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The Paradox of Indonesia's "Post-Majapahit" Presidency: Historic Direct Election Makes Yudhoyono Most Popular Leader with possibly the Weakest Government since Suharto's fall

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Goenawan Mohamad, the veteran writer, describes the July 5 direct presidential election as a historic turning point ushering Indonesia into the "post-Majapahit" era. Never before since the time of the old Javanese kingdom have the people had the freedom to choose their own ruler. This is also the first time since the birth of the Indonesian nation state that they can elect their own "king" - without intermediaries or "people's representatives" acting on their behalf.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as widely predicted by various polls, is emerging as the most popular choice, with Yusuf Kalla as his vice-president. The emergence of Susilo – "SBY" as he is widely known – at the expense of incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri is the consequence of a "deficiency fatigue": Tired of weak government, the people clamoured for change and rejuvenation and swung behind the candidate who to them came like a gush of fresh air. The result – a significant lead of 33.8% of the votes counted so far for SBY, cutting across ideological, ethnic and religious affiliations, according to an exit poll released two days after the election by the local research body, LP3ES, and the United States-based National Democratic Institute (NDI).

Some supporters might be tempted to cast SBY's rise from this "revolt of the masses" in the mould of the messianic *Satrio Piningit* – the long-awaited Javanese hero-warrior. But is he indeed the "saviour" who will lead Indonesians out of their miseries and into the golden age of abundance and harmony? Or is his current popularity just a passing fancy, that will soon fizzle out in the tortuous course of Indonesia's political transition, post-Suharto? Until the final tally is counted and officially confirmed by the end of the month, it is premature to write off Megawati, who is trailing not too far behind in second place with 26%, or for that matter, retired General Wiranto, who follows closely in third place with 22%. In short, it is still a bit early to declare SBY as president.

Although he has taken a big lead in the current phase of the two-part presidential election, there is still one more round to go, given that he is unlikely to meet the two conditions of a one-round knock-out victory: at least 50% of the votes in the first round and no less than 20% of the votes in half of the country's 32 provinces. Some 80 million votes have been counted so far, while about 100 million of the 155 million voters had taken part in this historic election. Now that SBY has to face a second round on September 20, the crucial question is who he will square off with.

Round II will be a totally different ballgame – a fight to the finish in which all gloves are off. A bloody outcome is not unlikely, especially if followers of the losing side prove bad losers. Already, many people are beginning to worry about the prospect of a thin margin of victory, and the high number of spoilt votes, which can lead to disputes and further uncertainty, if not violence. Despite his popularity, SBY's camp is actually not too pleased that the retired general has not been able to score a one-round knockout. The stark truth is that, as popular as he may be now, there is no certainty SBY will eventually win in Round II. This is the brutal fact about Indonesia's first direct presidential election. Megawati and Wiranto are both claiming to have won the second spot to qualify for the second round, based on their own party's count of the votes. Although Megawati has the better chance, either of them will be a tough rival to beat.

Scenario I: SBY versus Megawati

A showdown between SBY and Megawati will be a clash between two Cabinet colleagues turned bitter rivals, following SBY's less than friendly departure from the Cabinet, which propelled him into the presidential race. Because of the rivalry, both will go all-out to kill each other's chances. They will do so by winning over as much support as possible from the losing candidates and their train of followers. The new battle cry will be "Asal Bukan SBY (ABS)" or "Anything but SBY" for Megawati's followers, and "Asal Bukan Mega (ABM)" or "Anything but Mega" for SBY's. Who both sides get to win over will depend on what incentives they can successfully dangle. In this context, the most crucial support will be that of Golkar, which together with the National Awakening Party (PKB) of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), formed the backbone of Wiranto's presidential bid. Golkar is the strongest party in the new parliament (DPR), with 23% of the 500 seats, followed by Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) with 19%. SBY's Democratic Party (PD) has a weak DPR presence, with only 10% of the seats. Even with its two equally small allies, SBY's party can at most marshal 12% of the DPR seats.

