

The Indonesian Presidential Election: SBY Cruising to a Second Term? By Alphonse F. La Porta

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Not surprisingly, the Indonesian presidential election to be held on July 8 looks differently in Jakarta than from abroad. Foreign observers, bolstered by optimistic polling data, see President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, or SBY as he is familiarly known, cruising to a first-round victory with a majority close to the 61 percent he garnered in 2004.

The view from Jakarta, however, is much more complicated. The Jakarta “street” tells us that Vice President Jusuf Kalla is waging a canny and effective campaign in which deep pockets and media savvy are contributing factors. Also, the “*Berbudi*” or “success” team of SBY and Central Bank Governor Boediono has been tarred with the brush of “neo-liberalism,” which implies subservience to Western economic doctrine and overseas corporate interests. At the same time, the two opposition vice-presidential candidates – retired generals Wiranto, who is paired with Kalla, and Prabowo Subianto, who is paired with former President Megawati Soekarnoputri – have unexpectedly found popular favor and legitimacy despite their tarnished pasts and alleged human rights abuses.

A Second Round?

Even the most jaded observers accept that SBY will win a second five-year term. But will he win in the first round on July 8 or will there be a second round runoff in September?

The normally placid and low-key president and his equally even-tempered running mate, a renowned technocrat who has served both Megawati and SBY in key economic positions, show no signs of worry against the spirited and well-heeled opposition candidates. Early polls by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) showed SBY-Boediono with a commanding lead of over 70 percent at the end of May. At that time, Megawati was favored by 16.6 percent of those polled, while Kalla garnered only 6.2 percent (the “don’t knows” accounted for 6.7 percent). A face-off between SBY and Megawati showed SBY winning by 76 percent to Megawati’s 17 percent.

Since the LSI polls were taken, the SBY-Boediono team’s popularity has faded somewhat. Another polling organization, the Policy and Development Strategy Research Center, showed that Kalla’s popularity increased by nearly 5 percent during the past month, while SBY and Megawati dropped by 5.24 and 2.09 percent, respectively. Midway into the

campaign, pollsters still believe that SBY could still win with 60 percent of the vote.

The issues favor SBY and his running mate. The top three qualities sought by the voters, according to LSI, are integrity, empathy, and competence. SBY has staked his campaign on a strong anti-corruption platform, and he has bolstered the government’s performance during his first term and deliberately chose “Mr. Clean” – Boediono – as his running mate to underscore his determination to pursue wrongdoers (including his son’s father-in-law, who was sent to jail last week on a graft charge). In comparison, all the opposition candidates are vulnerable on integrity issues.

Campaigning and the Media

Backing by media moguls and businessmen, including Surya Paloh, the owner of Indonesia’s largest private television network, is burnishing Vice President Kalla’s image. He has appeared in well-staged events, has demonstrated finesse and empathy in dealing with the public, and is projecting himself as the “Islamic candidate,” having gained endorsements from Indonesia’s two largest religious organizations, the socially progressive Muhammadiyah and the conservative Nahdlatul Ulama. Somewhat cynically, Kalla’s and Wiranto’s wives appear in Muslim dress, while Wiranto is exploiting his musical skills on the campaign trail.

Meanwhile, Megawati is appealing to the secularist, nationalist vote. Although her personal style is more regal and remote than that of Kalla or SBY, she inherits the deeply entrenched nationalistic following inspired by her father, Soekarno, together with the non-Muslim parties, including many ethnic Chinese voters. Her running mate, Prabowo, a notorious accused human rights abuser and Soeharto son-in-law, is badly flawed but has found a degree of public forgiveness in attempting to appeal to farmers, fishermen, and petty tradespeople.

Tarred But Not Feathered

Some in the Muslim parties aligned with the president as well as the opposition have taken aim at SBY’s political partner Boediono on two counts: being a “neo-liberal” and economic internationalist and being an insufficiently devout Muslim. Boediono, who radiates economic conservatism and who is known for his personal piety and integrity, is the “very model of a perfect technocrat,” to paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan. He conspicuously is not aligned with business or other special interests, thus he fits SBY’s definition of a perfect running mate.

The “neo-lib” accusation, with all its overtones from U.S. politics in which “liberal” has been portrayed as a dirty word, has raised a lively public debate on economic theory and the degree to which the government is beholden to foreign interests, whether multilateral financial institutions, foreign

investors, or the United States. Kalla often found himself on the wrong side of economic policies favored by technocrats in SBY's Cabinet, and thus is playing the economic nationalist card.

And the issues?

“Neo-liberalism” aside, very little differentiates one set of candidates from the others. The main factors are public reputation (SBY commands the high ground on integrity) and various gradations of populism and economic nationalism. The first presidential debate on June 18 revealed only one point of friction: Megawati's accusation that the SBY government did little to stem the mud flow that is affecting a wide area of the Sidoarjo district in East Java. The “mud geyser” allegedly was caused by faulty oil drilling practices by a company then owned by Abu Rizal Bakrie, now Coordinating Minister for Social Affairs in SBY's Cabinet. SBY countered by asking Megawati what she would do to stem the mud disaster; predictably, however, there was no answer.

The televised debates of the candidates in fact are not debates at all and consist mainly of expositions of well-known views. In Indonesian terms, it would be impolite if political candidates engaged in *ad hominem* attacks or truly penetrating direct questioning.

It's Showtime

SBY can claim a good record on implementing “pro-poor” policies, and efforts to improve government responsiveness are likely to be featured in his second administration.

National defense has attracted attention because of three recent fatal crashes by military aircraft. Some jingoists are trying to stir up a spat with Malaysia over resource-rich Ambalat Island off eastern Kalimantan (Borneo), but this is a comic-opera debate in which the two ASEAN countries (and Malay cousins) are not likely to engage other than rhetorically.

The remaining issue on which the public has yet to engage to a great degree are the human rights accusations against both Wiranto and Prabowo. Both have been investigated several times and some U.S. observers have vainly hoped for a strong public reaction against their candidacies. Neither of these retired generals would be welcomed warmly, if at all, by the United States and, if either is elected, the Obama administration's effort to achieve a “Comprehensive Partnership” with Indonesia could be set back. A more energetic SBY-Boediono campaign that would capitalize on the flaws of the opposing candidates seems needed to produce a first round win.