist businesses. A gathering of foreign chambers of commerce and industry in Jakarta last month gave Yudhoyono a public vote of confidence, promising to continue investing.

The Indonesian economy has been hit by the global recession but not to the same extent as some other Asian countries, which are more heavily dependent on exports. Indonesian exports in value terms declined by 36 percent year-on-year in January and the central bank is predicting an overall fall of 25 to 28 percent for 2009. Economic growth is falling from 6.1 percent in 2008 to an expected official figure of around 4 percent.

Yudhoyono has been able to make limited concessions to voters. Falling oil prices have allowed the government to reduce fuel prices. Previously, cutbacks to state subsidies had led to higher energy prices and growing popular discontent. The administration has also given a pay rise of more than one third to government employees to offset rising prices and promised a \$6.1 billion stimulus package, mostly in the form of tax cuts.

While he attempts to maintain a democratic façade, Yudhoyono retains intimate ties to the Indonesian military (TNI). At the time of Suharto's fall, Yudhoyono was in charge of the military's political and social affairs section and was thus centrally involved in propping up the junta. After 1998, he, like other generals, suddenly became a proponent of *reformasi*. As coordinating security minister under Megawati, he was responsible for ruthless crackdowns on separatist movements in Aceh and Papua.

The US backed Yudhoyono as means of renewing ties between the American and Indonesian militaries under the guise of the bogus "war on terrorism". Shortly after he was installed as president, Washington overturned a ban on the training of Indonesian officers, imposed after the military's massacre of pro-independence protesters in East Timor in 1991. While a peace deal was struck in Aceh in 2005, the military has continued its abuses in West Papua under Yudhoyono.

In large measure, Yudhoyono's ratings in opinion polls are by default—many voters simply see no alternative. Megawati and her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) were deeply discredited by her period in office from 2001 to 2004. She and her immediate predecessor—Abdurrahman Wahid—were widely blamed for the continuing high unemployment and deteriorating living standards that followed the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which devastated the Indonesian economy.

While Megawati and Wahid were promoted as “reformers” after Suharto's fall, their chief role was to bring the *reformasi* movement under control and to ensure that the state apparatus, including the military, remained intact. The British-based *Economist* magazine aptly described their function this week: “Blink, and *reformasi* looks less like the revolution it seemed to herald and more like a tactical manoeuvre to help the old Jakarta elite to cling to power.”

Far from *reformasi* producing any major reforms, the political party of the Suharto regime—Golkar—and generals such as Yudhoyono were able to repackage themselves. Suharto and his close cronies were not convicted for any of their many crimes. Although Golkar's support has dropped from 21.6 percent in 2004 to 13.7 percent, it remains the third major party contesting this week's election.

The three main parties—Democratic, PDI-P and Golkar—have no fundamental differences. While claiming to be “pro-poor” and concerned about the plight of working people, all have backed the pro-business agenda implemented over the past five years by Yudhoyono. Golkar leader Jusuf Kalla has been Yudhoyono's vice president. Other Golkar figures have been prominent in the cabinet. While nominally in opposition, the PDI-P has raised few objections to government policy.

Not surprisingly, the election campaign has been characterised by handouts, cheap glitz and empty promises. The *Economist* described “a carnival of democratic competition: flag-waving, horn-honking processions; television-advertising blitzes; mass rallies with a few speeches, gifts of free T-shirts, 20,000 rupiah notes (\$US2) and, most important, singing and dancing.” It went on to declare that “the absence of political debate... is also dispiriting”.

Commentary on the election has been focussed mainly on speculation as to who will emerge as the main contenders in the presidential poll. Yudhoyono is yet to decide who will be his vice-presidential running mate after Kalla declared his intention to stand for the presidency himself. All the other parties have begun manoeuvring behind the scenes to sound out possible alliances to meet the strict requirements for a presidential nomination.

Possible allies include the Islamist-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) which won more than 7 percent of the vote in 2004 and a large number of seats in Jakarta. The party was initiated by

former student activists and attracted significant support among young middle class Muslims alienated by the major parties. While it attracted more than 100,000 to a rally in Jakarta last week, its support has stagnated as its elected members at the national and provincial levels are increasingly viewed as part of the political elite.

Two other former Suharto-era generals have formed their own political parties. Prabowo Subianto, the divorced husband of one of Suharto's daughters, established the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) last year. His billionaire brother Hashim Djojohadikusumo has funded a lavish advertising campaign and handouts to voters. Prabowo was head of the notorious Kopassus special forces that were responsible for some of the regime's worst crimes, including arbitrary arrests and the killing of political opponents.

Wiranto, who was head of the armed forces at the time of Suharto's fall, has formed the Peoples Conscience Party. He was Golkar's presidential candidate in 2004 but was eliminated in the first round of voting. Wiranto was in charge of the military when it backed violent attacks by various pro-Indonesian militias against independence supporters in East Timor in 1999.

One indication of widespread popular disaffection is the rising number of undecided voters and those who intend not to vote. Known in Indonesia as *golput*—literally white paper, the rate of voter abstention rose from just 5 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in 2004. Pollster Indo Barometer estimates the *golput* rate could be as high as 40 percent in this week's election.

Whatever the outcome of the parliamentary elections, the presidential poll in July is far from clear. As the full impact of the global economic crisis results in job losses, rising unemployment and poverty, the widespread alienation could soon turn to anger, upsetting all of the behind-the-scenes machinations currently underway.



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