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Aftermath of Indonesia's Legislative Elections: Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth

By Jonathan Chen

Synopsis

Following the release of quick-count results of the legislative elections, political parties in Indonesia are jockeying to build coalitions for the presidential elections in July. The current political configuration suggests a more fragmented and fragile coalitional government for Indonesia.

Commentary

THE QUICK-count results of the April 9 legislative elections in Indonesia produced a few surprises compared with forecasts from various pre-election opinion polls. Of the 12 contesting political parties, 10 made it through the electoral threshold. No political party won enough votes to field its own presidential candidate. In 2009 Indonesia had 9 political parties in the legislature out of 38 contesting parties.

The Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) with Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') as presidential nominee did not fare as well as anticipated. Islamic parties however performed above expectations. The total national vote for Islamic parties exceeded forecasts by a wide margin, with 31 to 32 per cent. In addition, the graft-tarnished Democrat Party (PD) led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) also did not perform too badly. PD came in fourth position after the Gerindra Party, the Golkar Party and the PDI-P in ascending order.

Medium-size parties holding sway

Many analysts had focussed on the underperformance of PDIP as well as the resurgence of Islamic parties. What had gone unnoticed is the inclusion of a sizable new entrant to the race, the National Democratic (NasDem) Party and the overall increase in votes across the board among the 10 political parties with the exception of PD – in spite of the electoral threshold being raised to 3.5 per cent.

The NasDem Party, which has agreed to a coalition with the PDIP, garnered close to 7 per cent of total national votes. On the other hand, previously underperforming political parties have done very well to clinch a substantial portion of the vote bank. As it currently stands, disparities in total national votes among the 10 political parties have narrowed tremendously. Unlike having a distinct demarcation as evidenced in the 2009 legislative elections among major political parties and minor ones, results from the current election paint a different picture. Medium-size parties have emerged to rule the roost. This can be seen in the manoeuvrings of political parties such as PD and The National Awakening Party (PKB).

Although the incumbent PD's share of votes had plunged from the 20.9 per cent it achieved in 2009, it still managed to salvage a respectable 9.8 per cent. PKB, emerging a close fifth in rank, also garnered 9.3 per cent of total national votes. The difference between third place Gerindra Party and medium-sized parties PD and PKB amounted to a mere 2 per cent. Already some analysts have posited three reigning "axes" comprising the top three political parties of PDI-P, Golkar and Gerindra.

However it cannot be ruled out that given the current circumstance, there could possibly be a fourth "axis". Electoral regulation stipulates that in order to run for the presidency, political parties or coalitions of political parties will need to meet the presidential threshold requirement of at least 25 per cent of national votes.

Given the increase in bargaining power across the board among the various political parties, it is not surprising that political horse-trading (or *dagang sapi*) has been especially intense. Although current coalitions among political parties may not be reflective of the eventual state of the Indonesian parliament, the newly elected president of Indonesia will have to contend with a coalition government with greater sharing of powers. This may not bode well for the Indonesian parliament if the current political configuration poses a stumbling block to consensus-building, not to mention political feuds present amongst various political "axes".

A similar conundrum had occurred previously during the 2004 legislative elections. With 16 political parties in the legislature and a presidential threshold of 20 per cent, five coalitions participated in the first round of elections in July. The presidential results however were only conclusive in the second round when the SBY-Jusuf Kalla pair emerged as victors.

The current political configuration points to a resumption of various "power centres" or "axes" with no clear leaders among them. While it may be premature to conclude that party cartels will surface, there certainly is a strong inclination in that direction. With the PDI-P unable to achieve an overwhelming dominance in the legislature even with the declaration of Jokowi's presidential nomination, an accommodative approach towards the other "power centres" in the formation of parliament may have to be adopted.

Can the "Jokowi Effect" prevail?

The "Jokowi Effect" had proven so far to be quite ineffective in raising the electability of the PDI-P in the legislative elections. This puts presidential nominee Jokowi in quite a dilemma. Known for being down-to-earth and upright, his worst fears may find him being engulfed in a balancing act maintaining a scrupulous image while playing to current political expediencies. Moreover with accusations of a "puppet presidential candidate" making its rounds, it is paramount that Jokowi shed off any intervening hand that may jeopardise his chances at the presidency.

The "Jokowi Effect" had been most resilient and effective when Jokowi showed himself to be *vertically accountable* to his constituency as demonstrated in his posts as mayor in Surakarta (Solo) and governor in Jakarta. Can he sustain such an accountability given the overweening presence of PDI-P leaders Megawati and Puan Maharani?

On the other hand, the "Jokowi Effect" would also have to depend on capable deputies willing to take on the less glamorous mantle of managing *horizontal accountability* among the institutions of state – including the various political parties, the bureaucracy, the army and judiciary. Hence, the selection of a suitable vice-presidential ally becomes pivotal.

Pitted against strong competitors eyeing for the top seat of government, the presidential elections will be a test of whether the "Jokowi Effect" can go beyond the *"blusukan"* (a Javanese term for impromptu visits) on the ground and onto the national stage. In order to ensure that the "Jokowi Effect" prevails in the presidential elections, it is imperative that Jokowi himself not fall into an "accountability trap" – a situation whereby vertical accountability is compromised by Jokowi's perceived lack of agency and horizontal accountability frustrated by a less than optimal choice of candidate as running mate.

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