

Three establishment candidates line up for Indonesian presidential election

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The campaign began last month for Indonesia's presidential and general elections due to be held on February 14 next year. Due to the country's highly restrictive electoral system, just three presidential candidates and their vice-presidential running mates will face off in the first round. All three are conservative figures of the Indonesian political establishment, defenders of capitalism and, despite their populist electoral rhetoric, innately hostile to the interests of working people. After serving two five-year terms, the current president, Joko Widodo, is ineligible to stand.

The anti-democratic electoral laws ensure that only a handful of people can hope to stand as presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Each pair of candidates must be able to demonstrate that they have the support of political parties holding at least 20 percent of the seats in the national parliament or People's Representative Council (DPR), or 25 percent of the total votes in the previous election. The requirement effectively restricts the maximum number of candidates to three, possibly four.

Moreover, the political parties represented in the DPR are themselves subject to restrictions. The threshold for a party to gain DPR seats is currently 4 percent of the national vote—a benchmark that only nine parties succeeded in reaching at the 2019 election. Regionally based parties that might poll strongly in a particular area are virtually excluded from the national parliament.

This anti-democratic system, set up in the wake of the fall of the blood-soaked Suharto dictatorship in 1998, has been a major obstacle to the emergence of new political parties, thus maintaining the monopoly of those political parties that were permitted to legally function under Suharto. He came to power in the

1965-66 CIA-backed coup that slaughtered up to a million workers, peasants and communist party members. Any socialist, communist or even left-leaning political parties or candidates face prosecution under Suharto's 1966 law banning communism that has been maintained by subsequent administrations.

While the fall of Suharto was accompanied by profuse promises of democratic reform, the state apparatus of the dictatorship remains largely intact. That is epitomised by the presidential candidate who is currently leading in the polls—Prabowo Subianto. A former army lieutenant general, Prabowo served as a commander in the notorious Kopassus special forces and was centrally implicated in the brutal operations against the East Timorese independence movement. At the time of the mass anti-Suharto protests in 1998, he was head of the Army Strategic Reserve Command or Kostrad, and was involved in the kidnapping and torture of student leaders.

Far from being reviled, put on trial and jailed, Prabowo has been allowed keep his substantial business empire and strut the political stage as leader of the right-wing nationalist Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra). He has contested the presidency in two previous elections, 2014 and 2019, in which he ran against the candidate of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Joko Widodo. On both occasions, Prabowo disputed the result. In 2019, his refusal to concede led to riots that caused eight deaths. After posturing as a reluctant candidate, he eventually "bowed" to Gerindra's insistence that he accept their nomination.

Widodo, who was elected in 2014, marketed himself as a small businessman from the lower classes sympathetic to the needs of working people. In reality, Widodo as governor of Jakarta, had powerful backers

who saw him as the vehicle necessary to impose drastic pro-market reforms as president. His slashing of oil price subsidies provoked widespread protests. He also presided over the COVID-19 pandemic that infected more than 6 million people and killed at least 161,921 people—a figure that is undoubtedly an underestimate.

In 2019, Widodo appointed his rival for the presidency, Prabowo, as defence minister. In this position, Prabowo set about expanding Indonesia's military, explicitly aimed against Chinese influence, and acquiring weapons and military equipment from the United States. While nominally neutral in the upcoming elections, Widodo is effectively supporting Prabowo whose vice-presidential running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, is Widodo's son.

Prabowo is notorious for his rabid economic nationalism and anti-Chinese chauvinism, and has criticized Widodo for being too accommodating to Chinese businesses and workers. Widodo's tacit backing for Prabowo, despite these apparent disagreements, makes clear that the former general is the favoured candidate of the political establishment and appears to have lifted his electoral prospects.

It is significant that substantial sections of the Indonesian ruling class are backing a former Suharto-era general with a history of brutal repression. Millions have taken to the streets in Indonesia in opposition to Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza, amid rising internal social tensions over deteriorating living standards. In September 2022, large protests took place over fuel prices rises involving clashes with police. The next president, whoever it is, will have to ram through unpopular economic measures. The turn in ruling circles to Prabowo is an ominous warning of the measures that will be adopted to crush any opposition.

Ganjar Pranowo, the official candidate of the PDI-P, has been the Governor of Central Java since 2013 and a member of the DPR since 2004. Like Widodo before him, he is attempting to promote himself as a man who will defend working people. Ganjar has associated himself with limited attempts to introduce free basic education and improve public infrastructure during his role as governor. Earlier polls showed him as the most likely victor in the 2024 presidential election, but Prabowo, no doubt with a considerable boost from Widodo, is now well in front. Indonesian polls, however, are very unreliable.

Despite his populist posturing, Ganjar is committed to the defence of Indonesian capitalism and the necessity of maintaining its economic competitiveness by suppressing wages and boosting incentives for foreign investors. Amid the escalating US-led war drive against China, countries and politicians throughout the region and internationally are under considerable pressure to align with Washington. Ganjar has evinced an anti-China stance, saying that countries other than China are welcome to invest in Indonesia's development.

Anies Baswedan is the third presidential candidate. He is running as an independent but with the endorsement of the "Coalition of Change for Unity", comprised of NasDem (which Anies founded with others in 2010), PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), and the Democratic Party. He was Governor of Jakarta from 2017 to 2022, then became the Minister of Education and Culture in Widodo's government. He was also the official spokesperson for Widodo's presidential campaign in 2014.

Anies, while intimately connected to Widodo and the political establishment, is using his status as an "independent" and posturing as an opponent of corruption. In the first public debate yesterday, he highlighted the fact that a controversial court decision had allowed Widodo's son, who is only 36 years old, to flout the rule requiring presidential and vice-presidential candidates to be at least 40. Many regulations have been bent according to the interests of those in power," Anies said. Like the other candidates, Anies also appears to be orienting away from China and towards the US as well as pushing for a greater role for Indonesia on the world stage.

With months to go before polling, electoral fortunes can change, but whoever becomes the next president will continue the anti-working class policies of the current Widodo administration.



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