



Indonesia's Presidential Election: Will Democracy Survive by Alphonse F. LaPorta

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President Joko Widodo. Or is it President Prabowo Subianto?

Over 700,000 Indonesian voters went to the polls July 9 to elect a new president. It was the third time a president was to be directly elected by Indonesians under constitutional reforms enacted after the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998. This year the people's choice, if the exit polls are to be believed, is Widodo, or Jokowi as he is popularly known.

But former General Prabowo has challenged the heretofore reliable quick count results by citing spurious exit polls showing him with a 1.8 percent victory margin. Instead of conceding in what the authoritative polls said was an average 5.8 percent vote spread in Jokowi's favor, Prabowo is pressing ahead with challenges to the official count, which is expected to be delivered July 22, with the prospect of an appeal to the Constitutional Court. In doing so, he has launched a public relations campaign to convince the public that he has been wronged by politically motivated polls and media friendly to the Jokowi campaign.

Less than six months ago, it appeared that the populist Jokowi was headed for a big win, but a late endorsement, damp enthusiasm, and lackluster campaign by the nationalist Party of Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) helped to erode the better than 12 point lead Jokowi enjoyed in April and May. The PDI-P is headed by Megawati, Sukarno's daughter, who herself was president in 2002-2004. Mega's daughter, Puan Maharani, chaired the party's inept and disorganized campaign, while Jokowi himself was constantly fending off social media smears alleging he was Chinese, a Christian, or a communist, or all of these things. Jokowi repeatedly was compelled to defend the authenticity of his Javanese Muslim background, to the extent of going to Mecca on the "minor haj" during the brief "cooling off" period between the end of the official campaign and voting day.

In contrast, Prabowo and his Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) mounted a well-organized, lavishly financed and media-savvy campaign that played to popular desires for more decisive national leadership – a reaction to the perceived weak leadership of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who is completing his second term. Prabowo spoke of a return to the "Guided Democracy" of Sukarno and a restoration of the 1945 Constitution with its strong presidency, but shorn of

the human rights safeguards, limits on military involvement in politics, and democratization measures enacted in constitutional amendments in 1999 and 2001. To underscore his promise of strong leadership, Prabowo adopted Sukarno's flamboyant style, aping his mannerisms, wearing white bush suits, and riding thoroughbred horses in his sports arena appearances.

Prabowo assembled a large coalition of secular and Islamic parties, including Suharto's former political vehicle Golkar. To attract the Muslim parties, Gerindra's platform pledged to uphold "religious purity," which many read as code word for enforcing Sunni orthodoxy against non-conformist sects, Shiites, Christians, and others. According to an authoritative Australian academician, Prabowo has enlisted the hardline Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI) and Forum Ukhawah Islamiyah (FUI), which have been responsible for lawless actions against perceived apostates and non-Muslims. His appeal to the urban middle and upper classes brought campaign money and media access, including the ability to finance friendly polling organizations, social media campaigns, and heavy television coverage. One of his campaign advisers, according to reliable media reports, was Rob Allyn, a "dirty tricks" specialist from US political campaigns.

There are concerns that Prabowo will buy off vote-counting officials at the district and provincial levels and challenge pro-Jokowi rulings by the National Election Commission and the Constitutional Court, in the process turning his supporters into the streets. Indeed, allegations against Prabowo during his military career for the abduction of anti-Suharto student activists, the suppression of student demonstrations, and fomenting anti-Chinese riots in 1997-1998 – events which the National Human Rights Commission declared recently were still open cases – raise questions about his suitability for the presidency, inasmuch as a board of senior generals removed him from command of the Army's strategic reserve for complicity in these events. His rejection of democratic reforms in the last 15 years, including the direct election of presidents, seems to confirm his determination to seize the presidency by any means possible.

The implications of the dispute over the presidential vote are considerable. In the campaign debates, Jokowi seemed to emerge as the substantive "winner" against Prabowo's bombast and generalities. Jokowi took largely mainstream, albeit slightly nationalistic, positions on economic management and foreign affairs, but outlined a strong domestic agenda for bureaucratic reform, anti-corruption, and improving the health and education systems. He specifically endorsed a strong role for Indonesia in ASEAN. On territorial disputes with China, he declared himself "ready to rumble" – backed up by national power – if there are aggressive moves against Indonesian territory or sea space.

Prabowo, meanwhile, alleged that Indonesia is too big for ASEAN and that his government would aspire to leadership on the global stage. He took a softer stance on the potential for Chinese territorial claims, indicating that Indonesia would be open to negotiations and a businesslike settlement. Also, while taking what he said was a pro-business stance on economic management, he decried the foreign control of Indonesian resource industries and said that foreign investment agreements in key sectors would be up for renegotiation, thus reflecting favoritism toward Suharto's former cronies and special interests. In this, Prabowo is reflecting the "scratchy nationalism" of his running mate, Hatta Rajasa, former coordinating minister for economic affairs in President Yudhoyono's second term.

To compound Jokowi's difficulties, the PDI-P and its allies will be in a weak position in the new Parliament against a larger coalition assembled by Gerindra. If Jokowi is the winner, he likely will face a hostile legislature, although his vice presidential running mate, Jusuf Kalla, formerly chairman of Golkar and vice president in Yudhoyono's first term, possesses political and persuasive skills needed to manage relations with the fractious body. The parliamentary skirmishing, however, has already begun with talk that Gerindra's opposition coalition may deny Puan Maharani the speakership. The penchant for power sharing and coalition-building will make it difficult for the ruling PDI-P and its allies to enact contentious economic and other legislation.

Decision day for the National Election Commission will be July 22, or possibly a day or two earlier, as the official ballot counts are sent from the district level to the provincial election commissions and finally tallied on the national level. Although vote-buying may be attempted, the vulnerability is at the provincial level where money politics and political party pressures will be greatest. That said, to change the quick count result Prabowo would have to shift 1.3 million votes, a considerable task. Fortunately, other than some local contests, the election commission has been reliable. If a further appeal is made, the Constitutional Court – which is trying to recover from the recent conviction of its chief judge for bribery – is going to be very circumspect in making a decision to overturn the final count in the popular vote.

For the United States and others for whom democratic values are important, a Prabowo victory would pose difficulties in terms of the legitimacy of his government, the unresolved human rights cases, and winding back the clock on democratization. Washington can all but forget the Comprehensive Partnership agreed with President Yudhoyono to advance bilateral relations across a broad front, including business and investment. An outcome favoring Jokowi, on the other hand, would ensure the continuation of open and democratic government. His emphasis on reform and popular concerns would be good news for Indonesia's people and international supporters. There is little doubt which choice benefits Indonesia most.