

Indonesian presidential election campaign gets underway

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The July 9 presidential election in Indonesia will be contested by just two candidates—Jakarta governor Joko “Jokowi” Widodo of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Prabowo Subianto, businessman, ex-lieutenant general and founder of the Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra). Incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is unable to stand for a third term.

The limited number of candidates is a product of the country’s anti-democratic electoral laws enacted after the fall of the US-backed Suharto dictatorship in 1998. To stand for the presidency, a candidate must have the support of a party or parties that secured 25 percent of the vote or 20 percent of the seats in the April 9 parliamentary elections.

None of the parliamentary parties reached the benchmark outright. In the subsequent wheeling and dealing, the parties all lined up behind either Widodo or Prabowo. Golkar, the political instrument of the Suharto junta, is divided. Senior Golkar figure Jusuf Kalla, who was Yudhoyono’s vice president in his first term, is Widodo’s vice presidential running mate. As a party, however, Golkar has formally backed Prabowo.

The final line-up was determined after Golkar’s chairman and nominated presidential candidate Aburizal Bakrie withdrew from the race and declared he would support Widodo on May 13. However, negotiations between Bakrie and PDI-P head, former President Megawati Sukarnoputri, broke down. At the last minute before nominations closed, Golkar shifted its support to Prabowo on May 19.

As part of Golkar’s deal with Prabowo, Bakrie was promised a new cabinet position, that of Menteri Utama or first minister. Prabowo’s vice-presidential running mate is Yudhoyono’s former economics minister Hatta Rajas, chairman of the National Mandate Party (PAN),

an Islamic party.

The agreement has produced deep ruptures. Golkar advisory council head Akbar Tandjung complained on May 21 that Golkar members were breaking ranks to support Widodo and Kalla. The *Jakarta Post* reported on May 23 that “scores of young Golkar politicians” were publicly declaring their support for Widodo.

More senior figures are also involved, including Indra J. Piliang, head of Golkar’s research and development agency, and central executive board member Agus Gumiwang Poempida. According to the *Jakarta Post*, the defectors were unaffected by threats of expulsion. Piliang called on the “party elites” to resign, claiming Bakrie broke the party’s rules in supporting Prabowo.

The sharp divisions in Golkar reflect deep concerns in the Jakarta establishment over the widespread alienation and disaffection in the electorate of around 180 million. Since the fall of Suharto, Golkar has sought to distance itself from the junta’s worst abuses, which are epitomised by Prabowo.

Prabowo, a former son-in-law of Suharto and ex commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces, was implicated in the regime’s crimes, including the kidnapping and torture of students in 1998 and other human rights abuses in East Timor, West Papua and Jakarta. He was forced out of the army in 1998 and lived for a time in Jordan. He is still banned from entering the US over human rights issues.

Prabowo’s executive board is dominated by retired generals as well as the patrons of the three Muslim-based parties in his coalition. His program includes the demand to “ensure the purity of religions recognised by the state”, which foreshadows a stepping up of attacks on the country’s Muslim Shia minority and Christian groups.

The Widodo-Kalla team is just as much a part of the

political establishment formed during the Suharto era. Widodo, who remains ahead in the opinion polls, is a front-man for powerful political forces. He was plucked out of obscurity in Solo and promoted as a “man of the people,” unconnected with the corruption and repression of the Suharto period. As the PDI-P candidate for Jakarta governor, he also had the backing of both Kalla and Prabowo.

Megawati heads the advisory committee for the Widodo-Kalla campaign. The right-wing character of the ticket is clear from its connections to the military/intelligence apparatus that remained in place after Suharto’s fall. Three members of the campaign committee are: former National Intelligence Agency (BIN) director A.M. Hendropriyono, former BIN deputy director As’ad Said Ali and former chairman of the Military Intelligence Agency (BAIS) Ian Santoso.

Hendropriyono was notorious during the Suharto era for his involvement as an army general in the 1989 massacre of 100 people in the Sumatran village of Lampung. He was head of BIN in 2004 when the agency was implicated in the murder of human rights activist Munir Said Thalib who died an agonising death after drinking orange juice laced with arsenic on a flight from Jakarta to Amsterdam.

Air Garuda pilot and BIN operative Pollycarpus Budihari Priyato was found guilty of administering the poison and sentenced to 20 years jail. Former Garuda president Indra Setiawan received one year’s imprisonment as an accomplice. But charges against former BIN deputy head Muchdi Purwoprandjono were dismissed after prosecution witnesses failed to appeal or retracted their statements.

Both presidential candidates are making empty pro-poor promises while signalling their support to big business and foreign investors of a new round of pro-market restructuring. The Indonesian economy is cooling significantly amid the slowdown in China and slump throughout much of the global economy. The growth rate for the first quarter was 5.2 percent, the slowest since 2009.

PDI-P secretary general Tjahjo Kumolo told the media on May 19: “We need to make a balance. When we talk about the economy we’re not only talking about poor people but we also need to hear from business people so that decisions won’t hurt poor people or businessmen.”

The party’s policies, submitted to the Election Commission for vetting, outline increased infrastructure spending to be paid for by further reductions in the fuel subsidy, which will drive up transport prices and inflation more generally and hit the poorest layers of working people hardest. The infrastructure plans include 2,000 kilometres of roads, 10 new airports, 10 ports and 10 new industrial estates.

Prabowo also posture as a defender of the poor and laces his rhetoric with heavy doses of economic nationalism. He has promised to create two million new jobs if he wins office. At the same time, his campaign has been quick to point out it is not hostile to foreign capital. Prabowo, Hatta and Bakrie all have significant business interests. When he stood for the presidency in 2009, Prabowo was the wealthiest candidate in the race.



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