


The Economist Debate Series
Resenting the rich
April 7th – 17th [JOIN THIS LIVE DEBATE](#)



[Economist.com](#)

[Economist.com](#)

WORLD
ASIA

Indonesia's election

Many votes to count

Apr 9th 2009
From Economist.com

Indonesia goes to the polls in one of democracy's great celebrations



AFP

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

[Get article background](#)

THE parliamentary election in Indonesia on Thursday April 9th is the third since the downfall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 ushered in an era of genuine as opposed to sham democracy. Like the previous two, this election campaign has been lively, mostly good-humoured and conducted in an environment of great political freedom.

The poll itself is an exercise whose scale and logistical complexity are second only to those entailed by a general election in India. Across more than 900 inhabited islands, 171m voters have registered to vote. They have 38 national parties to choose from, and as many as 1m candidates for the national parliament, known as the DPR, and lower-level provincial and other legislatures.

This is only the start in what may become a three-stage process. Parties, or coalitions of parties, that win at least 112 seats in the 560-member DPR, or 25% of the popular vote, may nominate candidates for the powerful presidency, with elections held in July. If no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote then, a run-off in September will follow.

For all the vigour—and huge expense—of the campaign, it has not generated the enthusiasm that saw 95% of registered voters turn out for the first post-Suharto election in 1999. In part this reflects the remarkable stability achieved in the country, so soon after the economic meltdown and political chaos surrounding Suharto's departure, and the apparent popularity of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who won the first direct presidential election in 2004.

But the loss of zest for politics also reflects some disappointment about the process of democratisation. Indonesia remains dominated by Suharto-era politicians and the parties compete less on policies than on the personalities of their leaders and the quality of the hand-outs they offer to supporters.

Opinion polls suggest many voters have yet to make up their minds but that three parties will emerge as the biggest in the new DPR. The president's own Democratic Party (PD), which basks in the glow of his own popularity, is expected to double its share of seats to more than 20%. Golkar, the biggest party in the present DPR, had its origins as a vehicle for the re-election of Suharto. The main opposition is the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which is heir to the nationalist movement led by independent Indonesia's founder, Sukarno, and is led by his daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri, whom Mr Yudhoyono replaced as president.

Many of the smaller parties are avowedly Islamist. They are expected to fare worse than in 2004 when they garnered a combined 40% of the vote. But one new secular party, Gerindra, has made a big splash this time. Led by Prabowo Subianto, a former son-in-law of Suharto and once head of a notorious army special-forces unit, it has poured money into television advertising and offers members an innovative freebie. Its populist, pro-poor message (reschedule Indonesia's debts and divert the proceeds into public services) has struck a chord.

Nevertheless, Mr Yudhoyono is widely expected to win re-election as president in July or September. This election will help determine the shape of the coalition he leads. It may also present him with a headache. The preparations have been dogged with logistical setbacks and blunders such as inaccurate or undelivered ballot papers. Worse, allegations of large-scale, systematic fraud in an election early this year for a governor in the province of East Java have paved the way for an expected avalanche of disputed results.

It is a tribute, however, to the roots that democracy has put down in so short a period that in a country with a history of appalling political violence, most observers expect these disputes to be resolved peacefully.