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INDONESIA PROGRAMME
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» The “Indonesia Election Watch 2009” is a weekly analysis of the key issues surrounding Indonesia’s 2009 Elections, from the parliamentary to the presidential elections.

» The analysis is produced by the Indonesia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

» The analysis would benefit leaders in the business, policy-making, media, and research community in Singapore and beyond.

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PDI-P and Gerindra: An Axis in the Making?

Recently, an interesting political drama has unfolded in the run up to the scheduled registration of the Indonesian presidential ticket on May 10.

The “first episode” began when the “perfect-couple,” President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla, decided to part ways. After this, there seemed to be a rapprochement between Mr. Kalla and former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, who heads the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P)—the strongest opposition party in parliament. Simultaneously, there were also some “flirting” moments between Yudhoyono, Kalla, and Megawati, with several medium and small parties.

To “spice up” the equation, former TNI Commander-in-Chief Wiranto and his arch nemesis former Special Forces commander Prabowo Subianto joined forces seemingly closing ranks behind Megawati.

This “drama” notwithstanding, recent polls have shown that Yudhoyono would be the likely frontrunner in the upcoming presidential race. Meanwhile, factionalism inside Golkar, resulting in indecisive political moves, has further eroded its electoral support. Such a situation now places Megawati as the primary contender to challenge Yudhoyono, especially if recent developments eventually point to a Megawati-Prabowo ticket.

However, analysts point out that with all polls placing Megawati’s electability way below Yudhoyono in a two-way race, continuing to run on her own would not only be a “suicide mission,” but it could also jeopardise PDI-P’s reputation. As for Prabowo, his dubious record concerning human rights abuses and his controversial role in the May 1998 riots have raised the ire of civil society, the ethnic Chinese minority, and well-educated voters—three blocks of voters that had supported PDI-P in the past.

Thus, the idea of Prabowo as Megawati’s running mate has been controversial from the beginning. Hence, why did the alliance come about in the first place? More importantly, can this alliance prevail against Yudhoyono?

Anatomy of an alliance

Being in opposition for the past five years has not been helpful to a big party like PDI-P. It has tightened the party’s purse strings thereby placing pressure on the party’s war chest and effectively shrinking its patronage network. This was confirmed by a PDIP

cadre who told the *Indonesia Programme* that the party's internal fundraising initiatives have brought meager returns. Although the party had relied on their own pool of businessmen and cadres, the nine-month long election campaign period had drained their coffers.

This is where an alliance with Prabowo may prove mutually beneficial. Supported by his billionaire brother Hasyim Djojohadikusmo and his own large private assets—not to mention the alleged support of Suharto's family members—Prabowo had been a strong candidate since the campaign season began. In fact, Prabowo's ability to mobilise his resources to broaden his support base has placed his newly established party Gerindra on the political map. Of course the clever use of the media and regular campaign advertisements effectively raised an unknown party to a favorability rate of 4.5 percent nationally by early 2009. In fact, sources tell the *Indonesia Programme* that currently only Prabowo could compete with Yudhoyono's "financial power."

It is hardly surprising then that Prabowo has become an attractive pick for PDI-P. It might even be the reason why Prabowo was favoured over Sultan Hamengkubuwono—who was initially Megawati's preferred choice as her vice president.

If this is indeed the case, it is hard to avoid a sense of *déjà vu*. In the 2004 presidential election, it was reported that Kalla paid most of the bills for the Yudhoyono-Kalla campaign—of course in exchange for having his name on the ticket.

That said, Prabowo himself needs a strong coalition with a major party like PDI-P as his political vehicle in the presidential race. Not only will PDI-P's 14 percent vote come in handy on the campaign trail, but, if elected, such coalition could provide the much-needed political stability to govern. Thus, with PDI-P onboard, Prabowo needs to gather only a middle-ranking party and one small party to lend weight to his coalition—a relatively easier task than his initial plan to sustain a couple of dozen small parties.

Moreover, compared to the other presidential candidates—mainly Yudhoyono, Kalla, and Megawati—Prabowo is perhaps the only contender strong enough to contest the 2014 presidential elections. Between PDI-P's need to increase its votes in the next election, and Gerindra's need to develop itself further, a Megawati-Prabowo alliance could very well bolster Prabowo's chances, either in this election or the next.

Can the alliance prevail?

Many analysts have predicted an electoral landslide in favour of Yudhoyono in the July presidential election. This is mainly based on Yudhoyono's favorability rate, which according to the Jakarta-based polling centre LP3ES, stands at over 43 percent—compared to Megawati's 13.9 percent and Prabowo's 5.8 percent.

However, if it materialises, the Megawati-Prabowo ticket has the potential to turn the tables on Yudhoyono.

First, both Megawati and Prabowo have a large pool of loyal and dedicated voters. Exit polls released by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) showed that 65 percent of PDI-P voters will elect Megawati and 55 percent of Gerindra voters will elect Prabowo.

Second, the alliance personifies the combination of an "experienced charismatic figure" (Megawati) with a "down to earth fighter" (Prabowo) dedicated to changing the status quo. In fact, the Jakarta-based *Kompas* newspaper recently released a survey that highlighted the electorate's preference for a presidential ticket combining the qualities of a "charismatic leader" with a leader with "down to earth" fighting qualities.

Third, despite the understandable backlash against Prabowo's candidacy, one should not forget that issues like human rights abuse and the need for justice to be meted out to perpetrators of the 1998 riots are generally seen as matters of concern to the urban-middle-class and highly-educated voters—and are not causes championed in the rural areas, where 79 percent of eligible voters reside. Slogans like “pro-people economy” or *ekonomi kerakyatan* and “change” is more appealing to these voters, especially when one considers Prabowo's pro-farmer image very much in line with his role as head of Indonesia's Farmers Association (HKTI). Finally, a good repackaging of image combined with powerful ad-buys may just tip the balance further in their favour in the coming weeks.

‘G’ factor to win?

Thus, despite indications from the polls, it may not be wise to conclude at this stage that the game is over—though the stakes are getting higher, especially since fixed coalitions have yet to emerge. What remains to be seen is the position of Golkar. Although there is still the likelihood that Golkar might nominate its own presidential candidate, party factionalism and Jusuf Kalla's lack of popularity might eventually see Golkar hedging its bets by choosing between the Megawati or Yudhoyono blocks. If Golkar chooses the former and establishes what is touted as the “Grand Coalition” between PDI-P, Golkar, Gerindra, and Wiranto's Hanura Party, then undoubtedly we will see a viable contest.

That said, although possibly more than 20 parties may not pass the electoral threshold, the sum of their votes can still matter in the presidential nomination process. Where these smaller parties, along with the middle ranking ones, will channel their support, might just change the political equation once again.

Furthermore, the latest news reported by *detik.com*, highlights that the Mega-Bowo alliance may possibly be modified further. Based on the news, last night Gerindra and PDIP have signed an agreement proposing a Prabowo-Puan Maharani ticket. Puan, daughter of Megawati, might replace Mega in the ticket. The rationale given by a PDI-P team member is that the party would benefit enormously if the pair win. If they lose, the result would be “understandable” since they were only putting Puan on the ticket—as a face saving gesture for Megawati thereby ensuring a smoother transition to the post-Megawati period while sustaining their dynasty. Nevertheless, the deal has yet to be sealed, as it requires Mega's approval before it can be implemented.

Thus, the stage is set for the final episode of Indonesia's 2009 general elections. With the presidential campaign season around the corner, the presidential race is still not a foregone conclusion.

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