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Indonesia's Presidential Election 2014: Enter the Next Big Fight

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

An inconclusive presidential election based on quick count results reflects the new uncertainty in Indonesia. The next big fight now building up is for the control of Golkar, the second largest party. Will a restructuring of the political landscape lead to stronger government?

Commentary

INDONESIA'S NEW period of uncertainty following its most intensely-fought presidential election is moving into a combative phase of political manoeuvrings. This is happening even as the unofficial quick count results by private polling companies are leading to intense controversy.

While all parties are showing restraint as they brace for the tussle ahead, tensions are simmering below the surface. Security authorities are on the highest alert, with orders to shoot rioters on sight. Until official results are released on 22 July 2014, Southeast Asia's largest country will be on tenterhooks as the rival contenders press their competing claims of victory based on the inconclusive quick counts.

The political manoeuvrings begin

The first shot at political manoeuvring post-election was fired by the Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla side who are forecast by several survey groups to win the presidential election. Kalla predicted soon after the election that Golkar - which supported the rival team of Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa - would splinter and lead to a change in the political landscape.

Golkar, the second largest party, is already coming under intense pressure from manoeuvres to replace its chairman, Aburizal Bakrie, and pave the way for Golkar's defection to the Joko-Kalla coalition. There is one fundamental reason why Joko-Kalla are eager to support this and bring about this political realignment.

The Joko-led coalition is actually a minority alliance of four parties, which won about 40 percent of the popular vote, translating into 207 seats in the 560-seat incoming parliament (DPR). The new House will be dominated by the Prabowo-Hatta coalition whose six partners collectively won 60 percent of the popular vote and control 353 DPR seats. Should Joko be confirmed the official winner by the

General Election Commission (KPU) on 22 July 2014, the cabinet that he will have to quickly form will be a minority government.

It is therefore crucial for Joko to expand the ruling coalition by bringing in at least one more party. And that will be Golkar, followed possibly by the Muslim-based PPP. The strategy is to win Golkar over through a combination of carrots, arm twisting and internal pressure. Its leader, Aburizal Bakrie, is especially vulnerable as within Golkar, he is seen to have failed on at least two counts:

The first is Golkar's inability under him to win the April parliamentary polls, even losing 15 seats from the 106 in 2009 to 91 in the incoming parliament. The second is his inability to win support to be a presidential or vice-presidential candidate despite securing the mandate from Golkar. Should Prabowo, whom Bakrie supports, fail to be declared the official winner on 22 July, this will become the third arrow against Bakrie.

Pro-Kalla politicians who have switched to Joko prior to the presidential election will likely team up with their allies within Golkar to accelerate the end of Bakrie's term as chairman. This will pave the way for Golkar's entry into the Joko-led coalition, leading to a clutch of Golkar leaders being offered seats in the Joko cabinet.

Joko's forward strategy

It is important to remember that Kalla was once Golkar chairman and his residual influence within the party is not insignificant. He would need a political machinery to back him - and Golkar would be a natural fit. Golkar's inclusion will strengthen a Joko government, which will be under strong public pressure to deliver. It is therefore only to be expected that Joko-Kalla will want to see a weakened Prabowo-led alternative coalition.

Meanwhile Golkar members disgruntled with Bakrie's support for Prabowo-Hatta have not wasted time to build up pressure for a Golkar leadership change in time for the formation of the new cabinet by Joko-Kalla soon after the new president is sworn in in October.

The likely successors include Agung Laksono, an outgoing coordinating minister; Fahmy Idris, a former minister and strong Kalla supporter; and Agus Kartasasmita, a young turk who switched to Kalla and was sacked for it. Agus is the son of Ginandjar Kartasasmita, a senior Golkar leader and former minister. Significantly, Agung Laksono has openly declared that Golkar could change direction.

If they fail to win over Golkar, Joko-Kalla will have to fight it out in parliament. Many plans promised by Joko in his presidential campaign could be blocked in the Prabowo-controlled parliament. Eventually, the Joko government could fail... This alternative scenario is not unlikely because Bakrie has also said openly that Golkar under him would not betray its coalition partners. Indeed, the plan by Prabowo and Bakrie is to build a strong, permanent coalition in the new parliament.

But this is precisely why the pro-Kalla forces within and outside Golkar are eager to see Bakrie go. The question is how to minimise his resistance. This is where Bakrie could probably be given a "soft landing" through a deal of some sort. Clearly, over the next two months, Golkar will be highly restive.

The big picture

What is now happening is not without precedent. In the 2004 presidential election when Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono contested and won, Kalla was his vice-presidential running mate. Golkar replaced its leader Akbar Tanjung with Kalla through a national congress following Kalla's successful election. In a similar scenario this time, Kalla may not return as Golkar chairman but appoint a loyalist instead. For this scenario to come about, the controversy over the conflicting claims of victory caused by the quick count results must first be resolved. Otherwise, the latent disgruntlement since the 9 July election will boil over. Indonesia does not need another period of instability as its economy cannot afford this. ASEAN also needs a stable and economically growing Indonesia to be the anchor of the ASEAN Economic Community which will be ushered in next year - coinciding with the ascent of Indonesia's new president.

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