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Gus Dur's party sitting pretty after Indon polls

Zainon Ahmad in Jakarta

ONCE the new Government is in place, students should not interfere with its running as the elected representatives of the people are there to ensure its work is done and done properly, said Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur on the role of the students after the general election.

"The people have elected their representatives and they should be allowed to do their work unhindered. It is mostly these people, along with some appointed ones, who will choose the President of the Republic of Indonesia," he said.

He alluded to last year's People's Consultative Assembly sitting where students assembled outside the hall had harangued the members and sought to influence their decisions. "That should not happen again. It's not good," he said in an interview.

Anxious to avoid post-election violence, the leader of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) or National Awakening Party has told his members to maintain discipline at all times despite the slow counting of the votes - and whatever the results.

He was happy with the preliminary results of Monday's polling which showed his PKB and Megawati Sukarnoputri's Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDI-P) or Indonesian Democratic Party surging ahead of the others.

Even though the agonisingly slow vote-counting had tallied only about 10 per cent of the estimated 112 million votes, he was optimistic the trend which showed PDI-P leading and PKB in second place, would continue.

He is PKB's candidate for President while Megawati is the choice of her party. Amien Rais is the candidate of Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) or National Mandate Party.

The three parties formed a loose front a month ago to prevent Golkar from returning to power. But of the "Big Five" of the 48 parties which contested the election, PAN is trailing far behind Golkar and Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) or United Development Party.

For much of the campaign period the "united front" seemed to exist only in name. Cracks appeared when the leaders began promoting themselves and running down each other. Amien's campaigners had even said that the country's new President must be fluent in English, a suggestion that disqualifies Megawati from the top post.

Some leading personalities, including student leaders of the reformasi movement which forced the resignation of President Suharto a year ago, are trying to resuscitate the "united front" and turn it into a coalition.

It has been touted the "49th party". A logo, incorporating those of the three parties with the amalgamated name Amanat Perjuangan Bangsa was distributed on Tuesday.

When asked about the coalition, Gus Dur just dismissed it with a wave of his hand. He said he could work with Megawati and that they were already talking about it.

But he hinted that both of them were wary of Amien. He said he and Amien "tidak bisa bersatu".

"Students should stay out," he said, adding that they should leave it to those elected to decide on the shape of the Government to come. But students, who said they are "watching" the general election, are already demonstrating.

Yesterday, a group of students calling themselves "Students Solidarity

on the Aceh Case" demonstrated loudly outside the Aryaduta Hotel where most foreign observers and journalists are staying to demand the annulment of the election in the strife-ridden province.

Gus Dur is proposing that a broad-based national Cabinet be formed after the election of the new President. "The ministers can be drawn from any party, even from Golkar, as long as they are honest, capable and dedicated to the re-construction of Indonesia," he said.

Of the many priorities of the new Government, he also talked of some kind of affirmative action - "like something you have in Malaysia" - for the indigenous Indonesians and said the Chinese minority should accept it. At the same time, all legal and other discriminations against the Chinese should be done away with.

The leader of Nahdatul Ulama, an Islamic organisation, rejected the call for Islamic-based parties to coalesce and said in the interest of unity, it is better to form the coalition and for the new Government to be nationalistic and secular.

"Like in Malaysia, even though the majority of the people are Muslims, they choose a nationalist party - Umno, instead of Pas to head the national coalition and Government," said Gur Dur, 59, who had a stroke last year and still cannot move without aid and who cannot see properly.

He said he finds common ground with Megawati and other leaders of PDI-P on a few matters, including giving some of the powers now held by the central government to the provinces and the bupaten (districts), and the division of powers of the executive, legislature and judiciary.

His party wants to end the dual role of the Armed Forces - military and politics (some have suggested its role under the New Order government of Suharto had been tri-fungsi - military, politics and business).

"They must be reduced to just an instrument of the state like in other democratic countries. If they do not want to accept the change we will legislate and force them."

Does he really want to be President of Indonesia? "If the members of the MPR elect me - I sometimes feel like retiring even though I am younger than (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) - why not," he said.

But whether he gets to be elected President by the MPR in November will depend on the number of votes his party bags. With the bulk of the votes still unidentified, the trend may just change.

Most pre-polling day forecasts indicated PDI-P would win the biggest number of votes, followed by PKB and PAN with Golkar and PPP trailing far behind. A few said PDI-P and Golkar would be neck-to-neck. PDI-P and Golkar had claimed to be able to win 40 per cent of the votes.

Even Gus Dur is pleasantly surprised by the present trend which showed his party behind PDI-P. "Di luar duga (beyond expectation)," he said. But most people are surprised that Amien's PAN is trailing behind the other Big Five parties.

Many party leaders are beginning to grow impatient with the excuses given by the General Election Commission headed by former Home Affairs Minister Rudini, who had declared before Monday's election that the bulk of the results would be in about 12 hours after the polling stations closed.

While television and radio continue to run the commission's announcements that polling was jujur (jujur dan adil, fair and just), party members are becoming restless.

More so after newspapers reported that cheating appeared to be rampant in some areas. And much more so after Jeffrey A. Winters, identified as a "US expert on Indonesian affairs" told the Media on Tuesday that "the slow release of results could indicate that fraudulent practices may occur".

Despite their impatience, the party leaders are anxious to avoid trouble

and have told their members there is merit in Rudini's explanation that most of the election workers are new. They are not government officials but people - including taxi drivers and hawkers - picked randomly.

Following a meeting of officials from PDI-P, PKB, Golkar and PAN, a statement issued by them appealed to the people to maintain peace and not react violently when the full results are announced.

Said Mochtar Buchori of PDI-P: "It's still possible that violence could occur if certain groups, particularly grassroots supporters of the various parties, cannot accept the election results."

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