

Teamwork rules in Indonesia

Behind The Headlines by Bunn Nagara



In the 'banquet' that is Indonesia's presidential election, parties partner themselves off in a dance to bag the prize of the presidency

TO appreciate Indonesia's fledgling democracy better, understanding its uniqueness helps.

The country's post-Suharto democratic gains are real and manifold. But the system is not without certain idiosyncrasies that help define it.

Whether the character of Indonesian democracy limits or expands its scope remains a moot point. The features of the system certainly become more pronounced in the run-up to each presidential election, like now.

Since the present is a continuation of the past by every means, some understanding of recent history should prove useful.

The swift flowering of democracy in 1999 after more than three decades of Suharto's Golkar Party rule produced a multiplicity of political parties with supposedly diverse agendas. The choice of individual candidates, if not also their platforms, broadened for the electorate like never before.

As for some republics with a presidential system, legislative elections come a few months before a presidential election with the razzmatazz reserved for the presidential contest.

However, the abundance of political parties and the minimal ideological differences between them have turned election campaigns into battles between party coalitions rather than between individual parties.

Legislative elections first provide a measure of each party's popularity and strength relative to those of the others. This scene-setting is useful in helping to determine the likely combinations of party partnerships to come.

Whether a party offers its leader as presidential or vice-presidential candidate indicates the status between them. So does the way a party approaches another for a prospective partnership, and the way that approach is reciprocated.

The glamour and hype of individual presidential candidates, and their choice of running mate for vice-president, then add to the intrigue and appeal (or otherwise) of each pairing. Indonesia's electoral experience following Suharto's political demise has been instructive.

In the 1990s, PDI-P and Golkar were engaged in the battle of the decade. PDI-P's Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of founding president Sukarno, was seen as a brusque challenge to residual elements of the decades-old, male, military-dominated establishment of the Suharto era.

Indonesia's economic misfortunes added to the dizzying heights of political possibilities of the day. The 1997 Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia hard, the rupiah fell to nearly a quarter of its value, and President Suharto stepped down the following year.

Yet irony was never too far away. Megawati's PDI-P best represented progressive reforms, or *reformasi*, but her untested appeal as national leader drew heavily from her family name harking back to earlier days of Indonesian national pride.

A presidential candidate's individual merit, character, personality and image matter – but not necessarily in that order. Megawati had her chance in the office but failed to impress, the more so her immediate predecessor Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid as first post-Golkar beneficiary.

In the 2004 election, the Democratic Party (PDI) of Megawati's vice-president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono paired off with Golkar. But since junior partner Golkar held more than 25% of the popular vote to PDI's 7%, the partnership would not last.

The strains in the two parties' partnership simmered until early 2009 when the next election was due. By then, Golkar had sounded confident enough to consider another party as junior partner to offer the vice-presidency to.

It even toyed with the idea of doing better than most expectations in that April's legislative elections. It thought aloud that if proven strong enough, it would want both the presidency and the vice-presidency for itself.

But PDI-P was also confident, talking of offering Golkar the vice-presidency if it did not insist on competing for the presidency. Golkar's Jusuf Kalla eventually ran for the presidency with Gen. (Rtd) Wiranto as running mate, with the pairing losing miserably by coming in third.

That was a sobering experience for Jusuf personally, particularly when he was then the country's vice-president and Golkar's chairman. He seemed to withdraw even from the party leadership after that.

In May 2012, Jusuf announced that he would not challenge Golkar's choice of Aburizal Bakrie as the party's presidential candidate for the 2014 election, even when it was no secret that Jusuf was more electable.

Surveys then had indicated Jusuf as a better choice for Golkar. Polls also showed that although Golkar was the second-biggest party on seats, it was the country's most popular party.

But in June Golkar officially declared Aburizal its presidential candidate. That moment sealed Golkar's fate as a secondary party at best for this year's election.

The subsequent rise and rise of Jakarta Governor Joko “Jokowi” Widodo of PDI-P in the presidential stakes duly confirmed that. Golkar would soon be left to lick its wounds, and Jusuf to philosophise.

On March 14 this year, weeks before parties needed to announce their presidential candidates, Megawati declared Jokowi PDI-P's presidential choice. Jokowi was then seen to be at the height of his popularity.

In legislative elections the following month, PDI-P became the most popular party with the largest haul of votes from the most populous provinces. It thus pushed aside President Susilo's PDI in those provinces, and toppled Golkar from pole position nationally.

Golkar fretted over its diminished status for two months. Until last week, no party would approach it for a prospective partnership.

Eventually, Golkar swallowed its pride and endorsed Jokowi on May 13, effectively resigning itself to being PDI-P's junior partner. By then, the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the NasDem Party had already allied themselves with PDI-P.

Golkar's support for PDI-P is co-authored by Aburizal and Megawati as party chief, since it promises to benefit both.

For PDI-P, it represents not only a stronger alliance and a curtailment of rival Gerindra's strength, since Golkar could have swung another way. Besides possible endorsement of Gerindra, it might also have paired off with Susilo's PDI in considering Golkar's Sultan Hamengkubuwono X as presidential candidate.

For Aburizal personally, joining PDI-P's team in endorsing Jokowi is a face-saving way out. It also makes eminent sense in joining the strongest team, since even with recent dips in appeal Jokowi still enjoys a 15% lead or more over Gerindra's Prabowo Subianto.

However, some in Golkar see Aburizal's move as premature and thus improper, since the party had yet to decide formally on such a move (scheduled for today). But amid more pressing issues, that is not seen as a major problem.

All of this makes Jusuf a natural choice as Jokowi's running mate. Not only is this due reward for Golkar's support, but Jusuf himself would provide Jokowi's presidency what it needs most: experience in government, business connections, Islamic credentials and grassroots support in the eastern provinces.

Meanwhile, kingmaker Megawati is not about to be eclipsed by Jokowi. On Wednesday she described him as being only a party official appointed as presidential candidate and assigned to fulfil the party's programme.

PDI-P may have given Jokowi a party machinery to rise to the presidency as well or better than any other individual before. But Jokowi himself has given PDI-P at least as much: electability, the best chances yet of beating all other parties, and an image to match.

In riding on a Jokowi-Jusuf ticket, PDI-P would effectively consign all the other presidential hopefuls to at least five years of soul-searching. But then politics is always unpredictable, and it is no exception in Indonesia.

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