

Indonesian presidential election produces disputed result

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Both candidates in Indonesia's presidential elections last Wednesday are claiming victory after "quick count" voter surveys revealed a close result, raising the possibility of weeks of political uncertainty, court challenges and social unrest.

The official result will not be announced by the General Elections Commission (KPU) until July 22. Reportedly, up to 75 percent of the country's 186 million voters cast ballots in 470,000 polling booths across the archipelago.

Most polling organisations, including the usually accurate Kompas, Indonesian Survey Circle and the Saiful Mudjani Research and Consulting and the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies, gave the election to Jakarta governor and Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) candidate Joko "Jokowi" Widodo.

According to their ballot samples, Widodo received about 52 percent of the vote, compared to 48 percent for Prabowo Subianto, the wealthy former Suharto-era general who heads the Greater Indonesian Movement Party (Gerindra).

Soon after the polls closed, PDI-P leader and former President Megawati Sukarnoputri declared victory for Widodo. Indonesian prices jumped 2.5 percent and the rupiah climbed against the US dollar, reflecting the financial elite's preference for Widodo.

Prabowo, however, referred to polls by the Centre of Policy and Strategic Development and the National Survey Institution, which gave him just over 50 percent of the vote. Prabowo declared that he had "received a mandate from the people of Indonesia." Prabowo's campaign manager, the billionaire businessman Hashim Djojohadikusumo, told the media that polls suggesting Widodo had won were "a hijacking of democracy."

Initial indications are that the Widodo ticket, which

he shares with vice presidential candidate Jusuf Kalla, gained most votes in Jakarta and in the eastern parts of Indonesia, including in Papua and Bali, while Prabowo and his running mate Hatta Rajas were ahead in the populous regions of West Sumatra and West Java.

Such is the potential for unrest that on Wednesday night outgoing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono held separate meetings with Widodo and Prabowo, urging them to keep their supporters under control. Yudhoyono subsequently called on both sides "to show restraint, not to mobilise masses onto the streets to celebrate victory until the verdict of the Election Commission."

Yudhoyono's ability to act as an arbiter, however, has been diminished by his Democrat Party officials joining the Prabowo presidential campaign on July 1, a break with the president's expressed policy of remaining neutral during the campaign.

Even if the KPU declares Widodo the victor, the result can be challenged in the Constitutional Court if the winning margin is below 5 percent. The court has until August 24 to issue a ruling. The new president is due to be inaugurated on October 20, following the October 1 swearing in of the new House of Representatives (DPR), which was elected in April.

The nine-judge court was established by Yudhoyono but was soon embroiled in a scandal typical of the corruption that has continued to taint the political and legal establishment since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998. The court's former chief judge, Akil Mochtar, was jailed for life on June 30 for graft and money-laundering, calling into question the court's credibility during a political crisis.

The social tensions underlying the election process are indicated by the preparations of the security forces. Over 250,000 police remain mobilised, supported by

30,000 military personnel. Army General Budiman warned that the security forces were on high alert in densely-populated central Java.

On Thursday, Jakarta police chief Major General Dwi Priyatno declared that the police “will not hesitate to take firm action.” He said the security forces were working with both sides “to anticipate everything that could cause friction among people and lead to massive rash acts.”

Widodo and Prabowo have called on their supporters to be vigilant for electoral fraud. The “quick counts” used by the polling agencies are based on surveys of local polling stations, where vote tallying is public. But as the ballots are counted in the district and regional centres, and finally in Jakarta, the process goes behind closed doors, raising the possibility of bribes and vote rigging.

Both camps are the product of anti-democratic election laws that effectively restricted the April election to 12 well financed right-wing parties backed by different sections of Indonesia’s ruling elite.

Widodo’s coalition is composed of the PDI-P, the Muslim-based National Awakening Party, the National Democrat Party and the Hanura Party. Prabowo’s bloc consists of Gerindra, Golkar—the political instrument of the Suharto regime—the Democrat Party, the Muslim-based Hatta’s National Mandate Party, the United Development Party, the Crescent Star Party and the Prosperous Justice Party.

Supposedly symbolising hope and change, Widodo’s claimed victory has drawn media comparisons with Barack Obama’s election in 2008. Widodo told voters yesterday: “Today, a new history has been made: a new chapter for Indonesia ... this is a victory for the Indonesian people.”

Widodo no more represents the masses, or a move away from old political dynasties, than Obama. In fact, he is being backed by old faces from the Suharto regime, such as former army commander Wiranto, and key figures in the business establishment. They include Liem Sieo Liong, who was Indonesia’s richest person under Suharto.

According to Bank Central Asia chief economist David Samual, Widodo’s cabinet will retain Finance Minister Chatib Basri, which “would be a reassuring move for the markets.”

Prabowo, Suharto’s former son-in-law, has been

more rabid in his nationalist and protectionist rhetoric. Washington also regards him as less predictable in his support for the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” against China. The US intervened aggressively in the final days of the election campaign, when US ambassador Robert Blake called for an investigation of Prabowo’s human rights abuses under Suharto.

Asked to comment yesterday on the unofficial polls, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said: “I think it’s in everyone’s interests to wait until the official announcement.” Her comment was an unstated reference to the Prabowo camp’s claim that its opponents were attempting to “hijack” democracy.

Whoever emerges as president will face a slowing economy—as falling demand from China, Europe and the US hits Indonesia—and escalating calls from finance capital for massive infrastructure spending to be funded by a social assault on the Indonesian masses.

International investment agencies have declared that the first task of the new government is to slash fuel subsidies, a measure that will impact heaviest on the Indonesian working class and the poor.



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