

Elections without a Left in Indonesia - “A sigh of relief but not much to celebrate”

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Many progressive Indonesians must have breathed a sigh of relief when it became clear that Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo had won the presidential elections of July 9, instead of his rival Prabowo Subianto. But there is not much to celebrate; the elections showed the weakness of the Left in the country of 247 million people and the persisting legacy of the Suharto-dictatorship.

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These presidential elections, the fourth after the fall of Suharto 1998, were especially tense because there were only two candidates. The two symbolized very different attitudes towards Indonesia’s recent past of dictatorship and to the development of democracy.

Jokowi is the incumbent governor of Indonesia’s capital Jakarta, a city of over 10 million. He is a political phenomenon who entered the elections for governor of Jakarta as a relative outsider but won with a comfortable margin. His popularity was usually explained by pointing to his earlier track record as mayor of Surakarta, a much smaller city in central-Java. Unlike many powerful Indonesian politicians, Jokowi is not a representative of a political clan or a business tycoon who entered into politics as a side-business. His father ran a furniture workshop and before entering politics, Jokowi himself had a modestly successful business selling furniture. In office, he became known as modest, willing to interact with ‘common’ people and – a change from the widespread corruption and nepotism - honest. It’s a style of politics that is very different from the haughty elitism cultivated by Indonesian politicians since Suharto’s *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime. It made him very popular. It also brought him the label of ‘populist’, but in his policies there is little that reminds of, for example, the populism of Indonesia’s first president Sukarno. Instead, Jokowi aims to be a liberal technocrat; modern, efficient, and of course pro-business.

His rival on the other hand was in many ways a throwback to the *Orde Baru* era. Prabowo’s father was minister of economy and of research and technology during Suharto’s dictatorship. Prabowo joined the Indonesian army in 1970 and in 1976 he joined infamous Indonesian special forces, Kopassus. The *Orde Baru*’s founding act was the massacre of at the very least half a million of (supposed) communists, trade-unionists and other leftists in late 1965, early 1966. Units that would later form Kopassus played a central role in organizing and carrying out these massacres. Since then, Kopassus repeatedly drenched its hands in blood, violating human rights throughout the country, including during counter-insurgency campaigns in East Timor, Aceh and Papua. Prabobowo joined Kopassus a year after the Indonesian invasion of East-Timor that overthrew a popular and progressive government led by the East-Timorese independence movement FRETILIN. This was the beginning of a quarter century of brutal occupation that led to around 200.000 Timorese dead.

Prabowo 'saw action' in the Indonesian army's campaign against the East-Timorese resistance.

Prabowo was a rising star in the Suharto-dictatorship. Western governments supported Suharto's crushing of the Indonesian Left and his opening of the country to foreign capital. While Indonesian soldiers were rampaging through East-Timor and Aceh in the eighties, Prabowo was given 'anti-terrorist' training abroad. In 1980 and 1985, Prabowo received training in the United States and in 1981 he trained with the GSG-9 special forces of Germany. Prabowo was one of the dictators golden boys and in 1983 he married Suharto's daughter Siti Hediati Hariyadi. Through the years he rose to the rank of Lieutenant General, while he was implicated in human rights violations in Papua and East-Timor.

The fall of the *Orde Baru* regime was also the fall of Prabowo - at least temporarily. As the 1998 East Asian crisis impacted on Indonesia, Suharto's regime was rocked by mass protests against economic inequality, poverty, corruption and abuses of power. Prabowo's soldiers helped organize pogroms against the country's Chinese minority in a partially successful attempt to divert discontent against the historical scapegoat. He was directly involved in the abduction and torture of pro-democracy activists, including members of the radical-left Partai Rakyat Demokrat (PRD, People's Democratic Party) that played a prominent role in the anti-dictatorship movement. Thirteen of them never returned. When Prabowo's implication in the disappearances became known, he was discharged from the army and went into voluntary exile in Jordan. King Abdullah of Jordan is a personal friend.

