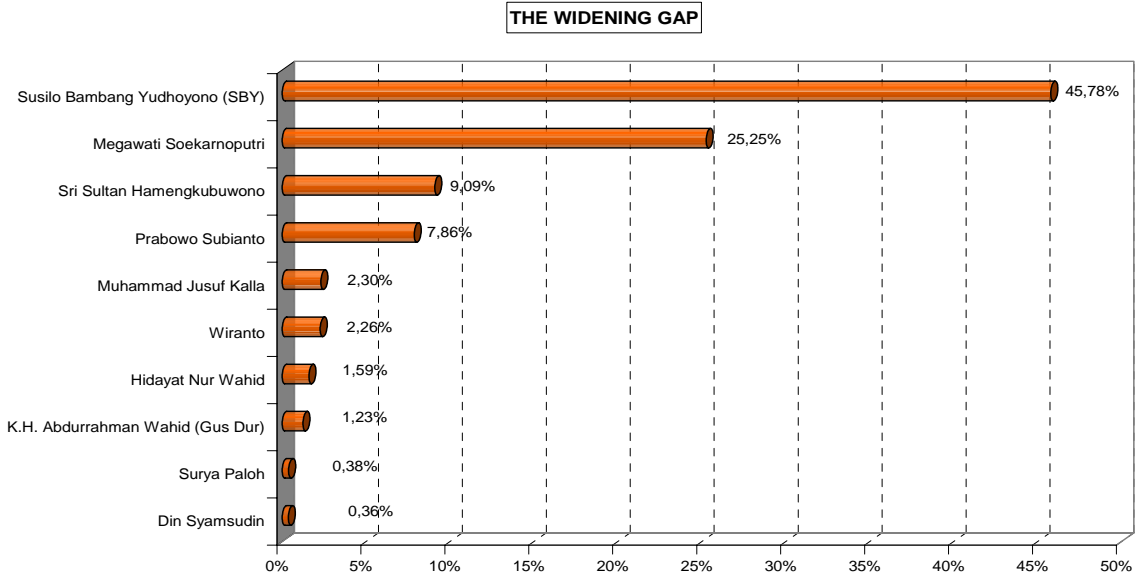


**Will the widening gap in the polls help narrow the economic divide?**

If the Presidential election had been held last month, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono would have won, by a very large margin. In a poll of 1,936 eligible voters conducted by Roy Morgan Research across four weeks and completed at the end of January, the incumbent president had garnered 46 per cent of ‘the votes’ followed by Megawati Sukarnoputri with 25 per cent. In other words, that’s a gap of over 20 cent between the top two contenders.

Sultan Hamengkubuwono’s decision to throw his hat in the ring was received well by the electorate, catapulting him into third position with 9 per cent. Prabowo Subianto achieved a small improvement on previous polls, growing to 8 per cent. Yusuf Kalla and Wiranto continued to languish in the low 2s. Hidayat Nur Wahid and Gus Dur are at the 1 per cent mark, with Surya Paloh and Din Syamsudin bringing up the tail of the top 10 hopefuls with less than 1 per cent each. The writing on the wall is obvious and uncomplicated. It would take events of epic proportions to radically change voting intentions between now and July. In political circles, the focus from this point on is going to be on the required pairings for the Presidential and Vice-Presidential ticket.

For Megawati Sukarnoputri, the Sultan does seem to be an obvious choice. Forces combined, they inch closer to SBY’s commanding solus position. No other pairing comes remotely close. In fact, a third party would be required to work the electorate to bring even that combination over the top. Under the circumstances, the outcome of the legislative election in April does have a significant role to play in potentially influencing voters for the presidential election in July. No wonder, SBY is waiting for the results of the April round before he announces his running mate. But even the most innocent of voters can be made to understand the need of a strong president for an equally strong voting bloc in the DPR, to bring about real change. That need should be the focal point for all political debate at this juncture. Is it?



In the next four months, it is more than likely that the messages going out from the candidates and their parties will remain similar to what they are today in tone and content. What we perhaps have not stopped to think about is the fact that all the potential presidential candidates hail from the Suharto years. From my neutral adman-turned-researcher's perspective, the messages would have been almost amusing had they not all been such wasted opportunities to really communicate, to persuade with good reason. They are almost uniform in their didactic style, their chest-thumping tone so similar to the 'smiling general' of yesteryear. But then, this comes as no surprise either because after all, it's barely been ten years since he left the stage.

Behind the scenes however, much has changed. Sadly, Indonesia has blindly followed the route almost all democracies take as par for the course. It takes money, big money, to get elected. That money has got to come from somewhere and inevitably, it comes from the rich. The rich and powerful, an old combination of two words that go hand in hand, as if they were inseparable. It actually doesn't take too long for even the naïve to put two and two together, identify who is financing whom, or even who is financing several candidates. That's just the way it is. While we are quick to condemn the humble traffic policeman in Jakarta for pocketing a bribe in the thousands of rupiah, we ignore the "contributions" made in the trillions to finance the ambitions of political leaders. Where do we expect the loyalties of our leaders to lie?

As in the rest of the world, Indonesia's decade of democracy has also seen the rich get richer, the unbelievable concentration of wealth continuing shamelessly. In the richest, most powerful nation on earth, poverty is on the increase. An investigation conducted by the BBC estimated that a small handful of these people, a few thousand, have over 20 trillion dollars stashed away in the fifty 'tax havens' around the world. What is a tax haven, if not a tax dodge? The biggest banks in the world have helped the richest people on the planet stash these ill-gotten gains away. Today, every government is struggling to find the billions required to stimulate their spluttering economies. Yet they are the same people, politicians and bureaucrats who have looked the other way, continue to do so, because 'haven' is a polite word that puts them beyond the reach of the laws they created. It's no secret that these stashes of ill-gotten wealth could stimulate the global economic recovery required, all by themselves.

The only glimmer of hope for our democracies is the fact that Barack Obama was really financed by small donations from the average citizen, not big business. For saying what he had said on the campaign trail, for now trying to deliver on his promises, the rich and the powerful are calling him names. Among the insults thrown every day by the media they own, the dreaded word "socialist". They are now demonizing him, comparing him with Chavez and Morales, ignoring the fact that these two socialists were democratically elected by their countrymen. It pains them that Communist China, the world's best performing economy, is crucial to their own salvation. Let us hope that Indonesia's leaders, whoever they may be come July, are taking note. The least they can do is acknowledge the everyday struggle of the people who will put them in power, not just those who finance their campaigns.

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