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Indonesia's 2014 Elections: Will Suharto's Enduring Legacy Last?

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Indonesia today is energised by democratic politics and electoral competition while enjoying high economic growth. Will the 2014 elections throw up a new generation of leaders or proceed against the backdrop of the continuing legacy of Suharto?

Commentary

INDONESIAN POLITICS today is characterised by the noisy and intense exchanges arising from democratic politics and electoral competition. A politically vibrant society has emerged, with younger Indonesians insisting that their country represents a model for the Southeast Asian region and is worthy of an influential role in global affairs.

Could the 2014 elections prove them right? A comparative appraisal of politics during the New Order era under Suharto and now would be instructive.

New assertiveness

Indonesia is already at the forefront of regional efforts to promote human rights, free elections, and doctrines of humanitarian intervention. Influential Indonesian policy makers and commentators have also called for an end to the long-standing Southeast Asian obsession with state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. They assert that Indonesia should play a global role as the world's sixteenth largest economy with annual growth rates of between 5 to 6 per cent. It is also the state with the largest Muslim population and a strategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Yet just 15 years ago Indonesia was ruled by an all-powerful leader with more modest ambitions for his country. Former General Suharto seized power after an attempted coup by the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) in October 1965. Over 30 years, Suharto built a highly centralised administration, focused on economic development. He also restored Indonesia's relationships with the West and Indonesia's regional neighbours. However, these achievements came at the cost of massive corruption, a top-down palace-centred structure and the depoliticisation of Indonesian society. These factors undermined his regime when it faced the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98.

Only now is a re-assessment of Suharto's rule beginning to take place. However, emotions are still raw and it

will be difficult for Suharto's supporters to restore him to the pantheon of Indonesian heroes. Efforts to commemorate his rule are immediately opposed by significant sections of Indonesian civil society. Those air-brushed out of Indonesian history during the Suharto years, such as left-wing activists of the 1960s, now receive an enthusiastic hearing from a younger generation. Positive references to Suharto are seen as implicit approval of his authoritarian rule. Suharto's legacy remains highly contested.

Suharto is remembered as a dictator whose family obtained immense wealth through their access to his office while he ruled with an iron fist. However, it is forgotten that his preference for simplicity in his lifestyle at his modest home in Jalan Cendana in Central Jakarta, shaped the approach of his administration. Ostentatious displays of wealth at weddings were discouraged. Government officials and ministers were instructed not to hold such celebrations at hotels. While Suharto presided over major events and made formal speeches, he was most at home talking informally to farmers and fishermen.

Because of his interest in agricultural issues, Indonesia attained self-sufficiency in rice production. Indonesia avoided falling into the trap of neglecting its agricultural sector. This is quite unlike Nigeria, Angola and Venezuela, which focussed instead on an oil and mineral resources bonanza.

An enduring legacy: mini Suhartos?

A surprising feature of Indonesia today is the continuing presence of so many leading personalities from Suharto's New Order. Prominent names from the past such as former Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, Golkar chairman Aburizal Bakrie and former minister Akbar Tanjung still hog the headlines. Golkar, a creation of the Suharto era, is still the best organised political grouping. It struggles to elect its candidate as president, but continues to exercise influence at the provincial and local level. Although the military has been shorn of its New Order dual role in civil and military affairs, it is still largely autonomous and free of civilian oversight. Military personnel at the local level continue to ride roughshod over civilian authorities and act with impunity, including attacking those who challenge their authority.

A casual review of Indonesia's most wealthy business families reveals many familiar names from the Suharto era. The pattern of mutually beneficial relationships between the politically powerful and successful business interests continues. Rent-seeking behaviour and protectionist instincts still plague Indonesia, undermining the country's attractiveness as a business destination. Ostentatious displays of wealth and extravagant weddings are increasingly seen in the capital, Jakarta.

The high cost of presidential as well as general election campaigns as well as an ineffective legal system has resulted in the persistence of high-level corruption. While the efforts of the Corruption Eradication Commission, better known by its acronym KPK, have resulted in the removal from office of several high profile politicians and bureaucrats, the KPK has only dealt with a small number of cases. The successful devolution of political authority and decision-making to the regions has facilitated the emergence of mini-Suhartos at the local level.

A democratic resurgence

The difference with the Suharto years is that television, radio and print media are uninhibited in reporting such cases. The rise of social media has also had an impact on government accountability, even if it has given credence to wild rumours. The government has had to respond to populist pressures and the activism of civil society movements. And it does not have Suharto's flexibility in dealing with Indonesia's neighbours.

Domestically, groups which were repressed under Suharto are now resurgent. Hard line Muslim activists have successfully pushed campaigns against alcohol consumption, the building of churches and temples and the relocation of minority groups such as Shia Muslims and Ahmadiyahs. An increasingly organised work force pushes for minimum wage policies and the freedom to organise trade unions. These developments make Indonesia less attractive for foreign investment. But they are balanced by Indonesia's booming domestic market and fast growing middle class.

Will new leaders emerge?

These new trends in Indonesian politics will create space for candidates in the forthcoming 2014 elections who are not tied to the Jakarta political establishment. These include the current front runner Joko Widodo, popularly known as "Jokowi". He was elected the governor of Jakarta in 2012, a meteoric rise for the son of a carpenter who became a successful furniture entrepreneur before being elected mayor of Solo in 2005.

It has also led President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to encourage close allies such as the minister of trade Gita Wirjawan, minister of state enterprises Dahlan Iskan and outgoing Indonesian Ambassador to Washington Dino Patti Djalal to consider seeking the nomination of the Democratic Party.

Other likely candidates represent continuity with politics in the Suharto era. They include business leader Aburizal Bakrie and former military commanders like Wiranto and Prabowo Subianto. In the case of these politicians the Suharto tradition of candidates for the presidency or vice-presidency coming from the ranks of senior cabinet members or key military appointments has been continued.

This is so even though many have philosophies that are very different from those common during the Suharto era. Mr Yudhoyono's brother-in-law Pramono Edhi Wibowo, for example, is a reformist general. And Coordinating Minister for the Economy Hatta Rajasa follows a nationalistic approach (quite different from the outlook of Suharto's Berkeley mafia, the group of University of California-Berkeley trained technocrats who were his economic advisers).

The 2014 elections could therefore be a watershed in Indonesia's transition if they result in the emergence of a new generation of leaders not tied to the legacy of the Suharto era.

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