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Title	Ideology and the presidency : the forces of aliran behind Indonesia's 2004 presidential election
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Citation	Yang Razali Kassim. (2004). Ideology and the presidency : the forces of aliran behind Indonesia's 2004 presidential election. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 013). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2004
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/4001
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IDSS COMMENTARIES (13/2004)

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IDEOLOGY AND THE PRESIDENCY: The forces of *aliran* behind Indonesia's 2004 Presidential Election

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28th April 2004

INDONESIA's ambition to start the new century with a modified political system has thrown up a number of surprises. Legislative elections to the national parliament (DPR) on April 5 have given rise to new players as Indonesians demand changes to a system that has been moulded by three decades of stern Suharto rule. The emergence of the Democratic Party (PD) and the Justice and Welfare Party (PKS) is symptomatic of this mood. The two jumped from relative obscurity to take fifth and sixth position respectively in the ranking of the top 10 parties. But even as this change is taking place, the electorate sought comfort in familiarity and continuity, returning Golkar, the Suharto-era party, to political dominance. Golkar's revival has been at the expense of President Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). The president's less than impressive leadership over the last five years has contributed to PDIP's fall to No. 2

Directly or otherwise, the re-ordering of the totem-pole of parties has an impact on the coming July 5 presidential election, which, for the first time, will see the next president elected directly by the people. No longer will the election of the Chief Executive be delegated to a caucus of legislators in the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). Given this, as well as the mood for change amid continuity, an unprecedented flux surrounds the process of electing the president. Predicting the outcome has become hazardous. Still, the leadership race has thrown up a mix of new and old contenders. The prospect of newcomers capturing power through the ballot box is a very real one.

But all these developments are not fundamental enough to alter the underlying ideological currents that have shaped Indonesia's deep-seated political culture. These currents or streams – *alirans* as they are called – have so defined Indonesian politics since the time of Sukarno that they will continue to prevail and influence the outcome of the presidential race. These *alirans* are the forces of nationalism and secularism on the one hand, and ideological Islam on the other – with a mixture in between. Virtually all the presidential contenders see themselves as belonging to one *aliran* or the other. But to widen their appeal, they are seeking vice-presidential running mates who are not from the same *aliran* background. A nationalist candidate will look for a partner from the Islamic parties, and vice versa. But whoever emerges as Indonesia's next president, the big question is: Which of the *alirans* will predominate? Will the nationalists and secularists prevail, or will it be the "political" Muslims? Will these *alirans* continue their historical contestations for supremacy or will these be set aside to allow a new modus vivendi or mutual accommodation to emerge?

The emerging presidential race:

The presidential race so far is being dominated by no less than five leading contenders. They are General (retired) Wiranto of Golkar, incumbent President Megawati of PDIP, General (retired) Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of the PD (better known as “SBY”) and Amien Rais, leader of a new coalition led by his own National Mandate Party (PAN) and the up-and-coming PKS. There may be at least one more candidate from the third-ranked Nation Awakening Party (PKB) of former president Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur. Although Gus Dur has been disqualified on health grounds, he remains a key power broker. His PKB is expected to offer an alternative face, possibly either former foreign minister Alwi Shihab or Gus Dur’s brother Solahudin Wahid.

It is true that the presidential race will be a contest of personalities rather than parties. But the five contenders interestingly, see themselves, and are perceived, as representative of their own *alirans*. For example, the day after his victory, Gen Wiranto told IDSS that as a “nationalist”, his immediate priority was to secure a vice-presidential running mate from the Islamic bloc, possibly either from PKB or PKS. This statement is significant for two reasons. The first is his self-perception and positioning as a nationalist. The second is his consequent need to team up with a figure representing the Islamic constituency. His goal clearly is to maximise his chances of victory. That he sees it important to gain the support of the Islamic electorate suggests how, despite losing ground in the April 5 parliamentary elections to the nationalists, the Islamic parties as a bloc remain a crucial factor in a country where at least 88% of the 220 million are Muslims and Islamic assertiveness is rising.

Gen Wiranto is not the first of the contenders to court an Islamic leader to help him ride into the *Istana*, or presidential palace. Earlier, “SBY” had roped in his former cabinet colleague, Yusuf Kalla from Golkar in what is seen as a “coup”. SBY, like Wiranto, is widely perceived as a nationalist. But having Yusuf as his vice-presidential running mate will help him draw not just the Islamic vote but also the business community and the “non-Java” constituency. Yusuf, who hails from South Sulawesi, has a reputation for entrepreneurship; his engineering business group, Bukaka, has built aerobridges that are still used by many international airports in Asia, including Changi. He has also shown some flair as a problem-solver, helping to defuse difficult inter-ethnic tensions such as those in the outer islands. The latest outbreak of violence in Maluku may dent but not seriously undermine this image.

