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No. 095/2014 dated 22 May 2014

Electing Indonesia's Next President: King or Kingmaker?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Indonesia's fifth presidential election post-Suharto is taking place under the shadow of Sukarno. Whether it will be Jokowi or Prabowo as president, the kingmaker behind the throne has to be reckoned with. Will there be a new post of prime minister?

Commentary

INDONESIA'S BIG contest to elect its next president has begun, with 185 million registered to vote in the third direct presidential election in post-Suharto Indonesia this 9 July. It is now a straight fight between two new political players – Jakarta governor Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), and former special forces general Prabowo Subianto. The real winner, though, is already apparent - the enduring legacy of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president. This in itself suggests a certain direction that the country may take over the next five years.

Jokowi is the candidate of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), the winner of the 9 April parliamentary elections, the successor of Sukarno's nationalist PNI, and whose leader is Sukarno's daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Jokowi himself lately until little known outside his Central Java hometown, is an enigma of a man. His sweeping popularity, due to his common touch rather than fiery oratory, is probably not seen since Sukarno. Strangely, the image and proletarian philosophy of Sukarno is more asserted by Jokowi's rival: in a highly symbolic show, Prabowo declared his candidacy in Sukarno's former house in East Jakarta.

Race to be 'king' of the hill

Attempts to field a third candidate in the form of Aburizal Bakrie, one of Indonesia's richest men, fizzled out at the eleventh hour, paving the way for the Jokowi-Prabowo head-to-head fight. Had there been a three-cornered contest, the wildly popular Jokowi's road to the Istana as Indonesia's seventh president would not be a shoo-in. In the worst-case scenario, Jokowi might have even lost in a second-round election.

While this is now academic, it will not be plain-sailing for Jokowi, whose popularity gives him the edge as voters get to elect their preferred leader directly. His rival has amassed quite a formidable coalition of six parties, with a combined strength of 49 percent of the popular votes. In contrast, Jokowi's coalition has a smaller combined power of four parties with 40 percent of the popular vote. The player who tipped the balance in Prabowo's favour is Bakrie who, in a surprise move, declared his support just before nomination closed on 20 May 2014. Earlier expectations had been for him to lean towards becoming Jokowi's vice-presidential running mate.

How did the race come to this? The 9 April parliamentary elections threw up three leading parties in a new pecking order - Megawati's PDIP, Bakrie's Golkar and Prabowo's Gerindra. But none of them could compete in the presidential election on their own as they failed to meet the threshold, forcing them to form coalitions to be eligible. Opinion polls suggested that the top two electable candidates would be Jokowi and Prabowo.

Although Golkar came in second in the parliamentary polls, its leader Bakrie was not deemed popular enough because of some business controversies. In the end, two contesting pairs emerged: Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla, a former vice-president and ex-Golkar chairman; versus Prabowo and Hatta Rajasa, a former economic coordinating minister.

Jokowi clearly held the upper hand as he easily met the threshold of 25 percent of the popular vote when his PDIP secured the backing of three other parties to form a coalition. This forced Prabowo to scramble for support from the remaining parties to add to his 12 percent. He eventually secured the backing of Golkar and four Muslim-based parties - PAN, PPP, PKS and PBB. PAN's leader, Hatta Rajasa, emerged as Prabowo's vice-presidential running mate, leaving no room for Bakrie.

Bakrie as prime minister in a Prabowo cabinet?

Bakrie was initially resigned to staying out of the contest, especially given Golkar's factionalism. However Golkar eventually closed ranks, endorsed Bakrie as its sole candidate, and gave him a wide mandate to play the role of a king-maker – which Bakrie did with some agility, though a tad too late.

When Jokowi stuck with Jusuf Kalla as his running mate, Bakrie gave up his own bid to be president or vice-president and threw his support behind Prabowo. This unexpected manoeuvre split Golkar. While retaining Hatta as running mate, Prabowo promised Bakrie an unprecedented role – as *Menteri Utama* – in a Prabowo cabinet. There is some debate over what this meant. Gerindra said it could be like a coordinating minister or even a senior minister ala Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Bakrie, however, interpreted it as equivalent to prime minister in a *trisula* or triumvirate leadership. “Overseas it is known as prime minister. Over here, the name is *menteri utama*,” Bakrie told the media.

Should he win, Prabowo would have to restructure the cabinet to create such a position – although some questioned whether this is possible in Indonesia's presidential system. But then again, when Sukarno was president, he had a series of prime ministers, in addition to his vice-president Mohammad Hatta.

The king-makers behind the scenes

Prabowo justified such a position as befitting Bakrie's role as a “king-maker”. Indeed, while either Jokowi or Prabowo could be king, this presidential election is as much about the king-makers behind the scenes. Apart from Bakrie, there are two others: Megawati and President Yudhoyono.

Megawati, the PDIP chair, is the de facto power behind Jokowi should he win the presidency. Megawati relishes this role, though she was initially disappointed to have to give up her ambition to be PDIP's presidential candidate owing to her lack of popularity. Opinion polls had not been in her favour, pointing to her as belonging to the past. But Megawati had an eye on the future - to advance the legacy of Sukarno beyond family through the PDIP as a ruling party. Interestingly, she even bypassed her own daughter, Puan Maharani, as a possible running mate for Jokowi.

The third king-maker is President Yudhoyono. Despite his Democrat Party's suffering a steep drop in popularity due to corruption scandals, it still won a respectable 10 percent of the popular vote, making it the fourth largest party in parliament. Yudhoyono is shrewd enough to know that his PD still has some clout in the new political terrain.

While choosing to be neutral now, he leaves the option open to throw his weight eventually behind Prabowo whose vice-presidential running mate, Hatta, is father-in-law of Yudhoyono's son. The outgoing president may also end up in the opposition, playing the role of check-and-balancer.

In this new power-game, it is significant that the ones who will determine the future course of Indonesia are two new players in the political landscape – Jokowi and Prabowo. Whoever it will be, the next president of Indonesia will carry the legacy of Sukarno's nationalism. How will this influence the rise of Southeast Asia's largest economy and its external relations?

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