

Indonesians go to the polls amid growing social tensions

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Up to 187 million Indonesians, including 67 million young, first-time voters, will vote today to elect the national parliament. The election is the precursor to presidential elections on July 9. Under Indonesia's anti-democratic election laws, a presidential candidate must be supported by a party or parties that won at least 20 percent of the popular vote, or 25 percent of seats, in the parliamentary election.

The elections mark the end of 10 years of rule by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the first directly elected national leader since the collapse of the Suharto military dictatorship in 1998. Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, won the 2004 and 2009 presidential elections and is ineligible to stand again.

For the ruling class, Yudhoyono's presidency brought a measure of political stability following the upheavals surrounding Suharto's resignation. The immediate post-Suharto presidencies of B. J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri were mired in conflicts within the political establishment.

Yudhoyono provided a democratic façade for a military and police-state apparatus that remained largely intact following Suharto's departure. His decade in office was buoyed by an economy that continued to grow by around 6 percent annually amid the global financial crisis that began in 2008.

Yudhoyono's democratic credentials were always a sham. In 2004, he declared that bringing to justice the murderers of well-known human rights activist Munir Said Thalib was "the test of our history." In the event, the main suspect, State Intelligence Agency chief Muchdi Purwoprandjono, had his trial aborted when witnesses failed to turn up and the security forces rallied around him.

The persistence of the influence of the military and security forces under Yudhoyono is seen in the Papuan

provinces, where he continued the hardline approach to separatist tendencies implemented when he served as Megawati's security minister. The US-based Human Rights Watch reported in January that the provinces remain "closed off from the rest of the world ... fostering impunity among the military forces" that operate there, committing one atrocity after another.

Whoever replaces Yudhoyono will have to contend with a sharply slowing economy and rising social discontent. Falling growth rates in China and stagnation in Europe and the US have begun to bite.

Bank Indonesia, the central bank, has forecast growth this year in the range 5.5 to 5.9 percent. In 2013, gross domestic product (GDP) grew 5.8 percent, the lowest rate since 2009. A large current account deficit, reaching a high of \$US9.8 billion, or 4.4 percent of GDP, in the second quarter of last year, threatens the currency. The country is vulnerable to further "tapering" of the US Federal Reserve Board's "quantitative easing" policy—a tapering that is undermining the flows of investment into countries such as Indonesia.

As in other "emerging economies," massive credit transfers from the West made possible the high growth rates in Indonesia. International capital is now demanding major structural reforms. These include cuts to the remaining \$18.3 billion set aside in the 2014 Indonesian budget for fuel subsidies, in order to finance infrastructure spending.

The gulf between rich and poor is widening. Currently 41 percent of the country lives below or just above the miserably low official poverty line of well under \$US2 a day. As the economy has expanded since 2009, social inequality has increased. As measured by the Gini ratio, social inequality moved up the scale from 0.35 in 2009 to 0.41 in 2011.

Support for Yudhoyono's Democrat Party (PD) has collapsed. He won 61 percent in the 2009 presidential vote and the PD scored the highest share of votes and seats in the 560-seat People's Representative Council (DPR)—20.85 percent and 150 respectively. Current opinion polls show support for the DP in the 5.4 and 4.3 percent range, making a PD presidential candidate virtually impossible.

Growing social discontent has been compounded by corruption scandals. In his first term, Yudhoyono posed as fighter against corruption but changed tack when his PD came under scrutiny. The PD's principal financial backer, tycoon Siti Hartati, was jailed for bribery over an economic project. The party treasurer, Muhammad Nazarruddin, was implicated for rigging construction contracts for the 2011 South East Asian Games, the proceeds from which he said flowed into PD coffers.

The 12 parties permitted to stand candidates are scrambling to win enough seats in the DPR to have a say in the list of probably three candidates for president. Under the anti-democratic and restrictive elections law, 36 parties were excluded from today's poll.

The front runners in the polls are Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) at 21.8 percent; Golkar, the party of the Suharto dictatorship, at 18.1 percent; Hanura, led by former armed forces commander Wiranto, with 11.3 percent; and Gerindra, led by ex-special forces commander Prabowo Subianto, at 11.1 percent. The traditional Islamic parties are struggling to maintain support.

Leading the polls for the presidency is the PDI-P's Joko "Jokowi" Widodo with around 40 percent followed a distant second by Prabowo. Widodo, who is Jakarta governor, is being promoted as a "man of the people" in a desperate bid to deflect popular hostility toward the entire political establishment.

A *Financial Times* blog on March 25 outlined Widodo's career: "A popular small-town mayor, [he] was elevated by (Jusuf) Kalla (of Golkar), Prabowo, his brother Hashim, and Megawati to run for the governorship of Jakarta. He did not rise through the party ranks but instead parachuted in from above, with enormous financial backing from major oligarchies. Combined with an enthusiastic pump-up from the major media, which are overwhelmingly owned by a dozen oligarchs, Jokowi rocketed from complete

anonymity into the public consciousness."

Some 16 years after the fall of Suharto, the promotion of Widodo from obscurity to potential president highlights the lack of any significant base of support for the political establishment in Jakarta. All candidates are attempting to dupe a distrustful electoral by stirring up nationalism and making false promises, while at the same time signalling to big business their willingness to implement its austerity agenda.



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