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Fourth PDIP Congress 2015: Reconciling the President and his Party

By Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) has begun its national congress until 12 April 2015. This could be a suitable platform for President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to advance his political position and reconcile with PDIP, while altering Indonesia's current political configuration.

Commentary

THE INFLUENTIAL Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) has begun its national congress (9-12 April 2015) with little, if any, prospect of a change of its leadership. Despite the result of a survey conducted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that showed 31.5 per cent of 467 local chapter leaders would like a change, the current party leader Megawati Soekarnoputri is most likely to continue as PDIP chairman.

Prominent PDIP figures, such as Tjahjo Kumolo and Sidarto Danusubroto, believe there is no rivalry between Megawati and President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in the congress which will discuss the party's grand political plan for the next few years, including its chairmanship.

Re-instating Megawati as chairman

After reviewing the party's accountability report for the 2010-2015 the next key item on the agenda is the inauguration of Megawati as the party's chairman. Thirdly, PDIP will decide its upcoming programmes and political postures. The fourth is determining the composition of the party's 2015-2020 structure. The last objective will be to discuss the current government's programmes in four critical areas: politics, law and security; economy; maritime; and human development and culture.

As the winner of the 2014 legislative elections, PDIP holds substantial power to influence national politics. This congress is crucial for the party to reconcile internally and plan its political strategy for the next five years. President Jokowi is expected to attend the congress as a member of PDIP, not as President of Indonesia.

This fourth PDIP congress also poses an opportunity for President Jokowi. The recent Police Chief saga has exposed a precarious relationship between the president and his own party. His status as a party functionary (*petugas partai*) and PDIP's status as winner of the 2014 legislative election provide

the party a political asset as well as a burden for President Jokowi. Recently some senior PDIP members accused Jokowi's inner circle of blocking their access to the president.

Jokowi himself is not likely to run for the PDIP Chairman's position. In fact, in the PDIP National Leaders Meeting (*Rapimnas*) in Semarang last year, Jokowi assured that he did not have the ambition to become the party Chairman or seek other key positions. So what does the coming congress mean for Jokowi, his government and PDIP? Would it be possible for Jokowi to promote a better relationship with PDIP? What would be the probable impact of the congress on Indonesian politics?

Fourth PDIP Congress: Reconciling Jokowi and PDIP?

President Jokowi undoubtedly had limited political capital when he was inaugurated as the seventh President of the Republic of Indonesia. He faced a strong opposition group in the form of the *Merah Putih* (Red and White) coalition in the parliament. Over time, however, this opposition group has weakened due to internal frictions and leadership changes. One of the strongest *Merah Putih* coalition members, Golkar party, is divided into two camps - that of Agung Laksono and Aburizal Bakrie, with each claiming the mantle of legitimate leader.

The declining power of the opposition group does not automatically provide Jokowi vast political space for creating policies. His status as a 'party officer' carries a responsibility for him to follow PDIP's platforms, though it also offers a political shield for Jokowi.

Preserving PDIP as one of his political guardians would be an advantage for him. Besides having limited political capital, Jokowi does not have an extensive political network. Being a newcomer to national politics restricts Widodo's political reach, especially in dealing with the members of parliament. Expanding his political network through various channels is necessary for Jokowi to ensure that his government runs smoothly. The President can benefit from the PDIP's well-established political network in national politics.

Jokowi's multi-party coalition, however, demands political compromises from PDIP, which makes it less likely for Jokowi to ignore the interests of the other coalition members. The 2015 PDIP Congress offers a chance for Jokowi and PDIP to improve their relations. It is the best time for both sides to settle their differences and forge a mutual understanding. Jokowi and PDIP may pledge political agreements to reconcile the party's next five-year programme with Jokowi's government agenda. The congress will also be an opportunity for Jokowi to gain trust from the PDIP leadership and other members. The congress may not be the only chance for Jokowi, but certainly it will provide a great momentum to close the gap between him and the party.

Hidden Conundrum for Indonesian politics

It is, however, not unthinkable for the rift between Jokowi and PDIP to widen. While he may benefit from attaching himself to PDIP, Jokowi must also prepare himself should he fail to firm up his tenuous affinity with the party. A prolonged disagreement may produce political consequences, such as clogged policy-making and the president's weakened political influence.

Furthermore, a continued rift between Jokowi and PDIP could end up in a cabinet reshuffle, particularly if the political configuration changed dramatically. If PDIP and Jokowi manage to improve their relations, it is probable for Jokowi to accommodate his party's interests, such as adding more PDIP cadres into the cabinet. On the other hand, a shaky relationship between PDIP and Jokowi may force him to find another power grouping that he could accommodate with cabinet positions or other concessions.

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