So, in this scenario, Golkar's support is crucial to form a stable government – a fact which both SBY and Megawati realise, which explains the current scramble for Golkar's support, in return for key cabinet seats and other forms of political advantage. SBY is using the popularity of Jusuf Kalla, a former Golkar leader, to swing Golkar leaders over. Clearly like a bride being wooed by many suitors, Golkar has 3 options: form an alliance with SBY or form an alliance with PDIP. If neither works, it will go into opposition. But the prospect of a Golkar alliance with SBY is slim for two reasons: Firstly, Golkar chairman Akbar Tanjung is more inclined to team up with PDIP. A PDIP-Golkar alliance will form a strong bloc in parliament to check an SBY-led government. Secondly, many Golkar leaders are also furious with Jusuf Kalla for abandoning his own party at the eleventh hour to strike an alliance with SBY. Kalla was one of the early Golkar contenders for presidential candidacy before he jumped ship. If SBY fails to get Golkar, he will be forced to turn to Amien Rais and Hamzah Haz – the last two in the five-horse presidential race. Amien Rais is closer to SBY than to Megawati and many of his supporters have also voted for SBY. As for Hamzah Haz, his supporters are more inclined to Megawati and Wiranto than to SBY because of SBY's perceived image as a proxy of the United States. This image will be exploited to weaken SBY's chances in the second round. In fact, the "missiles" have already been fired, as seen in the 9 July front-page headline story in Kompas suggesting the outgoing Cabinet's concern about "foreign intervention" in the current election.

Scenario II: SBY versus Wiranto

Megawati has a better chance of getting into Round II, but should she fail because Wiranto beats her as the second highest vote-getter in Round I, it will be a shoot-out between two generals in a penultimate fight for the presidency. Wiranto will reap from the rivalry between Megawati and SBY. Her PDIP will throw its weight behind Wiranto just to kill off SBY's chances of a victory. Support for Wiranto from Golkar will strengthen although this had been half-hearted during the first round election. Wiranto can also count on the support of Gus Dur's PKB and its followers. The PKB draws it support from members of the traditionalist Islamic body, Nahdatul Ulama (NU). Although NU has been pulled in different directions when its key leaders joined Golkar and PDIP as vice-presidential candidates, Gus Dur's influence remains strong. With Golkar, PDIP and PKB behind him, Wiranto will be a tough contender to beat. He may also win over several smaller parties representing the Islamic constituency. Wiranto however has several weaknesses which he knows SBY can exploit: For one, Akbar Tanjung's camp would not be too unhappy if Wiranto lost because of a possible purge of this faction should Wiranto win the presidency and push for control of Golkar. For another, Wiranto may also not be able to secure the full support of Amien Rais many of whose supporters voted for SBY. This was the case with the Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS), even though the party issued an edict to give full support to Amien Rais. So on balance, it will be a close fight between the two retired generals, with SBY having the edge. But if SBY is destined to be Indonesia's next president, it will not be a shoo-in for him. Yet, a victory for Wiranto in this scenario will not be a total surprise simply because the two biggest parties – Golkar and PDIP – are likely to team up against SBY.

Conclusion

SBY and his running mate, Jusuf Kalla, are clearly a popular pair as Indonesia's next president and vice-president. The "SBY-JK" combination has proven a lethal one, drawing support from across the country, and even sucking away the traditional voters of many political parties and NGOs. According to the LP3ES-NDI poll, 30% of Golkar's voters and 13% of PDIP's supporters voted for SBY-JK. In addition, SBY-JK won over 28% of Gus Dur's PKB and Hamzah Haz's United Development Party (PPP), 24% of PKS and 10% of Amien Rais' National Mandate Party (PAN). But despite all his popularity and the direct support of some 38 million people that cuts across party lines and ethnic as well as religious affiliations, SBY may actually lose the race eventually, defeated by the brutality of alliance politics. This is the paradox of Indonesia's first direct presidential election.

But should he win, SBY will still have a weak government. That is why he is rushing to form a viable coalition that can withstand a potentially hostile parliament. In short, SBY may be Indonesia's strongest elected leader since the fall of Suharto, but he may also be its weakest Chief Executive. It will be difficult, though not impossible, for him to avoid being hostage to barter politics – a practice that actually contributed to the fall of Gus Dur and the weakness of the Megawati government. One way for him is to go for a "limited coalition" with just a few parties that are truly supportive of him. SBY's last option is to bypass the problem entirely by forming a government that is filled with independent, non-party professionals, taking the risk of facing a hostile parliament that will stall his every policy. He may do this because he cannot be easily impeached under new parliamentary rules. But it will be a weak SBY-led government, nonetheless. In the end, an SBY-led government may turn out to be the weakest since the fall of Suharto. That is why some are already predicting that his government may not last two or three years, just like Gus Dur's, or Megawati's. In short, Indonesia's first

direct presidential election will not end Indonesia's problems in political transition. Indeed, we can expect leadership challenges or shake-ups in many political parties, especially those which have failed to win. Akbar Tanjung, Amien Rais, Hamzah Haz – and even Megawati – will not see the end of their troubles, even if they succeed in checking SBY's government. So the *lakon*, or drama, is hardly over. The post-Suharto transition will take at least another direct presidential election in 2009 before the dust of change finally settles.

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