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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Indonesia's Ambiguous Elections: Implications for the Region

By Yang Razali Kassim

### Synopsis

*As Indonesians mull over unofficial results of the 9 April legislative elections, two known unknowns remain. In fact, curiosity about the leading presidential contender is growing, despite unofficial results in his favour: Does Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') have what it takes to be president?*

### Commentary

INDONESIA'S FOURTH parliamentary elections since the fall of strongman Suharto in 1998 have taken place without incident. Though the official results are expected only in May the contours of the new political landscape are emerging. The two-step exercise in its latest democratic transition – parliamentary followed by presidential elections - is likely to revolve around the top three parties, the Indonesian Party of Struggle (PDIP), Golkar and the Greater Indonesia Movement (Gerindra).

Over the next three months, they will display intense political manoeuvring as they engage in coalition-building and deal-making with nine other smaller parties to achieve two parallel objectives: victory in the coming July presidential election and forming a government supported by the majority of the incoming parliament.

### Markets not excited

Going by the unofficial 'quick count' results, no single party met the threshold of 25 percent of national votes or 20 percent of seats to earn the right to nominate a president, which made alliance-forming inevitable – and with it, much political flux. Indeed, the election outcome had a negative impact on the Indonesian Composite Index: It dipped the day after reflecting concerns that the ensuing coalition-building process could lead to political uncertainty and affect investor sentiment. Indonesian business leaders have begun to express concerns about the emerging uncertainty and how this may impact foreign investments flows.

Given Indonesia's pivotal position in Southeast Asia, this flux over the next few months may impact the wider region. A leadership in transition preoccupied with political deal-making is likely to be inward-looking. Coming on the eve of the realisation of the ASEAN Community in 2015, this may not be helpful to regional integration.

The full implications of Indonesia's 9 April elections will not be easily understood either as there are two major 'known unknowns' in the country's current power transition. The first concerns the incoming House of Representatives. The second is about the leading presidential hopeful. These two ambiguities are still unclear

after the parliamentary elections and will remain ambiguous until the new president is elected in July and formally sworn in in October.

### **Known unknown I: What type of Parliament?**

In the post-*Reformasi* era, the Indonesian parliament has become increasingly independent of the Presidency, and at times even prone to chest-thumping, as if to make up for the three decades of being subservient to president Suharto. In the last parliament, such behaviour had come at the expense of Indonesia's neighbours. For instance 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, which had been passed by all other ASEAN members.

This posture reflected a parliament that did not want to be seen as being dictated to by other countries. Will the new legislature seek to be even more independent-minded, and more assertive, such that the next President will have a difficult time entering into international agreements with other countries? Will the Haze Pollution Bill be finally ratified by Indonesia so that ASEAN can implement its haze-fighting strategy?

Beyond nationalistic pride there is a larger question: 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 important, will the new crop of MPs understand and appreciate the critical importance of regional and global concerns that affect 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 regional volatility due to maritime territorial disputes.

### **Known unknown II: What type of President?**

The second known unknown is about the next president. For the three leading parties, their presidential candidates are clear at this point: the hugely popular Joko Widodo or "Jokowi" for PDIP, Aburizal Bakrie for Golkar and Prabowo Subianto for Gerindra. It is quite possible that a new presidential candidate will emerge following the current coalition bargaining. In the direct presidential election in July, Jokowi's immense popularity with voters will stand him in good stead. However his path to the presidential election may have been made easier had he not faced some resistance from within the PDIP. Yet, notwithstanding his star appeal, there is, paradoxically, not much known about the presidential front runner.

Indeed, voices have begun to emerge probing for the substance of his leadership. They will get louder towards 9 July: What does Jokowi really stand for? What is his vision for Indonesia and how does he intend to get there? 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? In fact some people are suggesting that should he emerge as president, he will be relying on his vice-president who will do the heavy lifting. But if he has to depend on his Number 2 to do his job, it begs the question where his leadership lies.

On the other hand, Bakrie and Prabowo, while not as popular, 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, projects himself and is seen as a strong and decisive leader, having been a special forces general in the past. Unlike Jokowi, Bakrie and Prabowo have issued clear manifestos of what they stand for.

To be fair, Jokowi may well have what it takes to be president should he be elected. But he remains an enigma, if not a mystery. He has to start articulating his vision and platform, and outline his strategies and policies so that he can be fairly judged. Otherwise the next five years will not necessarily be clearer for Indonesia - or for ASEAN and the rest of the world.

Over the next few months, Indonesia will be preoccupied with its latest leadership transition. Regardless of who wins in July, the next president needs to lead Indonesia to retake its preeminent position in Southeast Asia, even steer ASEAN through the growing uncertainty in the South China Sea and the wider East Asian region in the face of a more assertive China. Will Jokowi, can Jokowi play this role?

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