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Sebastian, Leonard C.; Irman G. Lanti

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INDONESIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS: A New System for a New Era

Leonard C Sebastian and Irman G Lanti*

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The series of general elections that Indonesia is holding from April through September this year mark important milestones in the history of the largest nation in Southeast Asia. They begin with the elections on 5 April for the national and regional legislatures and end with those for the presidency on 5 July and 20 September. The results will have important consequences for the political development of the country and the outlook for the region as a whole.

The elections are different from previous polls in many respects, as they are held under a new system using new mechanics and designed to bring change to the political structure of the country. However the new elements have also created some confusion and the outcome of the elections are unpredictable.

Mechanics of the elections

The elections are to be conducted in two stages: the first on 5 April will be for the DPR or House of Representatives; DPRD or Regional Assemblies, and also a new DPD of Council of Regional Representatives, a senate-like second chamber. In the second stage the electorate will, for the first time, vote directly for the President and Vice-president, on 5 July, initially from a pairs of candidates put up by the political parties which have obtained a threshold number of seats and votes in the first state. If no pair of candidates gets a majority of 50%+1 vote plus 20% of the votes in half the 32 provinces, a second round of voting will be held on 20 September to decide between the two top pairs.

Members of the PKU or General Election Commission, believe that the direct election of the president and vice-president will make the presidency stronger, as the president cannot be easily impeached. However the candidates for president and vice-president can only be nominated by political parties that gain at least 3% of seats in DPR or 5% of the nationwide vote.

The 24 parties contesting the parliamentary election, half the number that took part in the 1999 polls, were pared down from over 200 that sought registration. The KUP and Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, which was responsible for registration of political organizations, applied rigorous selection criteria. Of the 24 parties that were deemed capable of conducting a nationwide campaign, only six had contested in 1999, and held at least two percent of seats in DPR. Of the other 18, some had contested in those polls under different names, while others were splinters from the larger parties.

In the new system for parliamentary election the voters can choose the candidate they want to represent them in addition to voting for the party. Should they be unable to pick a candidate, because of lack of recognition, the party they vote for will name the candidate. But the voter cannot pick only the candidate without marking the party; that would invalidate the ballot. This method was decided as a compromise between the desire to have greater accountability from the representative to the constituents and the insistence of political parties to retain some of the power they had wielded for so long.

Besides the parliamentary and regional assemblies the voters will also cast their votes for representatives to a new state body, DPD or Council of Regional Representatives. It will function like a senate and serve as a chamber for voicing the aspirations of Indonesia's diverse regions. However they will not have any legislative function. The DPD will have mainly an advisory role on a broad range of issues such as regional autonomy, centre-region relations, management of natural resources, taxation, education and religious affairs. However the DPD and DPR will together make up the MPR or People's Consultative Assembly, which still has the power to make amendments to the constitution and to impeach the president.

Problems surrounding the elections

The 2004 elections face immense logistics problems, besides voter education and security. The KPU registered about 147 million voters with the help of the Central Statistics Bureau. The KPU's proposal to simplify the voting materials, in terms of ballot boxes and booths, plus the huge amount of ballot papers, 650 million in all, has encountered confusion and delays. The KPU however was confident that all preparations would be completed by polling day, though the government took legal steps to extend the polling period where the materials were not ready. Voter education has been conducted by the political parties and non-governmental mass organizations to acquaint them with the new voting system. Security and law enforcement agencies have been deployed in strength to ensure order during the three-week long campaign, which has been generally trouble-free. However there was concern that the populace might become more polarised and tensions could run high during the campaigning for the presidential election, especially if it went into a second round. On the other hand there is also concern that voter apathy might result in a lower turnout of voters than in previous elections.

Platforms of Political Parties

While Indonesian politics have been governed more by emotional allegiance to parties or individual leaders than by rational consideration of party platforms, there are some issues on which the political parties' positions differ. These revolve around the issue of the state's foundation, ie whether the Indonesian state should be based on an Islamic constitution or a more secularist approach. Currently the question is whether the Syariah (Islamic law) should be applied to Muslims in Indonesia. While the nationalist parties such as PDI-P (Democratic – Struggle) and Golkar (Functional Groupings) have rejected the Islamisation of the state, the Islamic parties are divided on the issue, with those supported by the mass organizations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, opposed to those incorporation of Syariah in the republic's constitution.

A similar divide is observed on the issue of terrorism, which has rocked Indonesia during the past two years. The nationalist parties have come out strongly against it while the Islamic parties tended to be more cautious. While abhorring terrorism they have criticised the tough measures adopted by the security agencies.

The most important issue that Indonesian voters have focussed on is corruption, and the rule of law, which they observed, have been seriously addressed since Reformasi began in 1998. While all parties have had to make this one of their campaign messages the party that is likely to benefit most from such an exposure is the PKS, the Justice and Prosperity Party, which has gained a strong following among younger voters by its repudiation of money politics and corruption, and by pursuing exemplary lifestyles. The PKS has shifted from direct advocacy of the Syariah to calling for the application of the Syariah in the fight against corruption, collusion and nepotism. The bigger parties have had to overcome public perception of their involvement in such activities. The election results, expected soon after polls close, will show whether the newer smaller parties have succeeded in making a dent in the standing of the bigger parties.

*Dr Leonard C Sebastian is a Senior Fellow and Mr Irman G Lanti was a Visiting Fellow, at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies