

Two candidates emerge for Indonesian presidential election

By John Roberts
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The July 9 presidential election in Indonesia is rapidly shaping up as a contest between two camps of the country's ruling elite both of which have close ties to the previous Suharto dictatorship and to the military that backed it.

None of the parties that took part in the April 9 election for the People's Representative Council (DPR) garnered sufficient votes or seats to stand a presidential candidate in their own right. The anti-democratic election rules require presidential candidates to have the support of a party or parties that secured 25 percent of the vote, or 20 percent of the seats, in the national parliamentary poll.

The current frontrunner for the presidency is Jakarta governor Joko "Jokowi" Widodo from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which topped the DPR poll but with only 19 percent of the vote. In the horse-trading following the April election, a substantial section of the political establishment has lined up behind Widodo.

The PDI-P, under the leadership of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, quickly signed up the National Democratic Party that had gained 6.7 percent of the vote. The party is the political vehicle of media tycoon Surya Paloh, a former official of Golkar, the political arm of the Suharto dictatorship.

On May 10, the National Awakening Party (PKB), which won 9 percent of the vote, announced it had joined the coalition backing Widodo's candidacy. The PKB is the political party of the conservative Islamic organisation, Natdlatul Ulama, whose now deceased leader Abdurrahman Wahid was elected president in 1999.

On May 13, Golkar party chairman Aburizal Bakrie announced that his party would not stand a presidential candidate and would support Widodo. Bakrie had been

slated to be Golkar's candidate but the party only secured 14.8 percent of the national vote. Bakrie's announcement has resulted in internal ructions and is yet to be finalised.

The PDI-P is yet to announce Widodo's vice presidential running mate. One name put forward by PDI-P spokesmen is Jusuf Kalla, a top Golkar leader and first term vice president of current president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Having served two five-year terms, Yudhoyono, a former Suharto era general, is not eligible to stand.

The Widodo campaign now has the resources of party machines that won around 50 percent of the vote through the archipelago. It has brought together Suharto's political machine with those of two of his officially sanctioned "critics"—Megawati and Wahid—while the military dictator held power.

Megawati and Wahid were both instrumental in derailing the opposition movement of students and workers that emerged in 1998 in the midst of the Asian financial crisis and threatened to rapidly expand after Suharto stood down. The two so-called reformers, who had accepted Suharto's anti-democratic framework, shut down the protests and diverted the opposition into new elections.

Megawati connived with the military and Golkar to oust Wahid from office in 2001. She defended Suharto and his family members from prosecution and backed the military's repression of separatist movements in Aceh and Papua. Megawati helped legitimise the utterly discredited military, in particular allowing ex-general Yudhoyono, who was her chief security minister, to posture as a reformer. As support for Megawati's PDI-P slumped, Yudhoyono left the cabinet, formed the Democrat Party (DP) and won the presidency in 2004.

Widodo's main opponent is likely to be Prabowo Subianto, a former son-in-law of Suharto. He heads the Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) which won 11.8 percent of the vote. Prabowo, another Suharto-era general, was a commander in the Kopassus special forces that were notorious for political repression under the junta. He was head of the military's strategic reserve, Kostrad, at the time of Suharto, and has been widely accused of being responsible for the kidnapping and torture of protest leaders.

Like Widodo, Prabowo is promoting economic nationalism and posturing as a populist defender of the "people's welfare." He has teamed up with two Islamic parties—the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). His running mate is Yudhoyono's economics minister and PAN chairman Hatta Rajasa.

Prabowo has also secured the endorsement of Confederation of Indonesian Workers Union (KSPI) chief Said Iqbal, who played a key role in limiting the large-scale wages strikes by industrial workers in 2012.

The lining up of parties behind Widodo and Prabowo has virtually excluded the possibility of a third candidate securing sufficient backing to stand.

The support for Widodo in ruling circles is not accidental. Amid deep-seated alienation and distrust in the Jakarta political establishment as a whole, he is being promoted as a modest "man of the people" untainted by corruption or connection to the Suharto. He trades on a record of providing cheap health care, traditional markets and parks for the people.

The image is entirely phony. Widodo, a furniture manufacturer and exporter, was plucked from obscurity and carefully groomed by his present backers, to whom he is completely beholden. He was a political unknown in 2005 when he sought to run for mayor of the central Javanese city of Surakarta or Solo and was turned down by the Democratic Party, PAN and the PKS. Local PDI-P strongman Hadi "Rudy" Rudyatmo persuaded Widodo to stand for the PDI-P, in the wake of Megawati's humiliating defeat by Yudhoyono in the 2004 presidential election.

Widodo won the post of Solo mayor twice with Rudyatmo as his deputy and mentor. Journalist Angitt Noegroho helped manufacture Widodo's image, helping to organise his trademark impromptu visits to

working class and poor areas ("blusukan").

The PDI-P was not alone in deciding that Widodo was a marketable political commodity. Golkar's Jusuf Kalla threw his weight behind Widodo, organising the backing of the Golkar machine as well as financial support and media backing from big business in Widodo's bid for Jakarta governor in 2012.

Prabowo also backed Widodo in the election, and, along with Kalla, persuaded a reluctant Megawati to allow Widodo to run as the PDI-P candidate. Prabowo boasted that it was he who brought Widodo from Surakarta to Jakarta.

The decision to run Widodo for the presidency is aimed at blunting widespread popular disaffection. Surveys prior to the parliamentary election showed that more than 80 percent of people believed that all parties were corrupt. Widodo's backers are well aware that the Indonesian economy is slowing sharply and that the next president will have to impose unpopular measures on working people.

Widodo has already signalled that he will cut fuel subsidies in line with the demands of the IMF and international finance capital. He will be just as ruthless as Prabowo is suppressing opposition and resistance to the anti-working class agenda of austerity.

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