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Indonesia's Disputed 2014 Presidential elections: What next?

By Leonard C. Sebastian

Synopsis

Rival presidential candidates Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto have both claimed victory in Indonesia's recently concluded presidential election. While the standoff is unprecedented in Indonesia and created uncertainty, the issue can be settled by the responsible electoral institutions. Of greater concern is the rivalry between Jokowi's patron former president Megawati Sukarnoputri and the outgoing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Commentary

INDONESIA FOR the time being is in a state of limbo. With both presidential candidates claiming victory based on the quick count of votes, an election that promised Indonesia's third democratic transfer of power on 9 July is now mired in uncertainty.

When Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo hinted at his possible victory citing quick counts from six pollsters, his claim was bolstered by former president and PDI-P Chair Megawati Sukarnoputri at a news conference held at her home. She was more forthright in her proclamation that "even though this is still in the vote-counting process, we already can say that Jokowi will be president." In a close race, a loser is unlikely to accept the quick count as authoritative. Unsurprisingly, Jokowi's rival Prabowo Subianto quickly countered that he would not yield referring to polling data indicating that he had an approximate lead of 2.5 points.

For Javanese, maintaining harmony and showing respect is very important. The concept of "saving face", to show respect and maintaining harmony in any situation is important. Therefore it is instructive to contrast Megawati's more assertive statement with the hopeful tone of Joko Widodo who preferred to hint rather than make an outright statement: "according to quick counts, Jokowi-J.K. look to have won".

Though polite, refined and cultured, Megawati was uncharacteristically straightforward to demonstrate her authority. After all, it was Megawati who stepped aside in March and appointed Jokowi as the party's presidential candidate. Javanese culture is highly contextual and you have to read between the lines.

She is not trying to avoid a confrontation by trying to save Prabowo's face. She wanted to assert her authority as the new power behind the throne. Perhaps that demonstration of her power may be what

elicited such a strong reaction from former army general Prabowo. However, it is important to place things in proper perspective. It was not just a signal to Prabowo, more importantly it is an indirect indication to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of what is to come and who now wields real power in Indonesia.

Just before the start of the presidential campaign, the Indonesian military commented that a Jokowi-Kalla win by a margin of less than five per cent could lead to disturbances particularly in key cities where Islamic militants have grown vociferous over the past few months. The security forces have factored into their assessment the possibility of sporadic violence between the time the official results are announced by the National Election Commission on 22 July and the period between 22 to 24 August when the Constitutional Court rules on election-related disputes.

Yet, all this is merely a sideshow. Megawati and Jokowi can defuse the situation easily by offering Prabowo's Gerindra Party a place in a newly constituted coalition. The coalition supporting Jokowi's presidency only controls 207 seats in Indonesia's 560 seat People's Representative Assembly (DPR). To ensure that Jokowi's policies are not hindered by an uncooperative DPR, a new coalition will have to be formed before the new parliament's first sitting.

Over the course of the next few months, the oligarchs who are now part of the Prabowo coalition will start to defect. The first movers could be the Golkar Party; also expect to see a leadership struggle there as Jokowi's running mate Jusuf Kalla plans to regain control of the party by ousting current Party Chairman Aburizal Bakrie. We could also see the end of Akbar Tandjung's long association with Golkar. PAN and/or PPP's move into the newly reconstituted coalition will help strengthen Jokowi's networks with the modernist Muslim community.

As the oligarchs jostle for position and attempt to divide up the spoils where will Jokowi, the president in-waiting, be in the power equation? Having no personal power base, in the short to medium term, he will be dependent on the protection and support of the oligarchs close to him – Megawati, Jusuf Kalla, and possibly Suryo Paloh. Initially, he will have to bide his time and consolidate his position before he can build an effective power base.

The attractiveness of the Jokowi story with his humble background and grassroots approach is that a person aspiring for high office no longer needs to have links to Indonesia's authoritarian past or be part of the elite. The jury is still out on whether Jokowi will be able to assert his power and dominate Indonesia's unwieldy political system without becoming an oligarch.

However, the test for Indonesia's political system is not the uncertainty surrounding disputes between Jokowi and Prabowo over the validity of the quick count but the battle lines now being drawn between Megawati and President Yudhoyono as his presidency winds down. How quickly will Jokowi be expected to act on graft cases closely linked to the palace? Will the issue be settled before President Yudhoyono completes his term and the seventh president takes office on 20 October? These questions are central to a stable transfer of power.

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