

# On the June 27 local elections in Indonesia

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**On June 27, Indonesians flocked to polling stations across the country to vote in local elections. On the ballot were mayors, district heads, and governors in 171 of Indonesia's more than 500 electorates. In the mid 1960s, the Indonesian military massacred hundreds of thousands of radicals. The country's left still hasn't recovered.**

The results of the June 27 elections [1] delivered few surprises. Parties that have a long-term base of support in this or that region retained that support. The majority of the thirteen parties in parliament back President Joko Widodo — only three are outside the government — and a majority of new governors are allies of Widodo. The one twist came at the local level, where some party branches that support Widodo at the national level threw their weight behind parties that oppose him. In the key region of North Sumatra, Widodo's party went down in defeat under these circumstances. Both the pro- and anti-Widodo parties are claiming victory in the aftermath.

More than anything, though, the elections once again threw into sharp relief the barren terrain of Indonesian politics — the vicious result of the 1965 massacres [2], which saw hundreds of thousands of leftists slaughtered at the hands of the Indonesian military. The Communist Party, then one of the largest in the world, was wiped out in one fell swoop. Leftist ideas became verboten. Popular mass-based organizations were exterminated. Since the massacres, a tight control on historical knowledge has eliminated almost all memory of past popular struggles or left-wing thought. Marxism remains legally banned, with significant penalties (including imprisonment) for “spreading widely” such ideas.

This isn't to say that there's a shortage of parties in present-day Indonesia. Fourteen different formations participated in the recent elections, deploying a range of symbols and rhetorical styles to differentiate themselves. Some adopted a semi-secular, moderate nationalist rhetoric; others a religious, mainly Islamic rhetoric; still others tried to merge the two, proclaiming themselves “national religious.”

But the differences, for the most part, are not deep. There is no formation articulating a left politics — no social-democratic or labor party, no party of class disaffection. The union movement, while much more active than a few decades ago, is still small and divided, with the biggest unions coopted by one or another of the registered elite-owned parties. There is no peasant movement, despite a substantial village and rural population and frequent peasant protests over land confiscation. Outspoken social-democratic or socialist public figures are nonexistent on the national political stage, even at the margins.

Why, then, are there so many parties? The answer lies in the character of the Indonesian capitalist class — the dominant, and only, class with political organizations in the country.

Indonesia, like most Third World nations, has remained economically underdeveloped despite its robust growth rate — on average, between 4 to 6 percent since the late 1960s. Its per capita income is just US \$4,000. It has virtually no industrial base — no domestic capacity to produce plant and

machinery, and for the size of the country, insignificant iron and steel production. No more than 5 million out of a workforce of 160 million are employed in medium or large manufacturing enterprises.

Indonesia, it could be said, has less a “national capitalist class” than a “domestic capitalist class.” Capitalists who deploy their capital nationally are rare, and even some of those are based in sectors with no real production weight — the richest capitalists are connected to cigarette production. Many of the bigger capitalists trace their origins to the Suharto era, when links to centralized, authoritarian state power helped them flourish.

The vast majority of Indonesian capitalists are relatively small operators. Their enterprises service a local market: an administrative unit, a province, or a few provinces. This parochialism bleeds over into their politics. Their political cultural style reflects the dominant cultural elements in their areas, and the local branches of political parties relate to their voter base through the vocabulary of these cultures: one variant or another of Islam; of the more eclectic Javanese, semi-secular cultures; eastern Indonesian Christianity; and so on.

“Welfare benefits” may be promised, but it occurs in the style of a local patron offering a benefit to his or her clients. To some extent this dynamic is being eroded in the sprawling urban centers of atomized proletarians and semi-proletarians, but no viable alternative has yet appeared. Even in the overcrowded urban hamlets, almost all community organizing is rooted in a patron-client culture.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the localist character of the parties is that all of them — to varying but significant degrees — have their primary voting base in specific regions, even if they’re ostensibly national parties.

Another line of differentiation is those political elements that relate to the general needs of the domestic capitalist class and those whose outlook is still framed by their history as state-dependent capitalists. The first pole, represented by the current president, Joko Widodo, and all the nine parties supporting him, are happy with “democracy” (that is, a formal pluralism for all parties of the bourgeoisie). They recognize the need for freedom for ongoing transactions between all the fragments, and are prepared to accept the messiness of making and remaking coalitions that goes with it. The other pole hankers for the days when a centralized authoritarian government acted firmly, unimpeded by formal pluralism. They want the kind of regime that once allowed them to flourish, and with much less hassle.

Associated with this second pole are the few parties or advocates, openly or otherwise, of an Islamic state of some kind — that is, a state where religious law and religious authority (i.e. of selected religious scholars) is preeminent. They loathe what they see as the concessions to secular culture that electoral pluralism has produced.

In the national parliament, the parties are divided into three blocs. The first is a group of eight parties that support the Widodo government — the transactional “democrats.” The second is composed of two parties: Gerindra, headed by former Suharto general Prabowo Subianto, and the Welfare and Justice Party, a conservative Islamist party. These two parties also regularly align themselves with extra-parliamentary conservative Islamic groups. This bloc acts as an “opposition” to the Widodo government.

The third bloc comprises a single party, the Democrat Party, headed by former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which bills itself as “national religious” and recruits liberal intellectuals as well as more conservative politicians. It regards itself as a party that can bridge the gap between different parts of the capitalist class, accommodating the needs of both small and medium capital

and the ex-cronies.

Despite their differences, all three blocs favor the current economic strategy, which has been pursued for more than two decades: support for capitalist-led growth and, more recently, wage suppression. They eschew redistribution save for a minimal World Bank-sanctioned social safety net. And they do what they can to keep discussions of past human rights violations out of the public arena.

The three bloc differentiation apparent at the national level is often absent at the local level, with the various parties formally aligning themselves with whomever seems likely to help them get elected or attain positions — even those they purportedly oppose at the national level. This makes it difficult to discern which of the national-level blocs performed the best in the recent elections. Looking forward to next year's presidential election, it appears the contest will still be between the current president, Widodo, and his 2014 challenger, Prabowo. Formal nominations by party alliances of their presidential candidates will take place this August.

So, in Indonesia, it's choice with no choice. Of course, this is not just a feature of contemporary Indonesian politics. Most electoral systems in capitalist countries, especially in this era, offer no real choice (although the Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn phenomena indicate that is changing in some places).

But Indonesia is particularly bereft. The extreme and totalitarian character of the suppression in Indonesia, not only of organization but of popular traditions and past progressive ideologies, means that a significant dissident minority current has still not made itself felt. Only the capitalist class, in its variegated forms, is represented politically. For popular forces, Indonesia is a veritable desert — a daunting environment for anything verdant to grow.

The longer this goes on, with social and cultural conditions failing to keep up with the aspirations of young Indonesians, most of whom are not part of the bourgeoisie, the more likely the eventual explosion will be shot through with both class tensions and generational conflict.

**Max Lane**

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**P.S.**

- "The Country With No Left", Jacobin, 07.15.2018:  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/07/indonesia-elections-joko-widodo-capitalist-class>
  - Max Lane has been a socialist activist in Australia for fifty years and is the author of *Unfinished Nation: Indonesia Before and After Suharto* and *Catastrophe in Indonesia* as well as the translator of the *Buru Quartet* novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer.
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**Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/indonesia-election-season-kicks-crucial-local-polls-180626132525097.html>

[2] Alex De Jong, ESSF (article 44703), [1965 to 1966: Indonesia's Red Slaughter](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44703>