

Suharto-era figures dominate Indonesian presidential poll

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Following the finalisation of the results in Indonesia's parliamentary election in April, three tickets have emerged for the presidential poll on July 8. All three teams were part of the Suharto-era political establishment and have played leading roles in subsequent administrations that have abused democratic rights and deepened social inequality. Each of the tickets has a former general from the Suharto junta.

Incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who is the clear frontrunner at this stage, has chosen Bank Indonesia Governor Boediono as his running mate. Current Vice President Jusuf Kalla, chairman of the Suharto-era political machine Golkar, has picked former armed forces (TNI) commander General Wiranto. Former President Megawati Sukarnoputri will run with the ex-commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces Prabowo Subianto.

A survey by the Strategic Centre for Development and Policy Review in late April put Yudhoyono strongly in the lead with the support of 87.5 percent of those polled, against 5.87 percent for Megawati and 1.67 percent for Kalla. Yudhoyono's Democratic Party won 20.85 percent of the national vote and 148 seats in the 560-seat Peoples Representative Council (DRP)—up three-fold from 2004. As a result, Yudhoyono met the restrictive requirements for a presidential candidate without having to form a coalition with other parties, placing him in a strong position to choose his vice-presidential running mate.

Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, served in Megawati's administration as the top security minister until he quit in early 2004 to run against her for the presidency. As minister in charge of the military and security forces, he oversaw the brutal counter-insurgency operations against the separatist movements in Aceh and Papua.

Yudhoyono's choice of running mate was clearly aimed at securing the backing of business. Boediono served three times as economics minister and headed the country's central bank. In announcing the ticket, Yudhoyono foreshadowed a central plank in his election campaign, promising to return Indonesia to

a growth rate of 7 percent, up from 4.4 percent in the first quarter of 2009.

Yudhoyono had been under pressure from the Islamic-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) to choose its leader as his vice-presidential candidate. Closely involved with Yudhoyono's first administration, the PKS was the only other party to increase its vote in the parliamentary poll, up marginally from 7.34 percent to 7.88 percent and 59 seats. It appears that the PKS gave its reluctant approval to the choice of Boediono.

The support of the PKS and the other Islamist parties—the United Development Party (PPP), the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the National Mandate Party (PAN)—will be important in the presidential poll and also for the president to exercise control over the new parliament. The PPP, PKB and PAN are each headed by figures who functioned as part of the limited legal opposition that was allowed under the Suharto junta. They won 39, 26 and 42 seats respectively.

The once all-powerful Golkar slumped to just 14.45 percent in the parliamentary election and gained 108 seats—a distant second to the Democratic Party. Kalla's alignment with Wiranto and his newly-formed Hanura party has the hallmarks of a marriage of necessity after Yudhoyono made it clear he was going to dump Kalla and Golkar from his presidential ticket. Golkar has been deeply divided over its presidential candidate, with several contenders jostling for the position. It needed the support of another party because its own results did not meet the 20 percent threshold required to stand in the presidential poll.

Hanura gained 15 seats and was the last of the 38 parties to qualify for parliamentary representation. As armed forces chief, Wiranto was responsible for the military-backed campaign of intimidation and violence in East Timor in 1999 against pro-independence supporters. The UN East Timor Special Crimes Unit indicted Wiranto in 2003 for crimes against humanity but the charges have not been acted upon. Wiranto campaigned in the parliamentary election on the basis of economic nationalist policies, including promises to create jobs, boost domestic food

production, slash imports and cut “illegal” immigrant labour.

It is the Megawati-Prabowo ticket, however, that sheds most light on the political processes in Jakarta over the past 11 years. Superficially, Megawati and Prabowo were on opposite sides of the barricades during the dying days of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998. Megawati, the daughter of Indonesia’s first president Sukarno, was pushed to the fore as a symbol of the broad popular demands for *reformasi*. Prabowo, head of Kopassus, was in charge of suppressing growing protests and is notorious for the kidnappings and disappearances of student activists.

Far from leading the revolt against Suharto, however, the role of Megawati and other reformers, such as the PKB’s Abdurrahman Wahid and PAN’s Amien Rais, was to contain the growing mass movement of students and working people. While having criticisms of the junta, all three had close ties to sections of the military and state apparatus, which, following the fall of Suharto, they did their utmost to preserve.

The crucial turning point came in November 1998, when large protests besieged the parliament building in Jakarta, demanding extensive reforms. Far from championing these demands, Megawati, Rais and Wahid cut a deal with the Suharto-era legislators for limited reforms and an election in 1999. The agreement gave the go ahead to the military and gangs of armed thugs to crack down on the protesters, killing at least seven.

Megawati and her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) won the 1999 election but failed to achieve a parliamentary majority. Golkar and the military backed Wahid as a safer option to stabilise the country, but rapidly came into conflict with him when his administration began to make limited democratic reforms and token concessions to separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua.

Wahid was ousted from office in July 2001 on trumped-up corruption charges and Megawati was installed with the backing of the military. Megawati reversed Wahid’s policies on Aceh and West Papua and gave the go-ahead in 2003 for a brutal military offensive in Aceh against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Yudhoyono, who as her top security minister oversaw the operation, went on to challenge her in the presidential poll the following year.

All the so-called reformers, Megawati in particular, played the crucial role in rehabilitating the military, which was widely detested as a result of the brutal Suharto dictatorship. Neither Suharto nor any of his generals were prosecuted for their crimes. Moreover, the failure of Megawati and Wahid to establish basic democratic rights and improve living standards only emboldened former generals like Yudhoyono, Wiranto

and Prabowo to become more assertive.

Megawati’s alliance with Prabowo is the logical outcome of these processes. Prabowo’s support enables Megawati to stand as a presidential candidate. In return, Megawati is helping to promote the right-wing populist Prabowo and his Gerindra party, which won 26 seats after a massive advertising campaign financed by Prabowo’s billionaire brother Hashim Djojohadikusimo.

Prabowo’s deputy in Gerindra is Muchdi Purwoprandjono, the former deputy head of the notorious State Intelligence Agency (BIN). Muchdi was acquitted of charges over the 2004 murder of the well-known civil rights activist Munir, despite considerable evidence against him.

In opposition to Yudhoyono’s pro-market agenda, Megawati and Prabowo have focussed their campaign on economic nationalism. On Sunday, for instance, Prabowo declared that Indonesia should follow Japan in restricting foreign retailers such as Wal-Mart. “We just have to remember that if we shop at foreign superstores, our farmers and small traders will cry,” he said. Far from defending working people, this protectionist program represents the interests of weaker sections of the Indonesian business vulnerable to foreign competition.

After more than a decade of broken promises, there is no widespread popular enthusiasm for any of the candidates. One sign of this resentment is the low vote in April’s parliamentary poll. Of 171 million eligible voters, 49.67 million did not vote at all and another 17.49 million cast invalid ballots—in total, well over a third, or more than 67 million voters. Under the Suharto junta, “golput,” or the casting of blank voting papers, was one of the few ways of registering a protest against the regime.

Yudhoyono is relying on his economic record to win him a second term as president. So far the impact of the global recession on the Indonesian economy has not been as great as other Asian countries that are more heavily dependent on exports. However, as the international crisis deepens and hits Indonesia, the underlying political and social tensions will inevitably come to the surface whichever candidate wins the presidency.



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