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Indonesia

Significant election year

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The year 2009 has been a significant one for elections in Indonesia. In April, 171 million voters participated in national, provincial and district assembly elections. Then, on July 8th, for the second time since the end of Suharto's military dictatorship, they elected their president by universal suffrage.

The country is one of the biggest archipelagos in the world with around 17,500 islands. Organising elections there is a real logistical nightmare. Several weeks were needed to obtain definitive results. However from the evening onwards it was clear that the outgoing president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as SBY), had won the elections in the first round with more than 60% of the vote, leaving the other candidates far behind. Three candidates were running. In addition to the current president, SBY, there was the current vice-president Jusuf Kalla and the former president from 2001 to 2004, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of the first president of Indonesia after independence, Sukarno.

Military still very much present

It is now 10 years since Indonesians freed themselves from the yoke of Suharto's military dictatorship. During the 33 years of this "new order" between 1 and 2 million Indonesians, partisans of Sukarno, Communists, socialists, human rights activists and trades unionists were disappeared, imprisoned, tortured and killed. The breadth of the crimes committed is still not known. Unlike Latin America, Cambodia or Rwanda, nobody from the military has yet been tried, or is threatened with being tried. On the contrary, the three pairings who contested the presidential election all included a retired military man, which is revealing of the still significant political and economic power of the army.

The current vice-president Jusuf Kalla, leader of Golkar (Suharto's party during the dictatorship) has as his running mate Wiranto, the leader of the Hanura (Hati Nurani Rakyat, Party of the Consciousness of the People) party, a former prominent soldier under Suharto. He is formally accused of crimes against humanity when he led the armed forces in East Timor at the time of its independence vote, in August 1999. At least 1,400 Timorese died at this time and tens of thousands of them were deported to western Timor which remained under Indonesian control. In addition the region was pillaged by the Indonesian military. Wiranto avoided trial thanks to the Indonesian authorities who rejected his extradition to East Timor. He is however subject to an international arrest warrant.

Prabowo Subianto, leader of Gerindra (Gerakan Indonesia Raya, Party of the Movement for a Greater Indonesia), the running mate of Megawati (head of the PDI-P, Democratic Indonesian Party of Struggle) was, during the dictatorship, one of the leaders of the Kopassus, a military unit specialising in counter-insurrection, renowned for its atrocities. He is accused of being behind the disappearance of several dozen pro-democracy activists in May 1998, during the last hours of Suharto's dictatorship. Prabowo is also known for his sinister record in Eastern Timor and West Papua. But he enjoys significant support in business circles and in the army as well as family connections (he is the ex-husband of Suharto's daughter, Titiek).

Three candidates, one neoliberal agenda

Finally, SBY is himself a retired general. Like his rivals, he served in the 1970s in Timor during the occupation at a time when there were serious violations of human rights. The leader of the Democratic Party, he led a coalition of 18

parties at these elections, of which several were Islamic. As a good indicator of the policies followed, his running mate, Boediono, was previously the head of the central bank and an economist much admired by the IMF. Boediono was the minister of finance for Megawati before becoming minister of the economy for SBY. The current Vice-president under SBY, Jusuf Kalla and SBY himself were also ministers under Megawati. So the political differences between the three candidates were very tenuous.

Although their campaigns had different accents, they shared the same neoliberal agenda. They have played an active role in this decade (1999-2009) in implementing neoliberal policies which led to an increase in poverty, unemployment and environmental damage. Jusuf Kalla played the nationalist card by promoting the strengthening of domestic capitalism and a weakening of the domination of foreign capital. Megawati used a populist rhetoric, which has little to do with the policies he followed for the 4 years of his presidency.

SBY is considered by "The Economist" as the champion of foreign investors. He suppressed petrol subsidies so as to reduce the budget deficit. To avoid protests as in Malaysia, he decided to pay every three months the equivalent of 26 dollars to the poorest and to grant them free primary health care. He enjoys a great popularity, in part thanks to this aid and the fight against corruption led by a commission which was independent, but from which he drew a certain prestige.

On the left

It is virtually impossible for left forces to contest elections. A presidential candidate should be supported by a party or coalition representing 20% of the seats in the national assembly or 25% of votes cast.

Most of the Indonesian left organisations campaigned for abstention or a militant boycott of the elections, known under the name of Golput. At the time of Suharto, this movement allowed the denunciation of the electoral farces organised regularly by the dictatorship. Today, in the absence of a credible left candidate, the call for a boycott offered a possibility of expressing discontent.

Not all the left chose to participate in this campaign. The preparation of these elections led to a split in the PRD (Democratic People's Party), a left party which played a major role in the fight against Suharto in the 1990s. A part of the PRD, and its electoral coalition Papernas, decided to lead their own electoral campaign. On this occasion, the main leader of the PRD, Dita Sari, set up a new group, the "Courageous Volunteers to Revive Self-sufficiency" (RBBM) to support the candidacy of the Kalla – Wiranto duo. They claim that, among the candidates, the positions defended by Jusuf Kalla are the closest to the positions of Papernas concerning self-sufficiency and the construction of a national industry. They even claim that the candidacies of Kalla and Megawati represent an alternative to the neoliberal policies of SBY.

The other party of the PRD, disagreeing with this electoral tactic, was excluded and has since formed the "Political Committee for the Poor-PRD" (KPRM-PRD) which took an active part in the campaign for a boycott of the elections.

Tactical electoral questions take on a particularly complex character in a country like Indonesia where the rules do not allow progressive left organisations to wage a campaign for their own candidate. However, by trying at any price to gain deputies, Dita Sari has put herself at the service of parties originating from the dictatorship and serving the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. This opportunism could sow dangerous illusions and weaken the Indonesian left.