Conversely, the contenders from the Islamic groups are seeking running mates with nationalist/secularist credentials. Gus Dur and Amien Rais have both been trying to seek a vice-presidential partner who can help swing the nationalist vote. With their earlier option of SBY clearly a non-starter, there is room for a dark horse nationalist to emerge as a potential vice-president. Among the nationalist names considered by the Islamic bloc are General (retired) Agum Gumelar, the transport minister in Ms Megawati’s cabinet, and Siswono Yudhusodo, a former Golkar leader. A likely dark horse for No. 2 from the Muslim camp is Nurcholish Majid, the widely popular University of Chicago-educated Islamic intellectual, who can easily be accepted as a “religious nationalist” by the nationalist or secularist bloc.

The binary categorisation of the current contenders into nationalists and Muslims however risks over-simplification. Gus Dur, Amien Rais and SBY would prefer a more “middle-of-the-road” image as “religious nationalists”. Even Akbar Tanjung regards his Golkar – all along seen as a bastion of secular nationalism -- as a party of “religious-nationalists”. Of the

nationalist contenders, there are two sub-streams known as “Sukarnoists” and “Suhartoists”. President Megawati, daughter of the first president, is clearly a Sukarnoist. Gen Wiranto, much as he may disagree, is seen as a “Suhartoist” because of his dedicated service to the former president in the 1990s. Even SBY may be viewed as a Suhartoist. But today, the “Suhartoist” label is no longer so objectionable.

On the other hand, among the Muslim-oriented contenders, Gus Dur’s PKB belongs to what is popularly known as the “traditionalist” Muslim school. The PKB draws support from the huge traditionalist constituency of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Amien Rais, in contrast, belongs to the Muslim “modernist” school. The stronghold of traditionalist support is in rural Java while that of the Muslim modernists tends to be in the urban cities and the outer islands. Although the distinction between the two has blurred somewhat over the years, their differing orientations broadly remain true.

The revival of the military’s influence has added another layer to the *aliran* dimension behind the Indonesian presidential election. Apart from the ideological divide between nationalism and Islam, there is also one between the military and Islam because the military, as an institution, tends to be nationalist in outlook. But given the trend among parties and voters to emphasise commonality rather than conflict, the possibility has emerged for a bridging of the great *aliran* divide. This will certainly favour both Wiranto and SBY as both retired generals have cleverly cultivated the nationalists, the military and the Muslims. But should either of them win the day, no one can complain of a military putsch because such an outcome would have come by democratic means. But it will certainly underscore the renewed acceptance amongst the people of the military, the very institution they had at one time wanted to remove from politics.

The dominance of the generals in the presidential race is however not likely to lead to a return to military rule. Despite how the foreign media may portray them, both Wiranto and SBY were actually, during their time, reform-minded generals. It was Wiranto who put an end to *dwifungsi*, the doctrine of dual function which for years had justified the military’s hold on politics. Wiranto refused the offer of power when he could have easily grabbed that opportunity given him by Suharto in the last days of the New Order. SBY, on his part is a scholar-soldier. But between the two, it is Wiranto who may have a better claim to the image of a strong and decisive leader. It is nonetheless ironic how after years of trying to drive out the generals, Indonesians are turning to both for leadership.

Implications:

What the current trend in the presidential race therefore shows is that Indonesian politics, post-Suharto, continues to be dominated by the two major ideological streams -- nationalism and Islam. Golkar may have displaced PDIP as Number 1, but both parties are ideologically similar as nationalists. They are also “secularists” in the sense that they do not support religion as a state ideology. Should they be able to forge an alliance, the nationalists will be a significant force. But a Golkar-PDIP alliance is possible only on paper. In reality, clashing ambitions and personal rivalries stand in the way.

On the other hand, it has sometimes been said that the DPR elections marked the decline of the Islamic or Muslim-based parties. A closer examination of the results shows this not to be entirely true. For if the Muslim-based parties in the top 10 parties act as a bloc, they are still quite a force to be reckoned with. Their collective voice can make up almost 40% of the

popular vote, which will make them twice as strong as Golkar (at 21%) or PDIP (19%). The question of course is whether the Muslim-based parties can act in alliance. But given that the nationalists and the Muslim-based parties are roughly at par in balance of power terms, neither bloc can dominate without taking into account the countervailing capacity of the other. This makes mutual accommodation rather than contest a more sensible option between them.

In any case, given the mood among Indonesians for national healing, it is just as well that no single force can dominate so completely and totally. This means that they all have to learn to live and accept each other. So whatever the outcome, the inclination so far is for Indonesians – leaders and voters alike -- to minimise the old tensions between the *alirans* and forge a more harmonious relationship. All the presidential contenders know this and are playing by this new “rule”.

If national healing and mutual accommodation is successfully pursued, Indonesia in the new century will be more inclined towards harmony than dissension and dispute. An Indonesia at peace with itself is good not just for Indonesians, but also for the region. In view of the country’s strategic position in international trade, diplomacy and security, an Indonesia at peace with itself will clearly be a major plus for the wider international community.

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