

Surrogates Line up to Run Jakarta
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By Our Correspondent

Governor's race a dry run for presidential polls in 2014

In what is being seen as a proxy run-up for the 2014 Presidential election in Indonesia, Jakarta residents go to the polls Wednesday to pick their next governor.

The incumbent, Fauzi Bowo, who is supported by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party, faces serious competition although he remains the favorite. Fauzi has spent five relatively ineffective years in office and faces deep criticism for his inability to get a handle on the sprawling city's flooding and traffic problems.

Despite adding capacity to the city's busway system, delays and lines – and complaining riders -- are common. Jakarta's continuing flooding problems stem from the fact that the low-lying city's residents have been drawing groundwater for decades, with the result that the city is slowly sinking. The mustachioed Fauzi is even the target of a fanciful campaign to rid Jakarta of mustaches.

But the bigger question is whether the city is governable at all. Like other magnet cities, it faces enormous pressures as people from all over the country flood into it. Jakarta has grown to become the world's 12th largest city by some measurements, with a population estimated at 10.1 million, not counting outlying commuters who enter the city each day. It is beset by a tangle of provincial administrations and interlocking jurisdictions making it difficult for any governor to have much impact.

Politically, the race is fascinating, though, for candidates' major backers. The winner – and its machine -- would have demonstrated the ability to raise and deploy serious amounts of money. Spending has been fierce, with Indonesia Corruption Watch reporting all six Jakarta gubernatorial candidates to the city's polling watchdog for allegedly committing campaign violations by not disclosing where their funding came from.

The major players behind the candidates include Aburizal Bakrie, the accused tax-dodging tycoon who heads the Golkar Party created by the late strongman Suharto; Yudhoyono's Democratic Party; Prabowo Subianto, the former special forces general who was accused of major human rights violations in the 1990s and who is leading in polls to be the next president. Interestingly, Prabowo and the Indonesian Party of Struggle (PDI-P) headed by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri are backing the same candidate in what some think could be a sign of an alliance for 2014.

Prabowo, having put charges of kidnapping and torture behind him, now heads the Great Indonesia Movement Party, or Gerindra. He ran as vice president in Megawati's failed attempt to return as the country's president in the 2009 election and has since established himself as a businessman. The divorced son-in-law of the late strongman Suharto, Prabowo is said to control 27 companies through the Nusantara Group, including palm oil plantations, coal mines fisheries and oil and natural gas. He was listed as the wealthiest presidential candidate in the 2009 election at Rp1.5 trillion (US\$159.6 million and US\$7.5 million).

At this point, Prabowo may well be the strongest presidential candidate two years down the road despite condemnation of his 1998 activities. If there were such a thing as an Indonesian princeling, he would be it. He comes from a wealthy family and married into the Suharto clan, although he subsequently divorced. His father served as Suharto's economics minister after having founded Bank Negara Indonesia, now the country's fourth biggest bank by assets, in 1946.

Despite his alleged involvement during the 1998 riots, when an estimated 1,000 Chinese died and more than 160 Chinese women were raped as army units ran wild in Jakarta, Solo and other cities, the Chinese are said to be slowly warming to him, partly because he is an supposedly anti-Islamist. Some political observers in Jakarta believe he could lead a PDI-P-Gerindra ticket, although the party's old guard remains leery of him, preferring Megawati, whom most of the political establishment regard as a spent force.

In Jakarta, Prabowo and Megawati are both backing Joko Widodo, the mayor of the central Java city of Solo, who has won respect for his stewardship of the 500,000 population city, which was badly singed by the 1998 violence. Joko, also known as Jokowi, was named the country's best mayor for 2011 and has acquired a reputation for running a clean government in a country where clean government is a rarity.

While Fauzi remains the favorite in a race that will likely result in a second round runoff, another formidable opponent is Alex Noerdin, the governor of South Sumatra, who is backed by the extensive Golkar machinery and Bakrie, who has already announced his intention to run for the presidency despite a long string of drawbacks including the still-bubbling mud volcano that blew out in 2006 in Sidoarjo, East Java, as a result of negligence by a Bakrie company, PT Lapindo Brantas, although the company has denied it. The foul-smelling mud has swamped at least 12 villages since 2006 and is predicted to go on erupting for 20 to 80 years, displacing about 50,000 people. He is so disliked for the well blowout and other problems that Tempo Magazine printed a picture of him with the numbers 666 -- the mark of the Devil -- imprinted on his forehead.

In his favor is the fact that that he is the country's most prominent pribumi, or native Indonesian, businessmen in an economy whose heights are dominated by the Chinese. However, he and his partners have been plagued by a long list of allegations of tax evasion, less-than-arms-length business deals, poor financial management and the fact that he was responsible for driving respected former finance minister Sri Mulyani out of the government to get rid of someone who was waging a campaign to make him pay his taxes and to keep him from costly government bailouts for his periodically ailing companies.

But if anything, he has more money available both for Noerdin's campaign and his own than Prabowo.

The Corruption Eradication Commission revealed last month that Noerdin is a "person of interest" in an alleged graft case involving budgetary irregularities from his stewardship of a local district from 2001 to 2006. Noerdin had also been summoned by KPK investigators as a witness in a notorious graft involving construction of the Southeast Asia Games athletes' village in 2011, which has ensnared a number of Democratic Party politicians all the way up to its chairman Anas Urbaningram.

Also in the mix is Sri Mulyani Indrawati, now at the World Bank, who is a long-shot presidential candidate urged along by a coalition of reformers despite her denials of interest. Whether Sri Mulyani is actually one of the potential contenders is problematical. Karim Raslan, a columnist for the Jakarta Globe and Asia Sentinel, said recently that "Sri Mulyani's presence is represented in spirit by the two independent candidates — Faisal Basri and Hendardji Soepandji. Both men were able to get their names on the ballot by dint of a new rule allowing nonaffiliated candidates to run, provided they gather enough ID cards and signatures from registered voters. There is no doubt their inclusion and relative success would help determine whether Sri Mulyani and her powerful backers choose to make a move on larger political prizes in 2014."

Just as with the Jakarta polls, Raslan writes, the mere possibility of being a viable independent candidate could be enough to convince Sri Mulyani that running for president would be worth her while. That may be wishful thinking. Sri Mulyani was one of the most forceful members of President Yudhoyono's first administration, winning widespread admiration for her efforts to reform the country's tax regime. She was almost single-handedly responsible for Yudhoyono's inflated reputation as a reformer until she came under fire by forces aligned with Bakrie and eventually had to withdraw from the government, becoming a World Bank vice president. She blamed Bakrie for her ouster.

Reformers' hopes that she would run are probably slim at best. Last September, she returned from Washington, DC for a dinner given in honor of her 49th birthday in which she threw cold water on heading an Independent People's Union, conveniently known by its Indonesian-language initials SRI, repeatedly deflecting calls on her to run. "You are being shallow," she told the crowd after speaker after speaker implored her to pick up the mantle being offered by the new SRI political party. "Now let's enjoy the party."

That leaves Fauzi Bowo himself, who has been pouring a bundle of cash into advertising, bombarding the city's streets and airwaves with campaign posters and banners, radio jingles, and spots on television and in cinemas for two straight weeks. His campaign team has created eight different ads, which have been aired 10 times a day on eight TV stations as well as in cinemas and on radio stations throughout the campaign period, spending an estimated Rp300 million per day, or Rp4.2 billion throughout the two-week campaign period for a single TV station. A Jakarta Globe study identified at least Rp40 billion (US\$4.25 million) spent on the incumbent's advertising.

Going into the final days of the campaign, it appears that none of the six candidates will produce an absolute majority, and that a runoff will be necessary. The spending can start all over again and current coalitions will collapse and re-form.

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