

# The age of plural constituencies

**POPULIST VEIN:** The main contenders for the post of president seem to be reaching out to a broader section of Indonesian society

**T**HE spectacular victory of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which has far exceeded the expectations of all pundits and analysts, may be symptomatic of the age we live in: with such an overwhelming victory, the BJP seems to have exceeded its own natural Hindu constituency and managed to win the support of India's minorities, including Muslims and Christians.

That non-Hindu minorities may have lent their support to Modi and the BJP is also telling of how India's complex society is now rendered all the more complex by the proliferation of new groupings and subject-positions.

Looking to the Indonesian elections closer to home, the same ground shift may well be in the offing, too. Judging by the lacklustre performance of all the parties at the April 9 legislative elections, it seems that Indonesians are unclear about who to vote for, and why.

After a decade of shaky democracy that seems to have run its course, many younger Indonesians seem sceptical about politics in general, and all politicians, too. (Surveys suggest that the private sector and media have gained most of the public's trust, more than 80 per cent, while political parties have won only 50 per cent of the public's faith.)

In such a situation, the main contenders for the presidential race — Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and former general Prabowo Subianto — seem to be reaching out to a broader section of Indonesian society. Already, we see Prabowo's Gerindra Party forming alliances with Islamists from the United Development Party (PPP) and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), while Jokowi's party is aligned to Nasdem (National Democrat), National Awakening Party (PKB) and perhaps Golkar



(From right) President candidate from PDIP, **Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo**, PDIP chairman **Puan Maharani** and former PDIP president **Megawati Soekarnoputri** with Nasdem chairman **Surya Paloh** and PKB chairman **Muhaimin Iskandar** during their coalition announcement in Jakarta ahead of the July presidential election. AFP pic

(Party of the Functional Groups). In such a situation, there seem to be shifting alliances aplenty and no firm ideological basis upon which they are formed.

Both presidential candidates will probably try to do a "Modi" in their campaigns: to reach out to a broad section of Indonesian society and perhaps even beyond their natural political constituencies and party loyalists.

Prabowo and Jokowi have already begun to tap into the populist vein, articulating a discourse of economic nationalism and even calling for the nationalisation of foreign capital assets, which has understandably upset and worried foreign investors.

But the real challenge that both candidates face is trying to find that common denominator that would help them string together a chain of equivalence that would bring together the disparate class, communal, ethnic and religious groups of the country.

Modi's genius was his ability to somehow tap into the grievances of the Indian poor and marginalised, ranging from the lower castes to non-Hindu minorities such as Indian Mus-

lims. Notwithstanding his own complex and controversial record, he has managed to do something that the ruling Congress party singularly failed to accomplish: to cobble together a vision for India that does not — at least at face value — alienate other sectors of society. This is what is so badly needed in the Indonesian campaign at the moment, more than empty promises, celebrity candidates or *dangdut* concerts.

Can this be done, one wonders? The question remains an open one. But whoever wishes to come to power in Indonesia will have to realise that Indonesian society — like India's — is more educated, complex and anxious than ever before.

Both countries seem poised on the verge of economic take-off, and much is expected of both India and Indonesia as rising middle powers. That dream, however, can only come true when the leadership of the countries develop a national narrative that takes into account the changes and evolution of their respective nations, and the growing aspirations of the new middle class.



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