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Indonesia

Presidential Election: Tensions rise as Indonesia awaits official election result

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According to the majority of polling institutions that carried out “quick counts” on 9 July, Joko Widodo won 52-53 percent of the vote in the Indonesian presidential election. Widodo, accompanied by Megawati Sukarnoputri, president of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), declared himself and his vice president Jusuf Kalla “winner of the quick count”.

Later that day, Prabowo Subianto made a similar declaration based on “quick counts” that put him in front and other data that he claimed he had from the regions.

Quick count tallies are based on a sample of between 2,000 and 4,000 voting booths out of more than 400,000 across the country. The Indonesian Election Commission (KPU) will announce the result of its official count on 22 July.

Since 9 July, there has been no let-up in the number of aggressive statements by Prabowo and his supporters claiming victory. On 11 July, his spokesperson announced that party scrutineers had concluded the count at all polling booths and confirmed a Prabowo win. The former general continues to claim that the quick counts that did not favour him are mistaken or are the result of corruption and bias. Labour union supporters of Prabowo are planning a rally, prior to the official election result being announced, in Jakarta’s largest stadium to “celebrate his victory”.

There are fears, both among Widodo supporters and among democratic and human rights organisations, that this ongoing campaign is aimed at sowing uncertainty and buying time while the Prabowo machine finds ways to pressure and bribe election commission personnel to increase his vote. He has huge financial resources and in some regions the support of incumbent provincial and district governments. President Yudhoyono also has come out in support – raising fears that the police, army and intelligence services may find ways to assist.

Based on the quick count estimates that have given the win to Widodo, Prabowo would need to “gain” at least 4 million votes to give him 50-52 percent.

Whoever the KPU announces as the loser on 22 July is likely to appeal to the Constitutional Court either to overturn the result or order fresh elections.

The old in the new

The election campaign has confirmed the widespread alienation of the population from the existing political elites and parties. The support for both candidates was won primarily by rhetoric and tactics that tried to portray them as new and different.

Widodo’s slogan is “Simple, honest and close to the people”. His folksy style, which contrasts with the 40-year tradition of elitist arrogance by politicians, and the fact that he became a politician after the fall of Suharto, have been key for him.

Prabowo has railed against poverty, foreign domination of the economy, elite corruption and the degeneracy of

politicians. On one hand he states that he would make former dictator general Suharto a national hero, indicating his authoritarian political tastes. On the other, he adopts some of the presentational techniques of former leftist president Sukarno.

The people have divided almost equally over whom they trust, although, in my view, there is a slight but clear majority in support of Widodo.

There have been reports of intimidatory mobilisations of military posts at the village level in some areas in support of Prabowo. There also has been a ruthless smear campaign against Widodo, which questions his Muslim credentials and hints that he is Chinese.

The left

No other forces have been able to intervene with a progressive response to the general alienation. The emerging trade union movement has been drawn into the Widodo versus Prabowo polarisation, sowing confusion and division among the ranks of even the more active unions.

The several small left wing organisations have taken different positions. Some have advocated a boycott of the elections on the grounds that both candidates are equally bad. The People's Liberation Party (PPR), acting with democratic rights groups, played a leading role in organising anti-militarist actions and propaganda, primarily aimed at Prabowo. Prior to the vote its spokesperson, Surya Anta, called on people not to vote for Prabowo.

The Working People's Party (PRP), the NGO "left" and most of the social democratic intelligentsia and progressive artists actively campaigned for Widodo. They provided the core of volunteers outside of formal party structures. In practice these were divided between those who concentrated on selling Widodo as a reformer, and those who avoided propagating such illusions and emphasised the threat Prabowo poses to democracy.

Widodo has given an undertaking to president Yudhoyono to stop victory mobilisations. However, Widodo is calling on his supporters to keep the closest possible eye on the KPU's counting of votes from the district to national level. It is likely that Prabowo will continue to mobilise. Prabowo has substantial militias, including some in the unions, if he wants to cause trouble on the streets.

Megawati's PDIP could also call on its core of traditional supporters to mobilise, at least in some regions. They have hardly been used so far in the campaign.

Tensions are heightening as 22 July approaches. There remains a threat to the democratic space won in 1998. Even if Widodo is declared winner, and even if Prabowo accepts the results, that threat will remain. Prabowo's coalition retains a majority of the seats in parliament. If Prabowo is declared winner, the threat will immediately be greater. Progressive people in Australia should prepare for active solidarity with all those defending the democratic space won since the overthrow of the Suharto dictatorship.

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