



**Indonesian presidential candidates** (from left) ex-general Prabowo Subianto and his running mate former economics minister Hatta Rajasa; and front-runner and former Jakarta governor Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo and his running mate former Indonesian vice-president Jusuf Kalla. In the absence of concrete and distinct policies that differentiate each other, **both camps have paid homage to the legacy of first Indonesian president Sukarno.**

# Sukarno's 'presence' in Indonesian polls

**LANGUAGE OF POLITICS:** Both Prabowo/Hatta and Jokowi/Kalla camps claim to be rightful inheritors of the Sukarno legacy

**A**S the presidential race in Indonesia heats up, observers and analysts have begun to notice that both the Prabowo/Hatta and Jokowi/Kalla teams are hard-pressed to identify themselves as distinct from the other.

Complicating matters further was the previous parliamentary election campaign that seemed devoid of issues, with none of the contesting parties offering anything concrete in terms of foreign policy positions, long-term development plans or even spelling out their vision for the future of Indonesia in realistic terms.

The absence of ideological positioning in the campaign thus far is reflected by the fact that, as in previous elections in Indonesia, there has instead been a host of celebrity candidates, "superstars", gossip and the like.

But at present as the presidential debates have begun, both sides are compelled to spell out the terms of their long-term policies and both sides are attempting to package and present themselves to the electorate in bold relief: Emphasising the particularity of their respective policies and showing just how they are different from the other.

One curious feature of this self-identification process is the manner in which both the Prabowo/Hatta and Jokowi/Kalla camps have paid homage to the legacy of Indonesia's first leader, Sukarno.

To quote a foreign analyst based in Jogjakarta: "Both sides are claiming to be the inheritor of the Sukarno legacy, but who is right?"

The answer to the question is both. For Sukarno's complex and confounding identity as a multifaceted statesman means that he has left behind an overdetermined legacy that can mean many things to many people.

In linguistic terms this is what would be called an empty signifier; that is a sign or symbol that is identifiable and yet is not anchored to a particular, fixed referent (the signified).

Though political analysts with a strong political-economy or materialist basis may find such cavalier use of signs confounding or even misleading, it should be remembered that the language of politics is replete with such empty signifiers whose meanings or referents are diachronic

(changing over time) and polysemic (capable of meaning several things at the same time).

The fluid and plastic nature of the signifier Sukarno — here taken as a symbol — is partly due to the personality of the man referred to. In his time, Sukarno was widely acknowledged as a master orator, a charismatic leader, an adept and able propagandist for his cause.

Yet ruling as he did during the turbulent decades of the 1950s and 1960s, when Indonesia was fraught with challenges ranging from secessionist movements, separatist groups, Islamists who wanted an Islamic state and Communists who wanted a communist state, Sukarno played a balancing act that managed to keep all these forces at bay.

His Nasakom (Nasionalisme-Agama-Komunisme/Nationalism-Religion-Communism) strategy attempted to keep the forces of the nationalists, the Islamists, the Communists and the Army

together, until the ill-fated experiment met its end with the untimely failed coup attempt in 1965 and the total eradication of the Indonesian Communist Party.

During this period, Sukarno was many things to many people: To the Islamists he presented himself as a model modern Muslim leader; to the

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# *Sukarno's legacy a convenient vehicle for all politicians*

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Communists as an advocate of social equality and to the Nationalists as an Indonesian patriot.

Even then, in the 1950s-60s, all the major political groups in Indonesia were trying to monopolise the man and the symbol Sukarno for themselves.

It is, therefore, hardly a surprise if

today all the mainstream political movements are doing the same: For contemporary Indonesian nationalists who may be partial to the Prabowo/Hatta camp, Sukarno's defence of Indonesian territory and the principles of Indonesian republicanism sit well with their own aspirations for a more developed and economically independent Indonesia.

While for social activists, pluralists and liberals, it is Sukarno's defence of Indonesian pluralism and diversity that attracts them the most, and this is also the facet of Sukarno's legacy that is being adroitly foregrounded by the Jokowi/Kalla camp.

Indonesia is a country that is both ancient and modern, and it happens to be a country where the

royal courts and aristocracy of the past no longer wield political power.

In the absence of such a hierarchy, Sukarno's legacy serves as a convenient and recognisable vehicle for different political aspirations; and he has been elevated to the status of an imminent and invisible founding-father figure by all parties concerned.

The prevalence of images and references to Sukarno during this presidential campaign reminds us that even in the context of ostensibly secular plural democracies like Indonesia's, there remain master narratives and a (secular) political mythology as well.

Modernity has not eradicated the transcendental from politics, be it in the West or in Indonesia.