After returning to Indonesia, Prabowo joined his brother, who had become rich as a Suharto crony, in business. Today Prabowo himself is a multi-millionaire. His properties include oil, gas and coal companies and palm oil plantations. For Prabowo, wealth isn't enough; already in 2004 he made a failed attempt to become the presidential candidate of Golkar, Suharto's former party. In 2008, his own party was set-up; the Gerakan Indonesia Raya or Great Indonesia Movement (Gerindra). In 2009 he tried to become a presidential candidate but instead only managed to win the position as candidate for the vice-presidency - with former president Megawati Soekarnoputri, daughter of Sukarno, as presidential candidate. The pair won only 27 per cent of the vote and lost to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known in the country as SBY), another Suharto-era general.

This time, Prabowo came closer, winning almost 47 per cent of the vote. Especially in the final weeks, the election campaign was a bitter fight. Although Jokowi started with a comfortable lead, in the weeks before the elections Prabowo was steadily gaining in support. Behind Prabowo rallied a coalition of the country's most reactionary forces, including Golkar, several Islamist parties, SBY's Partai Demokrat and the Islamic fundamentalist thugs of Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front). Jokowi's coalition was smaller and ran a poorly organized campaign that however benefited from more grass-roots support and the work of volunteers. Jokowi's coalition included Megawati Soekarnoputri's Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan (PDI-P), a secular party that thanks much of its support to the memory of Soekarnoputri's father, and the Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat, the party of yet another former general: Wiranto, Prabowo's commander during the 1998 violence.

Jokowi thanks his success largely to his 'man of the people' image; he campaigned with slogans describing him as '*jujur, sederhana, merakyat*' (honest, modest and close to the people) and *Jokowi-JK adalah kita* (Jokowi-JK is us). Jokowi combined this populist style with technocratic language about good governance, liberal democracy (including defending Indonesia as a nation of many different cultures and religions), development and fighting corruption. It was a message that appealed to the country's religious minorities - who have been subjected to increasing violence from sectarian militia like the FPI - and to the urban middle-classes who are frustrated with the widespread corruption and Indonesia's culture of impunity for human rights violators. It also brought Jokowi the support of many capitalists, like Sofyan Wanandi - chair of the Indonesian

Employers Association. Many of them would like to see a government and state that is more professional and more predictable.

Nostalgia for a dictator

Prabowo played on very different sentiments, trying to simultaneously channel Sukarno's populist nationalism and Suharto's propaganda of him as a benevolent autocrat as *Bapak Pembangunan Republik Indonesia*, Father of Indonesian Development. His campaigning team, which included soldiers that had been under his command during the 1998 pogroms and disappearances, appealed to feelings of nostalgia for the Suharto-era. It might be difficult to imagine nostalgia to such a bloody regime, but many Indonesians who weren't victimized by it remember the *Orde Baru* period as one of stability and steady progress. They contrast this with the rapid, often confusing changes of the post 1998 *Reformasi*-era and after, and yearn for order and strong leadership. The *Orde Baru* regime was probably one of the most corrupt governments in the world, but back then censorship hid the true scope of the rapaciousness of Suharto and his cronies. Today, the media is filled with news of widespread corruption. Media and government report record GDP growth-rates and the growth of the a new middle-class but many people don't see it. For example, Indonesia's public infrastructures is one of the worst in the region. And in addition to corruption, the government seems to be characterized by incompetence - which in turn is partly the result of the practice of politicians and high bureaucrats of giving away public service jobs to supporters and family.

The Prabowo camp also appealed to xenophobic and bigoted attitudes. Since over two decades conservative interpretations of Islam have been on the rise in Indonesia. In the final weeks before the elections, rumors and pamphlets that attacked Jokowi as a non-Muslim, a Jew, a Christian and Chinese and his supporters as 'communists' - that old *Orde Baru* bugbear - increasingly circulated. Especially in the conservative country-side, this tactic brought Prabowo votes.

