

Financial elites and US envoy back Widodo in Indonesian presidential election

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Amid predictions of a tight finish, sections of the corporate elite in Indonesia and internationally, as well as the US ambassador in Jakarta, have intervened to back Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, one of the two candidates in Indonesia’s presidential election this Wednesday.

With opinion polls pointing to falling popular support for Widodo—who was earlier touted to be a likely overwhelming winner—intensive efforts are being made to prevent a victory by his opponent, Prabowo Subianto.

Both candidates represent wealthy business interests with close connections to the military generals who have continued to dominate the country’s ruling elite since the fall of General Suharto’s junta in 1998. Widodo, however, is regarded as more pro-free market and more likely to align himself with Washington in its escalating confrontation with China.

Widodo, nominated by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) of former President Megawati Sukarnoputri, was plucked out of obscurity by key figures in the ruling elite to become the mayor of Solo, then governor of Jakarta. Despite his carefully cultivated cleanskin image, his links to the military-intelligence apparatus are evidenced by the presence of three former intelligence chiefs on his campaign committee.

Prabowo, a former general, son-in-law of Suharto and commander of the notorious Kopassus elite special forces, is a wealthy business figure and founder of the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra). His corporate interests epitomise the business empires assembled by military figures. His Nasantara group controls 27 companies, involved in oil, natural gas, coal, palm oil and fisheries.

Washington’s preference for Widodo was made plain when the US ambassador to Indonesia Robert Blake

sent an e-mail to the *Wall Street Journal*. On June 22, the newspaper published an article based on the email and citing Blake’s call for Indonesia to investigate alleged human rights abuses by Prabowo.

The Obama administration’s intervention was ostensibly triggered by unpublished army documents, leaked from the Widodo campaign, that detailed Prabowo’s role in the kidnapping and torture of student protestors in the dying days of the Suharto dictatorship. Blake disingenuously told the newspaper that Washington was not taking sides in the presidential race but his action followed poll results showing Prabowo gaining ground.

Although the *Wall Street Journal* said it was “unusual for a US ambassador to discuss another nation’s candidate for president during the closing weeks of a campaign,” the US government has a long history of intervening in Indonesia, including its orchestration of Suharto’s military coup of 1965-66, in which up to a million people were killed.

Washington’s concerns today are that Prabowo is too nakedly associated with the brutal record of the Suharto era—which the US backed for three decades—plus his nationalist rhetoric against Indonesia being tied to the interests of the United States.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the outgoing president, sought to balance between the US and China, Indonesia’s biggest trading partner, but there are fears that Prabowo will be more resistant to US pressure to line up behind Washington’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia to militarily and strategically encircle Beijing.

The foreign policy platform of Prabowo’s Gerindra party rejects any “sole superpower” status for the US, hails China’s “proven” economic, military and nuclear strength, and brands the US invasion of Iraq a “failure” that has left the US “more isolated” and weak in

international relations.

Washington's geo-strategic agenda overlaps with the interests of the financial elites. For the first time in its 31-year history, the *Jakarta Post*, Indonesia's biggest circulation English-language media outlet, endorsed a candidate. It urged a vote for Widodo, warning that the election represented a critical juncture for the nation, "precarious in its consequences."

The July 4 *Jakarta Post* editorial denounced Prabowo for affiliating with "hard-line Islamic groups" and "religious thugs." Referring to the ex-general's record of military abuses under Suharto, the newspaper declared: "A man who has admitted to abducting rights activists—be it carrying out orders or of his own volition—has no place at the helm of the world's third-largest democracy."

The editorial insisted that Prabowo was "embedded in a New Order-style of transactional politics that betrays the spirit of reformasi." The "New Order" was Suharto's military-backed regime of "crony capitalism," resting on privileged business empires, which was toppled in 1998 after losing Washington's backing.

Likewise, the London-based *Economist*, a voice of global finance capital, unequivocally endorsed Widodo. After mentioning Prabowo's "tainted record on human rights," its July 5 article denounced him as a "master of money politics" who "bashes foreign investors." It insisted that Widodo was "less of an economic nationalist than his opponent; foreign investors would cheer a Jokowi victory. He understands the need to cut ruinous fuel subsidies and to boost education."

The reference to fuel subsidies, on which Indonesia's millions of working people depend, reveals the anti-working class austerity agenda that will be pursued, regardless of which candidate prevails, in order to satisfy the dictates of investors and the global financial markets.

In its election eve commentary, the *Wall Street Journal* warned of slowing national output, falling foreign direct investment and a worsening current account trade deficit. "For investors, the clearest signal of change will be how quickly a new president moves to rein in fuel subsidies costing billions of dollars," it emphasised. "Tackling the subsidies has been politically unpopular and has led to nationwide protests in the past."

The election offers no alternative to the Indonesian masses. Both camps are backed by business and media tycoons, Suharto-era chiefs and right-wing Muslim parties. Anti-democratic laws restricted participation in April's parliamentary election to just 12 well-financed ruling class parties and further restricted eligibility for presidential candidates.

Widodo's coalition encompasses the Muslim-based National Awakening Party, the National Democrat Party led by media tycoon Surya Paloh and the Hanura Party led by ex-army commander Wiranto who, himself tainted by loyal service to Suharto, has been releasing the dirt on Prabowo.

Prabowo's lineup includes the Islamist parties of National Mandate Party (PAN), the United Development Party and the Crescent Star Party, as well as Golkar, the political instrument of the Suharto dictatorship.

Both Widodo and Prabowo have resorted to nationalist rhetoric to divert attention away from faltering economic growth, revealing the impact of the global downturn, while feigning commitments to protect people's "welfare." Promises to improve the lot of the masses fly in the face of the fact that half the population lives at or below the UN's miserably low poverty line of \$US2 a day.



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