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Indonesian President Yudhoyono's Big Decision

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Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) is a clear winner in his country's April 9 parliamentary (DPR) elections. Indications are that SBY's Democrat Party has increased its 7.5 percent support from the 2004 DPR elections to approximately 20 percent. Whether his party clears the legal 20 percent threshold of seats required to name its own presidential candidate does not practically matter: Either way, SBY will need to form a governing coalition. The most important part of the coalition will be his choice of a vice presidential running mate.

The Islamist Failure. The other major outcome of the election is the considerable setback dealt to the Indonesian Islamist parties. PKS, the ideology's standard bearer, failed to improve substantially from its 2004 share. Throughout the last year, PKS held firmly to a goal of garnering 20 percent of the vote. That was probably never in the cards. But they outwitted themselves on the 15 percent they might have reasonably hoped for. To expand their base, PKS sought to appeal to Indonesian nationalism and downplay their Islamism. They portrayed themselves as members of the political elite, ingratiated themselves with SBY at every opportunity, and floated coalition balloons with each of the mainstream parties.

The PKS campaign failed. If Indonesians voted out of a sense of nationalism, they went with more trusted sources: a president who has largely led the country in the right direction and older parties with which voters are more comfortable.

At the same time, PKS failed to pick up defections from the other Islamist parties. Two of these parties went below the 2.5 percent threshold for representation in parliament. And the fourth, the

PPP of the Suharto era, continued its long decline, presently hovering around 5 percent of yesterday's vote total. It is unclear where all these voters went—although given its poor performance, it seems certain that they did not go to PKS. Maybe they were as confused by PKS's appeals to non-sectarian nationalism as everyone else. Polling before the election also indicated the possibility of migration from the Pancasila-based Muslim parties—PKB and PAN—to PKS. This also does not appear to have happened.

No political victories are permanent. In 1999, PKS itself failed to make the threshold necessary to contest the 2004 elections. It changed its name to qualify and emerged in 2004 with 45 seats and three cabinet posts. They turned the name change to their advantage, using it to obscure their previously more explicit ideological agenda. They have been running from those roots ever since to good, steady effect—until now. Their loss will exacerbate infighting and likely lead them to rely more on their missionary political work, which continues apace whatever this week's national election results.

Unfortunately, however, there is one other possibility that could save PKS from its defeat and pending turmoil.

Vice Presidential Lottery. The Indonesian electorate's attention now turns to the nominating pro-

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cess for president. Only nine of the 38 parties contesting the parliamentary elections qualified for representation, and only a handful of them will field presidential candidates. The system will force them into multiparty coalitions, each representing at least 20 percent of the seats in the DPR. Even if SBY's Democrat Party ends up with the 20 percent of seats necessary to nominate him without a coalition, he will still require a coalition of supporting parties to compete effectively in July.

SBY would seem to be in the driver's seat for the coming presidential election. His party finished far ahead of the others, virtually tripling its 2004 total, and the big parties—Megawati's PDI-P and Golkar—lost votes. But the situation is complicated. If PDI-P and Golkar—the second and third place finishers—manage to come together, SBY would be left with few choices for a vice presidential partner. He could preempt that possibility by resurrecting his partnership with Golkar, either by patching up political affairs with his current vice president or running with another Golkar candidate (the sultan of Yogyakarta, for example). He could reach out to PKB and PAN, but given their declining fortunes, that is unlikely.

The other real prospect for vice president is Hidayat Nur Wahid, the former president of PKS and the speaker of the joint assembly and holder of three degrees from University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. Eight percent may be far below what PKS had hoped for, but it did hold its own, and it has strong organizational capacity. Securing a spot a heartbeat away from the presidency would more than salvage their poor performance in the parliamentary elections.

The Future of U.S.–Indonesia Relations. SBY has clearly done some things of mutual importance to Indonesia and the United States. On his watch, Indonesia has prosecuted the war on terrorism quite effectively: Indonesia is now going on its fourth year without a major terrorist attack. Under SBY's leadership, Indonesia is reasserting itself in East Asian politics, and speaking aloud about the importance of values in its foreign policy. On this basis—and on the basis of the positive political model Indonesia serves for other predominantly Muslim countries—the Obama Administration is rightly committed to

taking the U.S.–Indonesia relationship to a whole new level of partnership.

On the negative side, SBY has sent mixed signals about an Islamist agenda diametrically opposed to both Indonesian tradition and American interest in liberal democratic governance. The most recent example is the remarkable commission he offered Shari'a financing at the World Islamic Economic Forum this past March: "Islamic bankers should therefore do some missionary work in the Western world to promote the concept of Shari'a banking, for which many in the West are more than ready now." While Shari'a financing is a complex subject for another paper, suffice it to say that most Indonesians in the market are indifferent to it, and those inclined to examine their options would find more than enough authoritative religious opinion approving of interest-based banking services. Plus, Shari'a financing constitutes a bare 3 percent of the Indonesian market.

No one accuses SBY of being an Islamist. And the DPR election results are evidence that he is a good political tactician. But from the perspective of U.S.–Indonesia relations, his political maneuvering may ultimately bring him into the cross fire of American politics. Careless statements extolling as a role model Indonesia's most influential Islamist¹ and calls for Islamist missions to the West could have the effect of choking off the tremendous potential in U.S.–Indonesian relations.

A Telling Choice. SBY's election victory should give him the confidence he needs to develop and assert his own vision for Indonesia. With his choice of a vice presidential candidate, he will tell the world something about that vision. There are many factors to consider in his choice—political calculations top among them—but if SBY cares about establishing a deeper, mutually beneficial relationship with the United States, he will consider the way his choice will be received outside Indonesia. Throwing PKS a lifeline by giving them the vice presidency will effectively kill any effort to take the U.S.–Indonesia relationship to the next level.

—Walter Lohman is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

1. Walter Lohman, "Indonesian President's Praise of Natsir Raises Questions," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2181, December 31, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2181.cfm> (April 10, 2009).