In addition to firm leadership, Prabowo promised he would defend the interests of 'the little people'. He claimed among other things he would end the system of outsourcing, the contracting out of a business process to a third-party that often employs workers on precarious contracts. The multimillionaire even talked about an '*ekonomi rakyat*', a people's economy. This was pure demagoguery, lacking concrete proposals or credibility considering the track record of the political crooks around him and of himself as one of the country's big capitalists. Chauvinism and populist demagoguery blended together in Prabowo's ranting against the influence of 'foreigners' in Indonesia. This was in part an attack on ethnically Chinese Indonesians who in racist imagery are all wealthy merchants.

Trade-Unions divided

In recent years, the Indonesian trade-union has become increasingly militant, organizing mass-demonstrations and strikes, with two nation-wide strikes that involved millions as the most visible signs. Jokowi however alienated many workers in Jakarta when he refused their demands during large strikes at the end of 2013 and had little to offer them during his campaign. With his demagoguery, Prabowo tried to capitalize on workers discontent. Outsourcing for example has been one of the recurring targets of workers mobilizations. Prabowo succeeded in attracting workers who are frustrated that they see so little of the supposed economic success of the country.

The *Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia* (KSPI, Indonesian Trade Union Confederation) played a prominent role in the recent mobilizations. It's lead in a rather top-down fashion by the charismatic

Said Iqbal who entered into an agreement with Prabowo promising to support him. This agreement was based on 10 demands of workers or what it was called SEPULTURA (*Sepuluh Tuntutan Buruh dan Rakyat*). This document promised among other things a 30 per cent increase in the minimum wage, healthcare- and pensions and cheap housing for workers. Said Iqbal is also president of the *Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal* (FSPMI, Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers' Unions) whose uniformed Garda Metal functioned as stewards of large trade-union mobilizations. In past weeks, Indonesian leftists found themselves trying to convince some of the militant workers they have worked with in the past years not too support an Orde Baru thug like Prabowo.

This highlighted the weakness of the Indonesian Left. The *Orde Baru* physically annihilated what had been one of the largest left-wing movements in the world. Decades of repression and propaganda against any kind of left-wing ideas broke any kind of organizational and ideological continuity. Today's Indonesian Left is not only very small, it's also marginalized because of the continuing strong social stigma on Left ideas. It is now more isolated than around the turn of the century, when the influence of the PRD was stronger. The veterans of the Indonesian Left are the small numbers of activists who entered the anti-dictatorship movement in the mid to late nineties and remain on the Left.

Few of the radical Left groups have real organic roots in the workers movement. Left groups have been very active in the recent workers mobilizations and in organizing workers. But a large social and cultural distance still separates the radical activists and the workers they are active among. Many Left activists, often former students and full-timers supported by their organizations, live very different lives from those of the workers they try to represent. Only rarely do workers join the political groups. Often the leftists organizers, not workers, remain the real leadership of the workers organizations they set up. Such 'red' trade-unions organized by radical leftists remain relatively small. By far the largest of the radical unions is KASBI (*Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia* or Congress of Indonesia Unions Alliance) with around 250.000 members. KSPI has almost 3 million members.

Slow recovery from defeat

The Indonesian Left as it is now is of course still deeply characterized by the total defeat the Suharto-regime inflicted on any kind of progressive movement and by the experiences of the 1998 crisis. Back then, the PRD, an organization with never more than a few hundred members, found itself propelled to the front line of a huge mass movement. Many of the now existing socialist groups in Indonesia have their roots in splits from the PRD. Many share an attitude similar to what Daniel Bensaïd called 'hasty Leninism' in his discussion of the French radical-left after May '68. In both instances, small groups of often young radicals suddenly found themselves playing central roles in mass movements, scrambling to find ways to lead the movement in a revolutionary direction. In both cases, many cherished overblown hopes of imminent revolution and vanguard pretensions that were out of proportion to their influence on the course of the movement.

