

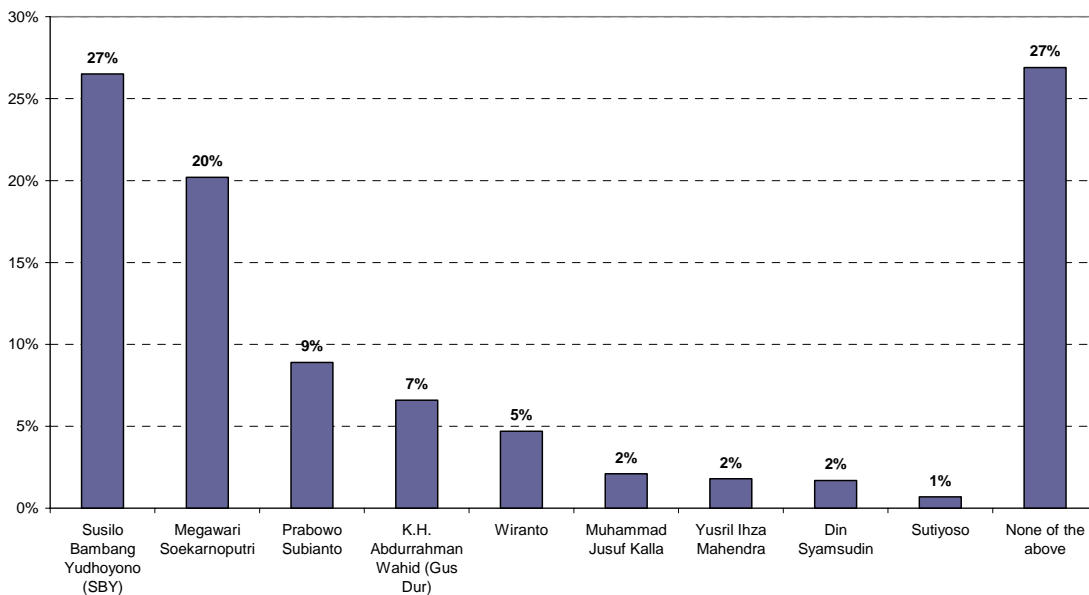
The crisis of confidence goes beyond the global financial market.

In a special poll conducted by Roy Morgan Research across the country and completed late-August, 1,875 adults were asked two simple questions about their voting intentions. First, "are you planning to vote in the next federal election" and second, "who would you choose as president if the election was held today?"

The answer to the first question drew a remarkably positive response with 92 per cent stating they intend to vote. A reflection of their intentions as at the end of August, polls closer to the day will indicate expected voter turnout. But the level of interest is high everywhere though slightly higher among men than women, rural than urban, over 35s than under-35s. As for the second question, the response was equally fascinating. From a list of 10 possible options, two stood out at the top, each with 27 per cent of 'the vote'. The clear winners were incumbent president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and "Other". It looks like it will be a fragmented race, once again. The remaining 46 per cent was dominated by Megawati Sukarnoputri with 20, followed by Prabowo Subianto with 9, Gus Dur with 7 and Wiranto with 5. Yusuf Kalla won only 2 per cent as did Mahendra and Syamsudin. Mega obviously remains a major contender.

The situation in Indonesia today is similar to the numerous options available to the electorate in India's multi-party democracy. The similarity becomes all the more obvious as I write this column from New Delhi this week, on the heels of a 2-day Australia-ASEAN-India dialogue organised by Melbourne University's Asialink unit and CII, the Confederation of Indian Industries. It was a privilege to wear all three caps, including my Indonesian one, on occasion.

"Who would you choose as president if the election was held today?"



It seems the days of Soekarno, Gandhi and Washington, giants among men, are well and truly over. Their moral legacies are fading into oblivion. Who is inspiring the voters in their own countries today? George Bush? Robert Mugabe? Hugo Chavez? You may want to think about it. Towering leaders in thriving democracies appear to be ghosts of the past.

In search of leadership, in the hope of finding a real voice, the peoples of both India and Indonesia are now prone to place their hopes in the hands of a wide variety of potential leaders. Impatient and disappointed with the lack of progress, voters punish incumbents faced with massive challenges. For similar reasons, one party before independence to several parties today, India's political landscape has in a way come full circle. Most of the disparate parties have come under the umbrellas of two broad alliances, one left of centre and the other to the right. The far-left and far-right tend to remain isolated on the fringes. In time, this is a likely scenario in Indonesia as well, evolving beyond two or three party coalitions.

Problems provide opportunities. With laudable clarity, Gordon Brown was the only leader who offered a pragmatic but honest path out of the global meltdown. Buying equity in troubled banks with public funds, he demonstrated a fair and effective way forward to the United States, the European Union and the world at large. For a beleaguered leader, he pulled off a major coup not only his people but for the world at large. Quick to take the cue, Kevin Rudd moved to protect deposits in Australia pushing his ratings even further up making him the most popular democratically elected leader around today. Last week's Roy Morgan poll finds he is "the preferred prime minister" among 62.5 per cent of Australians.

In the main however, recent transitions of power in major democracies have not put new leaders firmly in their seats. The crisis of confidence in global financial markets is symptomatic of a low level of confidence across the political panorama as well. Soon after the horrific events of 9-11 the financial assets of suspected supporters were quickly frozen, as well as their ability to move money around. Some 23 trillion dollars of privately held money is idling in tax havens around the world while governments scramble to create liquidity. Where is the same political will to declare that the party is over, that those funds need to be taxed just like the average citizen is in every country?

Around the free world there is an unholy alliance between big business and big politics. Simply put, it costs too much to get elected. Till such time that nexus is broken, the party will never really be over. Greed has existed always, but appropriate regulation is the only way to keep it in check. Loopholes need to be plugged, excesses need to be arrested and severe penalties need to be exercised. Policing the morally bankrupt requires political will. That will is sorely lacking, in India, in Indonesia, just about everywhere.

It is the same will that lies at the core of the fight against corruption in Indonesia. Among voters, it remains social issue No. 1. It was a major issue during the last election, it still is. A candidate with a concrete plan and a realistic timeline to show tangible results will win more than just eager listeners at the next election. .

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