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Known Unknowns in Indonesia's Elections: What They Mean for the Region

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As Indonesians head to the polls next week, there are two known unknowns that call for closer attention. Answers to these could indicate either possible changes or continuity in Indonesia's attitude towards the outside world.

Commentary

WHEN INDONESIANS elect their MPs on 9 April, followed three months later by a new President on 9 July, their decisions will have an impact on the wider region. Given Indonesia's pivotal position in Southeast Asia, this is to be expected.

But understanding the full implications of their electoral choices will not be easy as there are two 'known unknowns' in the country's latest power transition. The first concerns the new parliament. The second is about the new president. Until and unless the picture becomes clearer towards the end of the year, a new government clouded by these twin ambiguities could mean quite a testy time ahead for the region.

Known unknown I: What type of Parliament?

In the post-*Reformasi* era, the Indonesian parliament has become increasingly independent of the Presidency, at times even prone to chest-thumping, as if to make up for the three decades of authoritarian rule under Suharto. In the last parliament, such a posture had come at the expense of Indonesia's neighbours. ASEAN's failure to push through a proposed region-wide anti-haze law was partly due to this. The legislature simply dragged its feet and refused to ratify the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution Bill, even though all other ASEAN members had done so.

Underlying this inclination was a parliament that would not want to be seen as dictated by other countries, reflecting growing nationalistic pride. Will the new legislature be even more independent-minded, and even more assertive, such that the next President will have a difficult time entering into national agreements with other countries? Will the Haze Pollution Bill finally be ratified by Indonesia so that ASEAN can implement its haze-fighting strategy?

There is a larger question behind this growing nationalism: What will be the attitude of the new parliament towards the regional and international order? Will it be a team player, or will it be prone to ignoring the outside

world? Just as importantly, will the new crop of MPs understand and appreciate the critical importance of regional and global concerns that affect not just Indonesians but also the wider Southeast Asia? These are not trivial questions given the region's growing stress, such as from climate change and its multi-dimensional impact, as well as from growing regional volatility.

An increasingly nationalistic legislature mirrors the underlying currents in Indonesian society. Singapore felt a direct impact when elements within the Indonesian defence establishment asserted their pride in *Konfrontasi* era national heroes – Usman and Harun - whom Singapore, however, regarded as terrorists for their bombings of an Orchard Road building in 1965. Will the new MPs manage this trend, or ride on it?

Known unknown II: What type of President?

Notwithstanding his huge popularity, there is, paradoxically, not much known about the front-running presidential candidate. In a growing democracy like Indonesia, an independent-minded parliament calls for a strong president to be on top. Otherwise he will be overwhelmed by the legislature. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to be a strong leader, as he will not easily get legislative support for his policies. This will not be good news for the wider region.

It is to avoid a weak presidency that the major Indonesian political parties are aiming to secure victory big enough that they can form the government on their own; or if they must, to forge a ruling coalition with the smallest number of partners. In the past, coalition-building in support of the ruling party had often led to unstable government.

So which of the current presidential aspirants have the necessary qualities to be that strong leader? A slate of serious contenders have emerged – Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), Aburizal Bakrie, Prabowo Subianto and Wiranto. Dark horses may surface after the 9 April results are out. But of the current line-up, Jokowi has stood out as the most popular in opinion polls, with Bakrie, Prabowo and Wiranto trailing by significant margins.

While Jokowi, with his fresh face, is a clear favourite, riding on Indonesia's populist politics, voices are beginning to emerge probing for the substance of his leadership. They ask: what does Jokowi really stand for? What is his ideology? What is his attitude towards existential and strategic issues of nation-building and Indonesia's place in the international order? Does he have what it takes to be a leader who can stride the regional and global stage to advance Indonesia's role as an emerging regional power?

Indeed, some are suggesting that should he emerge as president, he will be relying on his deputy who will do the heavy lifting. But if he has to depend on his right hand man to do his job, it begs the question as to where then lies his leadership.

While Bakrie and Prabowo are not as popular, they are known quantities. Bakrie is a proven business leader – in fact one of the richest in Indonesia - who has earned his stripes in cabinet as well. Prabowo, as controversial as he is, is seen and projects himself as a decisive and strong leader, having been a special forces general in the past. Up to this point, Bakrie and Prabowo have offered clear manifestos of what they stand for.

Jokowi has been basking in his popularity. Yet, there is much about him that we don't really know. To be fair, Jokowi may well have what it takes to be president. And he may turn out to be the president Indonesia needs. But he has to start articulating his vision, platform, strategies and programmes so that he can be fairly judged. Otherwise the next five years will not necessarily be clearer for Indonesia - or for the region.

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