



IDSS COMMENTARIES (64/2004)

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GOLKAR: YUDHOYONO'S TRANSFORMATION

From Weak to Strong Government

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23 December 2004

INDONESIA'S new president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, has just demonstrated that while he may be new in his job, he is a political leader not to be trifled with. Under siege from a hostile parliament controlled by Golkar and its allies since he assumed power in October, Dr Yudhoyono has been facing the prospect of leading a government that has little support from the legislature.

But rather than go through the next five years in weakness and uncertainty, President Yudhoyono, or better known as SBY, and his vice-president Jusuf Kalla, hatched a daring plot: They would launch an offensive to break the primary source of opposition to the administration by contesting the chairmanship of Golkar. The strategic goal was to take over the Golkar leadership and turn the party around from an opponent into an ally. This would be done by deploying Jusuf Kalla, who remains an influential senior Golkar member despite having been nominated for the vice-presidency by SBY's Democrat Party (PD).

At the Golkar party elections in Bali on December 19, the strategy was put to devastating effect. In an early morning vote, the incumbent chairman, Akbar Tanjung, was defeated by Mr Kalla with a margin that was too wide -- 323 votes to 156 -- to be disputed. One key factor in Mr Kalla's favour were party leaders who were also governors and heads of regencies. Still deeply influenced by the culture of the ruling class, they were averse to voting against the country's vice-president.

With that dramatic victory, the Yudhoyono phase of the post-Suharto era entered a more stable and, perhaps, dynamic period. One immediate effect of Mr Kalla's emergence as Golkar leader will be to bring the much-needed stability to the new administration. Prior to this, the opposition had been so strong that it has virtually brought the SBY-JK administration's reform agenda to a standstill. Golkar has been instrumental in blocking the forward march of the new administration through a formidable coalition with the second largest party, Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), and a handful of smaller parties.

On paper, the *Koalisi Kebangsaan*, or National Coalition, as it was known, vowed to play the role of a constructive balancer to the SBY-JK administration. But in reality, it was also an obstructionist oppositionist bloc because collectively, it controlled at least 275 of the 550 seats in the DPR, and had shown its capacity to bring the government to its knees.

To counter this Golkar-led bloc, the SBY-JK administration formed its own *Koalisi Kerakyatan* or People's Coalition comprising SBY's PD, the National Mandate Party (PAN), the Peace and Prosperity Party (PKS), the United Development Party (PPP) and an alliance of smaller parties called the Democratic Pioneer Star faction (BPD). But this pro-SBY coalition could however marshal only 233 seats – still short to outvote the National Coalition.

The SBY-JK government had a foretaste of its future problems when the polarisation of the DPR caused an immediate legislative impasse over the appointment of the armed forces chief. In one of her final acts as president, Mr Megawati recommended to the DPR the retirement of the current commander General Endriartono Sutarto and his replacement with General Ryamizard Ryacudu. Yudhoyono however withdrew that recommendation as soon as he was sworn in on October 20, but the DPR took that as an affront to its authority and opposed the retraction. The fracas was completely unnecessary but it exposed the inherent tension between the executive and legislative branches of government.

The SBY-JK administration had two choices to break out of the worrisome gridlock. It could either accept its fate as a weak government and muddle along until its term is over, risking an erosion in popularity. Or it could swing over members of the National Coalition to its side. The SBY team however chose the more long-term solution of an offensive strategy of capturing the Golkar leadership.

Mr Akbar knew that he would be a target. He has been blamed for many of Golkar's ills since the party's candidate, retired General Wiranto, failed to win the presidential election. "SBY does not have enough support in parliament. He needs another party to strengthen the support for his government. So he needs to topple me and take over the chairmanship," Mr Akbar told IDSS over the telephone. In other words, the capture of the Golkar chairmanship was as much an act of desperation as it was a brilliant strategy on the part of the SBY-JK administration.

With Golkar now in the hands of pro-SBY leaders, it is only logical to expect Mr Kalla to pull the party out of the National Coalition. The whole idea was to weaken, if not dismantle the opposition alliance. The balance of power in the DPR will now shift in favour of the People's Coalition, transforming it from a minority alliance into a majority juggernaut supportive of the administration. And with that, SBY will control both the executive as well as the legislative arms of government – a feat which was enjoyed only by Suharto when he was in power.

The capture of Golkar's leadership is therefore one of the most significant developments in Indonesian politics since the fall of Suharto. There has been no precedent in which a smaller party had engineered a leadership coup of sorts in a larger party to remove hostility to itself. The successful take-over of Golkar means that SBY has also transformed himself from a weak leader into a strong one, with Golkar as one of his new pillars of strength. With that, Golkar will return to its Suharto-era status as a ruling group. The question is whether the other parties will be happy with a rubber-stamping parliament as was the case during Suharto's New Order. This issue may cause more shifts and realignments in the power configuration in the DPR.

But with the DPR tamed, the SBY-JK administration will now be able to focus on delivering its electoral promises of fighting corruption, creating jobs and countering terrorism. This more stable phase will be good for Indonesia as the country needs a long period of calmness

to improve the economy and the welfare of the people. If this enhances his position and popularity, SBY will have a better chance of winning a second term in 2009.

In the wake of his victory, some analysts have raised doubts whether Mr Kalla will stick with SBY in 2009 -- or become his new rival for the presidency, given his strong position as chairman of the largest political party. This issue may have been overblown as the new Golkar chief is unlikely to have such an ambition, given his Sulawesi background. Although there has been one non-Javanese president before when B.J Habibie succeeded Suharto in 1998, Mr Kalla holds the view that the presidency is best left in the hands of a popular Javanese leader like SBY. So, unless there is a mindset change amongst the people, and Mr Kalla abandons his policy of being a loyal deputy, the SBY-JK partnership will remain unbeatable come the 2009 presidential election - when many old players would have gone from the scene.

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