

Jakarta election points to social unrest in Indonesia

John Roberts
22 February 2017

Preliminary results of last week's election for the governor of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital province, indicate that the election will go to a second round on April 19. None of the three candidates gained more than the 50 percent vote required to win.

Incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, with an estimated 42.87 percent of votes, will contest the runoff against Anies Baswedan with 39.76. The third candidate, Agus Harmurti Yudhoyono, at 17.37, conceded defeat.

Basuki faced a vicious chauvinist campaign by right-wing Islamic organisations, attacking him on the basis of his Christian and ethnic Chinese profile. This was a means of exploiting and channelling the rising discontent fuelled by widening social inequality produced by the "free market" program that he shares with his predecessor as governor, President Joko Widodo.

This campaign, encouraged by his two opponents, failed to dislodge Basuki, but is continuing. His political opponents aim not only to remove him, but to weaken the Widodo administration in the run up to the 2019 presidential and national parliamentary elections.

The Islamists claim that, as a Christian, Basuki is unfit to hold the important Jakarta post in Muslim-majority Indonesia. These groups, like the prominent Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), have well-known ties with rival factions of the ruling elite. Behind the religious bigotry and racism lie definite class interests.

The Islamist groups hounded Basuki into a trial on trumped-up charges of "blasphemy" under reactionary pro-clerical laws. The trial is still ongoing. A conviction could see him jailed, even if he wins on April 19. His running mate, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) figure Djarot Saiful Hidayat, would replace him.

Demonstrations held in Jakarta as part of this anti-Basuki campaign on November 4 and December 2 attracted hundreds of thousands. The anti-Basuki groups were able to capitalise on the mass discontent of some of the poorest sections of the population with all the political parties of the ruling elite.

Basuki is supported by a pro-business coalition comprising not only Widodo's party, the PDI-P, led by ex-President Megawati Sukarnoputri. It also includes Golkar, the political instrument of the former Suharto dictatorship, as well as NasDem, the party of media mogul Surya Palof, and Hanura, the party of Suharto-era general Wiranto, who is Widodo's security minister.

The Basuki campaign appealed to sections of big business and more affluent middle class layers that have benefitted from the Widodo coalition's implementation of the pro-market restructuring demanded by international finance.

Basuki pushed large projects in Jakarta, including the commencement of work on mass rapid transit (MRT) and light transit lines, and associated flood mitigation programs, after decades of delays. Widodo has closely associated himself with the MRT.

Part of this program was the eviction over two years of 16,000 families from waterfront neighbourhoods, stripping them of their livelihoods as street vendors and fishermen. Basuki's administration treated this as collateral damage, a response exploited by the opposition.

Vital to maintaining Basuki's electoral base has been the role of Megawati and the PDI-P. Despite the PDI-P's anti-working class record while in office, it has retained the support of sections of the working class and urban poor, by posturing as a secular party of social reform.

The PDI-P initially hesitated about endorsing Basuki, in part because of the evictions and the impact on its Jakarta electoral base. Even after endorsing him, Megawati played no role in the campaign until the size of the November and December demonstrations set off alarm bells in the Widodo camp and the state apparatus. Megawati hardly said a public word about the anti-Basuki agitation until it developed as a proxy campaign against Widodo's government.

On January 10, at a PDI-P meeting, Megawati denounced the Islamist campaign and its political allies for fomenting "recent social, religious and ethnic tensions" and threatening national unity.

A state crackdown began. FPI leader Rizieq Syihab and other leaders were placed under investigation on various charges. The Jakarta police chief, backed by the area military commander, banned a rally called by the FPI and other Islamist groups for the Saturday before the election and threatened arrests.

Second place-getter Anies serves as the front man for Prabowo Subianto, who contested the 2014 presidential election against Widodo. Anies has the support of Prabowo's Gerindra party and the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). This campaign was closely identified with the Islamist attacks on Basuki. At the same time, well aware of the social discontent in Jakarta, it pushed jobs as an issue, advocated price controls on basic commodities, and demanded clean water availability and an end to land reclamation and evictions.

Leaders of the FPI and the two largest Muslim organisations, Nahdlatu Ulama and Muhammadiyah, called for a vote for the third place-getter Agus. A former army officer, and the son of Widodo's predecessor as president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, he had the support of a coalition of Yudhoyono's Democratic Party and the three Muslim-based parties.

While the election was widely portrayed in the media as a religious battle, the fact that Basuki was not eliminated in the first round indicates the limits of clerical influence. Far more telling is that nearly 20 years after the collapse of the 1965–1998 Suharto dictatorship, social tensions are sharpening.

While the economy has grown more than fivefold since 1998, 80 percent of the archipelago's 250 million people are worse off, according to World Bank statistics. Today, 1 percent of the population controls

half of all property and financial assets, while almost 100 million people live below, or just above, the official poverty line.

Fuelling the political turmoil are differences in the capitalist elite over economic policy and the uncertainties produced by Donald Trump's election as US president. Widodo's governing coalition is associated with the restructuring demanded by international investors and sections of big business. In 2014, Widodo's incoming government slashed fuel subsidies, provoking hostility among working-class people and the most impoverished layers.

The more nationalist and protectionist wings of the ruling class include the Prabowo and Yudhoyono factions. The former President Yudhoyono introduced a 2009 law to force mineral exporters, including the US Papua-based Freeport-McMoRan, to build smelters to undertake more refining prior to export. Widodo, however, has made concessions to the big exporters.

When Anies emerged as the second candidate, Prabowo proclaimed it was a defeat for "those who want to prove that money can colonise all Indonesian people." This is a reference to an influx of ethnic Chinese capital, of which Basuki is a symbol. Widodo has courted foreign investment, which has seen China become the third largest supplier of direct foreign investment after Singapore and Japan.

As part of this policy, Widodo has met Chinese President Xi Jinping five times in the past two years. There are concerns in sections of the Indonesian elite that the Trump administration's aggressive "America First" program and threats of trade war and military actions against China could produce dire consequences for Indonesia and the rest of Southeast Asia.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact