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Indonesia's Next President: Will Jokowi Prevail?

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

Indonesia's parliamentary elections belied polls predictions and produced unexpected results. They open possibilities for uncertain outcomes in the presidential elections in July. Front runner Jokowi may not be a shoo-in.

Commentary

INDONESIA'S PARLIAMENTARY elections on 9 April 2014 were significant in fortifying its democracy but produced unexpected results that belied polls predictions. While various pre-election surveys forecast correctly that the leading political parties were likely to be the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), Golkar and Gerindra, they were way off in respect of the margins of victory.

PDIP, the disappointed leading party

The PDIP, led by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, got 19% of the votes, missing the 20% threshold to nominate a presidential candidate on its own. Golkar and Gerindra garnered 14% and 12% respectively, which would enable them to nominate their presidential and vice-president candidates only if they have coalition partners from among the Muslim and minority parties.

The leading political figure to emerge in the elections was Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), the governor of Jakarta and former Mayor of Solo. Various polls found his political support hovering between 30% and 40%, far ahead of his rivals. Once he was named as PDIP's presidential candidate some three weeks before the elections the "Jokowi effect" was expected to boost PDIP's electoral support to around 27%. However PDIP failed to reach even 20%; forcing it to look for a coalition partner for the presidential race. A new party, Nasional Demokrat (Nasdem) quickly announced its support for Jokowi with its 7% electoral votes, making him the first eligible presidential candidate.

While PDIP's performance has improved compared to the previous elections in 2009, largely at the expense of the ruling Democrat Party of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which slumped to fourth place with 9.5 %, still the PDIP will not be able to dominate the coming parliament which would be more fragmented. The Muslim-based parties also did better than expected, garnering collectively around 32% voter support. This will make administering Indonesia even more difficult, unless a strong president with a strong mandate emerges, which does not seem likely.

The inability of PDIP, with Jokowi as its presidential candidate, to perform as predicted may be due to a number of factors. Firstly, the intense hype by various media and polling agencies was belied by off-the-mark exit polls. Secondly while the PDIP had a solid support base it suffered from an inability to break out from its old Sukarnoist mould. It had little to offer in new national programmes to meet the pressing challenges facing Indonesia, whereas new political parties have surfaced to put forth alternative policies with personalities attractive to younger voters. Jokowi blamed the weak political machinery of the PDIP for its less than expected results.

The PDIP campaign machinery did not leverage on the Jokowi “brand” as most posters and television advertisements featured Megawati and her daughter Puan Maharani and not Jokowi until the last two days before the elections. Another key factor that hurt the PDIP was the double impact of naming Jokowi as its presidential candidate - namely hurting many of its hardcore supporters as well as a majority of Muslim voters, which led to the failure of many PDIP supporters to vote for PDIP candidates. This led to “*golput*” or abstentions from voting, which benefitted other parties, a key reason for the PDIP’s failure to garner its expected 27% support.

The coming presidential elections

Indonesia will know who the presidential and vice-presidential candidates are by 18 May. Most predictions have slated three groups viz: Jokowi (PDIP); Aburizal Bakrie (Golkar); and Prabowo Subianto (Gerindra). Some Muslim groups have called for a new “Middle Axis” in view of the respectable showing of the various Muslim parties in the elections. Coalition politics will prevail in the choice of their running mates. In view of the new post-election constellation it would appear that Jokowi and his vice-presidential choice are likely to face an uphill task and not the shoo-in as was predicted. This is due to the various challenges facing him.

Firstly Jokowi is largely a local figure, more well known in Solo and Jakarta, though his nationwide following is beginning to emerge. He might have celebrity status like a dangdut singer or national footballer but whether this can be translated into political support is uncertain. Secondly Jokowi is an untested quantity in national politics and governance. Even as Governor of Jakarta he has yet to deliver on his promises and is leaving the job half-way. Thirdly Jokowi has shown that he can be a divisive force, as evident in the PDIP and the Megawati family. Not all in the Ibu Mega family are for him. Fourthly, Jokowi will be seen as a possible “puppet” or lame duck president likely to have serious clashes with PDIP power brokers as Jokowi is only a PDIP cadre with no strategic position in the party.

Fifthly and probably most critically will be Jokowi’s capacity to reach out to the majority of Muslim voters. While PDIP members are seen largely as *abangan* or nominal Muslims, Jokowi has been blamed for promoting non-Muslims especially Catholics, arousing fears that Jokowi’s presidency will represent a threat to Muslims. These factors have made it apparent that Jokowi’s election as president is not a certainty.

Who will be Jokowi’s running mate?

Accordingly, the group of advisers close to the PDIP leadership who will select Jokowi’s running mate realise the importance of getting the right candidate for vice-president to boost his chances of winning the presidency. So far three key names have surfaced. They are Jusuf Kalla, a former vice-president and senior Golkar leader; Mahfud MD, a former defence minister and head of the Constitutional Court and key member of the PKB, a party affiliated to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU); and retired General Ryamizard Ryacudu, a former Army Chief. It would appear that the choice will be Jusuf Kalla, with Mahfud and Ramizard likely to be slated for key ministerial positions.

If the contest is decided in the first round on 9 July 2014 Jokowi stands a strong chance of winning, with Prabowo’s support possibly undercut by Bakrie. However, if Jokowi falls short even with Jusuf Kalla, the run-off in September could affect Jokowi’s chances of becoming the next president. Prabowo might be able to cobble a strong coalition and win over public opinion.

Jokowi might be personally attractive as a champion of the common man, but Prabowo has emerged as a charismatic master political campaigner. While Jokowi is expected to win, victory is no longer assured; he has to fight hard to win. Hence, the immense strategic value of Jusuf Kalla as the key that can ensure Jokowi’s victory over Prabowo.

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