The twists and turns to the presidency

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It was a positive sign that candidates with questionable track-records such as Golkar’s Abrizal Bakrie struggled for support, despite his party coming strong in second place with 14.75 percent votes. His image suffered badly because of his inability to solve the Lapindo case, and despite his party’s solid machinery, he becomes the first Golkar chairman not nominated as either presidential or vice-presidential candidate since the first direct presidential election in 2004. Jokowi’s only serious rival was Prabowo Subianto, an ambitious former military general whose name has been closely linked with the disappearance of student activists in 1998. Prabowo ran and lost alongside Megawati in 2009, but his Gerindra Party did well with 11.8 percent in the April legislative election. Head-to-head, Jokowi had a comfortable lead against Prabowo. In mid-May, most surveys put Jokowi in front with twice as much support for Prabowo. After the deadline for nominating candidates passed, only two names remained: Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. Almost immediately, Prabowo demonstrated the formidable capacity of his campaign team. With the financial backing of his businessman brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, and coterie of experienced international campaign professionals, he managed to cut Jokowi’s lead quickly. By mid-June, Prabowo’s poll numbers increased significantly to 38 percent, while Jokowi’s hovered at 44.5. The former managed to convince many voters that he was the decisive leader that the country most needed. At this point, I was still optimistic that most Indonesians would not want to vote for Prabowo, whose ‘decisive’ image also carried the risk of a democratic rollback and even a return to authoritarianism.

However, by early July, I was concerned and frustrated. It was nearing polling day and it looked likely that many Indonesians would be swayed towards Prabowo. Experts and observers were clearly apprehensive. Even Jokowi’s early critics, who initially disparaged his lack of clarity on campaign issues, started to campaign against Prabowo. The prevailing mantra was that while Jokowi may not be the best person to be President he was surely better than the alternative. To make matters worse, Jokowi’s campaign lacked coordination. In stark contrast, the Prabowo camp was successful in starting several rumours including the possibility that Jokowi may be Megawati’s puppet, a non-Muslim, a Chinese, was under foreign influence, or even communist. The man who barely three months ago looked set to waltz his way to the presidency was suddenly looking weak and helpless against a team who did not shy from dirty campaign tricks.

Depressed and preparing for the worst, I rationalised that if Prabowo were elected, it would be a wake-up call for Indonesia from complacency. If so, Indonesia would soon realise its mistake and vote him out in the next election. However, a couple of days before polling day the momentum began to swing back again to Jokowi. Whether it was because voters saw beyond the smear campaign, Jokowi’s convincing debate performances, or the middle ground swaying back towards Jokowi, it began to look likely that Jokowi would pull it off after all. Still, when polling day came, uncertainties remained. Only after the booths were closed, and exit polls slowly started to point to Jokowi as the next president, do many Indonesians have a strong democracy that has withstood some challenging tests. But losing proved hard to accept. Prabowo, using some non-credible poll results, insisted that he had won. Then, hours before the official results were announced on 22nd July, he withdrew from the election causing confusion over what that meant for the results. After the results were announced, Prabowo brought the case to the Constitutional Court citing massive fraud by KPU as the cause for his loss. The Courts rejected his request after he failed to produce credible proof.

Although Prabowo continues in his search for other avenues to appeal the decision, I am, once again, a confident and proud Indonesian. We dodged a bullet with this election. The risk of a democratic rollback is still real. The road ahead is bumpy but we have a strong democracy that has withstood some challenging tests. It is now up to Jokowi to use this momentum to bring Indonesia forward.

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