One way Indonesian Left groups have tried to politicize the recent movements is by introducing slogans that link social militancy to political radicalism. In different movements, like the protests against cutting fuel subsidies or for wage increases, Left activists for example used slogans about 'national industrialization under workers control'. And in recent elections, a slogan of part of the Left was 'reject bourgeoisie elections, build a people's party'. Such slogans remain abstract in the absence of any actor that can keep take them up.

The Left struggled to determine its position towards the recent elections. Because of the Left's

weakness and the restrictive demands on political parties in elections, any Left candidacy was impossible. In recent years, the majority of the Left called for 'resisting' the elections but it hasn't been able to build a real sustained campaign around it. Likewise, calls to focus on the building of a workers party remain isolated from the social developments. The one force that could potentially build such a party is the trade-union movement, not the small propaganda groups of the Left. A part of the Left, including independent scholars and activists, decided to support Jokowi. They hope that he will extend democratic space in the country and make it easier for the Left to campaign in the future.

Another (small) part of the political Left even fell for the 'anti-imperialist' demagoguery of Prabowo and campaigned for the businessman. The most startling thing was to see some of the victims of the abductions in '98, former members of the PRD, join the Prabowo campaign and declare the past didn't matter anymore. It's not only former PRD-members who supported Prabowo. In several areas, PRD-members campaigned for him, sometimes even joining his Gerindra party. After several unsuccessful attempts to build a national Left wing force in the century's first decade, the PRD collapsed into Indonesian nationalism. Nowadays, they seem to have adopted the idea that human rights and democracy are matters of secondary importance, to be dealt with after the country has broken free from the domination of foreign capital. This notion rejects any idea of self-emancipation of Indonesia's poor and exploited, instead putting hope in a 'savior from above'.

Realizing the need to have an orientation to these elections that went beyond general slogans, a part of the Left campaigned against the continuing influence of the military in Indonesian politics; an implicit rejection of Prabowo without giving support to Jokowi. Together with other social and workers organizations, *Politik Rakyat* (Popular Politics) organized a series of commemorations of the death of Marsinah, a female worker activist who was raped and killed by the military in 1993. After her death, Marsinah became a symbol of different social struggles in Indonesia and of the violence of the military. These commemorations were an attempt to link workers concerns to those of women and the struggle against militarism. Such initiatives had some success but they remain small.

So what now? Prabowo has declared his defeat was the result of election fraud but few people give credibility to his complaints and his coalition is unlikely to hold. Jokowi's election did create new hope among progressive segments of Indonesian society; he is after Gus Dur only the second Indonesian president who symbolizes distance, and not continuity, with the *Orde Baru* regime. But Jokowi is likely to continue the same kind of neoliberal policies as SBY. He already declared he will continue to cut subsidies on fuel for example.

But unlike Prabowo, Jokowi is not expected to actually further decrease democracy. But it seems unlikely Jokowi will keep promises like prosecuting human rights violators and ending Indonesia's culture of impunity. Prosecuting one prominent human rights violator would open up the possibility of prosecuting the whole old regime since human rights violations were systematic. Of course, unlike Prabowo, Jokowi is not a human rights violator, but he is still surrounded by them, like general Wiranto. Another close associate of Jokowi is the former head of the Indonesian intelligence agency, Abdullah Mahmud Hendropriyono. Hendropriyono is implicated, among other things, in the murder of prominent human rights activist Munir in 2004. Outside Indonesia, Jokowi's running mate for the vice-president, Jusuf Kalla, is maybe best known for his appearance in Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary about the killers of 1965, *The Act of Killing*. There, he can be seen praising the murders and explaining the necessity of political gangsters 'to get things done'.

The challenge for Indonesian leftists to help build a political expression to the new labor militancy remains. Common political work that goes beyond the small ranks of the Left groups is crucial for this. Here, there is room for some optimism. Many of the grassroots volunteers that supported Jokowi will be disappointed by him but they have been politicized and the Left groups could work

with them. And another wave of strikes and demonstrations is a possibility this October and November when, like each year, the minimum wages are determined anew. Jokowi's victory was a moment for relief - but only a moment.

Alex de Jong, Zely Ariane

P.S.

* From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>