

# Indonesia's unlikely - and steady - democracy

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## As it prepares for elections, the country outshines its neighbors

A decade ago, Indonesia was often written off by analysts as unstable and perilously close to being dismembered piece by fractious piece in the wake of the tragedy in East Timor and ethnic and religious tensions throughout the vast archipelago. But heading into national elections scheduled for April 9, its democracy seems to be in pretty good shape 11 years after rioting and economic meltdown forced out former President Suharto, the strongman who ran the country for 32 years.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the retired general who took power in national elections in 2004 on an anticorruption ticket, has considerably solidified his position. In 2004, his Democratic Party was a relatively minor force that forged an uncomfortable coalition with the Golkar Party and its chairman, Jusuf Kalla, who became Yudhoyono's vice president. Recent polls (which can be notoriously unreliable), however, have the Democratic Party with nearly a quarter of the electorate, if the Indonesian Survey Institute data is anywhere near accurate.

With nearly 40 parties lined up to vie for hundreds of seats in Regional Representative Councils or the 560 seats up for grabs in the national House of Representatives, or DPR, the big question is what happens after the elections, when the real strength of the major players is determined and serious jockeying will begin to for the presidential election to be held in July, which will likely be followed by a runoff.

The game is complicated because under the election laws a party cannot nominate a presidential candidate unless it wins 20 percent of the seats or 25 percent of the vote in legislative elections - the only party likely to reach that milestone is the president's Democratic Party. A handful of others - Golkar, former President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Democratic Party of Struggle, or PDI-P, the new Gerindra Party of right-wing former Army General Prabowo Subianto - will be in the running to form coalitions to reach the 20 percent threshold in order to make a run for the top spot.

And here the Islamists play a potential role, especially the Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS, which rose in popularity in 2004. While Islamic parties generally have seen their support shrink by most measures, the complex electoral arithmetic - and lack of any real issues other than flag waving and sloganeering - could yet find the PKS in a potential presidential coalition with either Golkar or the Democrats, both of which bill themselves as nationalist and secular. That courtship began late last year when the two parties both backed an unpopular and hard-edged anti-pornography bill pushed by religious extremists as a way to curry favor with potential Islamist coalition partners.

Andi Mallarangeng, a spokesman for Yudhoyono, told CNN recently that the president's support for the bill was a "symbolic gesture" to Islamists. "During the process of legislation, [the government] made sure we do not support pornography," Mallarangeng told CNN. "But there should be no limitation on freedom of arts and expression"

Unfortunately, critics have said the bill undermines traditional culture by proscribing traditional dances, could eventually ban swimsuits from the beaches of Bali and may lead to rampant

vigilantism. The measure is being put through the courts by reformers who hope to nullify it.

Still, Indonesia's imperfect democracy is in better odor than most of the rest of Southeast Asia and there is little fear here that serious mayhem will come from the polls, despite some worrying signs of fraud in the voter lists in populous East Java and continuing ethnic tensions in Papua.

Thailand is still suffering the after effects of the 2006 royalist coup that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra's democratically elected government. The royalty and political establishment there later annulled elections and supported street demonstrations in its effort to finally manipulate the system into putting in place the government it wanted, led now by the Democrat Party.

Malaysia, after a surprising election in March 2008 that broke the two-thirds majority stranglehold of the national ruling coalition in parliament, has fallen into both intraparty and ethnic squabbling and appears set to name Najib Tun Razak as prime minister, despite his involvement in a long series of scandals, including connections with the spectacular murder of a beautiful Mongolian woman.

The Philippines is still trying to shake off the hangover of 2001's People Power II ouster of Joseph Estrada, which was little more than a coup disguised as a big street demonstration. That event just added fuel to the idea, as it did in Thailand, that indignant elites do not have to wait for an elected government to finish out its term.

Elsewhere, Singapore, of course, is Singapore, which maintains a thin façade of democracy designed to keep the ruling Lee family in power. Laos and Vietnam are one-party states as, effectively, is Cambodia under Hun Sen. And Burma's military dictatorship remains one of the world's most reviled governments.

Contrast them with Indonesia and things look pretty good. With a certain amount of ambiguity, a new class of politician is coalescing around Yudhoyono. The old guard that surrounded Suharto, which viewed government as a personal cash register, is losing momentum although all the major presidential candidates hail from the old guard. The new government, if Yudhoyono wins, will probably see a proliferation of the kinds of technocrats like Sri Mulyani Indrawati, the finance minister, and Mari E Pangestu, the trade minister, with fewer politicians around the ministries.

Golkar, the political vehicle for Suharto, was still the dominant political party in 2004, with Kalla largely able to dictate the terms of his support for Yudhoyono, including putting in place old-guard cabinet members like Aburizal Bakrie, the head of the Bakrie clan whose troubled empire has benefited repeatedly from government intervention. Golkar has now fallen to below the magic 20 percent of voters, according to the Indonesian Survey Institute poll, and some party insiders worry it could suffer a massive embarrassment on April 9, a fear that has Kalla increasingly isolated inside the party.

Megawati's PDI-P has fallen to 17.3 percent, according to the poll. The Islamic parties may have the lowest aggregate total since Suharto fell, if the polls are close to accurate. Religious parties got nearly 45 percent of the vote in Indonesia's first elections in 1955, but they have slowly tailed off, falling to 38 percent in 2004. Although at one point it was expected that the country's four Islamic parties would get as little as 17 to 23 percent of the votes, that figure has been rising in recent days.

The best hope for moderates, say many observers, is for Yudhoyono's party to get a clear win on April 9.

"The legislative elections will lead to a less fragmented government for the 2009-2014 term because parties must have 20 percent of the seats or a coalition of 25 percent of the votes cast to nominate a presidential candidate," said a knowledgeable western political observer. "That means there will be

far fewer candidates, and a big party like the Democratic Party can likely get that 20 percent on its own, thus it won't have to go into a coalition with Golkar or anyone else. He can run with a technocrat vice presidential candidate or senior Democratic Party official, and if or when he wins, he doesn't have to hand out any cabinet posts as a payback for the coalition."

Part of Yudhoyono's success has to be laid to attempts, not always successful, to clean out corruption. The country's Corruption Eradication Commission, or KPK, has jailed or indicted at least nine members of the House of Representatives, as well as a number of other senior government officials and businessmen. The arrested include members of Golkar, the Democratic Party, PDI-P and others. The house remains one of the most corrupt institutions in a country tied with eight other countries for 126<sup>th</sup> place in Transparency International's 2008 corruption index of 180 countries.

The economy, which was flattened by the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998, and hammered by the Bali bombings and the Asian tsunami of 2004, which claimed an estimated 170,000 lives in Indonesia alone, is still in positive territory despite the current global crisis. Partly because its domestic economy largely shields it from export slumps, Indonesia, along with the Philippines, is expected to chug along at 4.0 percent gross domestic product growth this year, while Singapore's GDP is expected to sink by nearly 5 percent. Thailand, at least partly due to political turmoil, could shrink by as much as 1.5 percent, and Malaysia's export-dependent economy is expected to contract by at least 1.2 percent or more. That gives Indonesians a certain sense of security. The malls remain packed; tourism is set for a moderate increase.

Against Yudhoyono, Megawati, a listless campaigner and a lackluster former president but one whose father's name - Sukarno, the founder of the country - still inspires affection, remains the front runner. Others include Prabowo, the former head of the Army Strategic Reserve unit Kostrad and a one-time Suharto son-in-law. Prabowo was dismissed from Kostrad for mobilizing troops around Jakarta without orders following Suharto's resignation, prompting speculation he was orchestrating a coup. He's also been implicated in the kidnappings and torture of student activists prior to Suharto's fall, and of instigating anti-Chinese riots in 1998, charges he denies. He was never convicted of anything, however, and his well-funded Gerindra party is blanketing the country with newspaper and television advertising. Jusuf Kalla, the Golkar head, is making a nominal run for the top job, but he is given little chance because he is an ethnic Buginese from South Sulawesi in a political scene dominated by Javanese.

Is there a wild card? If the Democratic Party falls short, the fear that it will sell its soul to the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS, is real. The PKS has built its support on attempts to bring Islamic purity to Indonesia's pluralistic society and vows to clean up corruption.

In 2004, the party endorsed Yudhoyono for the presidency and has largely run rings around the other Islamic parties with a mixture of savvy public relations and connections to the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood. It was considered to be the driving force behind the anti-pornography bill that Yudhoyono signed. Secularists worry that despite its relatively small size, it will end up as a kingmaker and the price of its support will be hegemony over the social agencies that supposedly govern public morals. But relatively few Indonesians, even among the 90 percent of the country that is at least nominally Muslim, want the hard-line Imams to tell them what to do. It remains to be seen what damage they might do.

It's a long shot and moderates of all stripes say it is unlikely.

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