

Suharto-era general poised to take Indonesian presidency

Peter Symonds
14 February 2024

A quarter century after the fall of the bloody US-backed Indonesian dictatorship, ex-general Prabowo Subianto, son-in-law to the former dictator Suharto, is poised to take the country's powerful presidency. That Prabowo, who is responsible for numerous atrocities, could stand in Wednesday's election and is not behind bars, is an indictment of the entire political establishment and the "democracy" established after Suharto's fall in 1998.

While the official election results will not be announced until March 20, the "quick count" by various polling agencies puts Prabowo at 57-59 percent of the vote, with more than 80 percent of the vote counted in the polling booths sampled. The "quick count," based on a sample of polling stations across Indonesia, has proven to be relatively accurate in the past four presidential polls. To avoid a second round run-off, Prabowo has to win more than 50 percent of the vote and achieve 20 percent across each of the country's provinces.

The two other candidates were former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan and former Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo. The same unofficial results indicated that Anies received about 25 percent of the vote and Ganjar less than 20 percent. While Prabowo has already claimed victory, neither of the other two candidates has conceded defeat amid accusations of electoral fraud.

The anti-democratic framework of the presidential election ensures that at most four candidates can stand and that all are connected to the political establishment in Jakarta. Each presidential/vice-presidential pair must demonstrate that they have the support of political parties holding at least 20 percent of the seats in the national parliament, or 25 percent of the total votes in the previous election.

Only parties that win at least 4 percent of the national vote are eligible for parliamentary seats. Any socialist, communist or even left-leaning political parties or candidates face prosecution under Suharto's 1966 law banning communism, which has been kept on the books by all subsequent administrations.

Ex-general Prabowo, now a wealthy businessman, ran a slick and well-funded campaign to absurdly repackage himself as cuddly grandfather who loves his dog and promises to help the poor and rule for the whole nation. In reality, he is a right-wing political nationalist with connections to the Islamist extremists. He will quickly junk his election promises, protect the interests of the wealthy business elite and not hesitate to repress any opposition.

Prabowo was born into the Jakarta establishment. His father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, served as economy minister and minister for research and technology to the dictator Suharto, who had come to power in the 1965-66 CIA-backed military coup, in which up to a million members of the Indonesian Communist Party, workers and peasants were slaughtered.

Prabowo graduated from the Indonesian Military Academy in 1970 and served mainly in the notorious Kopassus special forces that were responsible for the bloody repression of political opposition to the dictatorship. One of his first deployments was to East Timor shortly after the Indonesian invasion in 1975. He was assigned to capture the first East Timorese prime minister, Nicolau dos Reis Lobato, whom he tracked down and fatally shot in December 1978.

Prabowo is known to have carried out further atrocities in East Timor in the 1980s and 1990s as the regime sought to crush an armed pro-independence movement. He carried out similar brutal actions in West Papua against the Free Papua movement.

In March 1998, as the Asian financial crisis destabilised the Suharto dictatorship, Prabowo was appointed to head the army's 27,000 strong Army Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad). Amid emerging anti-Suharto protests, he was responsible for kidnapping and torturing at least 22 activists, of whom 13 remain missing, presumed dead. Prabowo was dishonorably discharged after he had risen to the rank of lieutenant-general, but was never charged for his crimes.

Prabowo's ability to avoid trial and make several bids for the presidency depended on the duplicity and treachery of the various bourgeois parties and politicians that loudly proclaimed their commitment to democratic reforms but left the state apparatus, including the military, largely intact.

The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the first Indonesian President Sukarno, played the central role in Prabowo's political resuscitation. He stood as her vice-presidential running mate in the 2009 national elections, but the pair lost to another former Suharto-era general, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Prabowo stood against the current president, Joko Widodo, the official PDIP candidate, in the 2014 and 2019 elections but lost in the run-offs on both occasions. In 2019, Prabowo claimed that he had won, accused Widodo of electoral fraud and whipped up violent right-wing demonstrations that threatened to destabilise the country. He finally accepted the result, and was rewarded by Widodo with his appointment to the powerful post of defence minister.

Moreover, Widodo's backing for Prabowo in the current election was instrumental in boosting his popularity. Early in the campaign, Prabowo was trailing in the polls behind the official candidate of the PDIP, Ganjar Pranowo, until the announcement that Widodo's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, would be Prabowo's vice-presidential running mate.

Gibran, just 36, was not eligible to be vice-president, as the constitution sets a minimum age of 40. Yet the Constitutional Court made an exception in Gibran's case, with Widodo's brother-in-law casting the deciding vote. Widodo brushed off accusations of nepotism and all but openly campaigned for Prabowo, ignoring constitutional restrictions on presidential involvement in elections.

Widodo's backing for Prabowo, along with his tacit acceptance by much of the country's ruling elite, stems from the growing concerns in ruling circles of potential instability and the need for a strongman to crush opposition. In response to growing global economic uncertainty, Widodo unerringly took action to defend the interests of big business and the financial elite at the expense of the democratic rights and social position of working people.

Like its counterparts internationally, the Widodo administration bailed out corporations and banks during the COVID-19 pandemic, then let the virus rip through the country by lifting basic health measures at the cost of at least 160,000 deaths. The government also provoked widespread opposition among workers by enacting its Omnibus Law, supposedly to create jobs but in reality to slash wages and conditions including job protections. Prabowo has pledged to continue Widodo's policies.

Amid the aggressive US confrontation with China, Prabowo is likely to strengthen relations with Washington. He has pledged to boost Indonesia's military spending and has been critical of China's claims over waters close to Indonesia's Natuna islands. For years Prabowo was banned from entering the US as a result of his record of atrocities. The Trump administration, however, ignored the ban, invited him to Washington and gave him a visa—a policy that the Biden administration will almost certainly follow as it seeks to consolidate anti-China alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

While the "quick count" appears to give Prabowo a first round win, the election outcome is by no means certain. Indonesian elections are notorious for ballot rigging, vote buying and other corrupt practices that call into question not only the "quick count" but the final official result. Under conditions of mounting social tensions, the ex-general's "victory" may well be challenged not only by the other contenders, but also by popular protests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact