

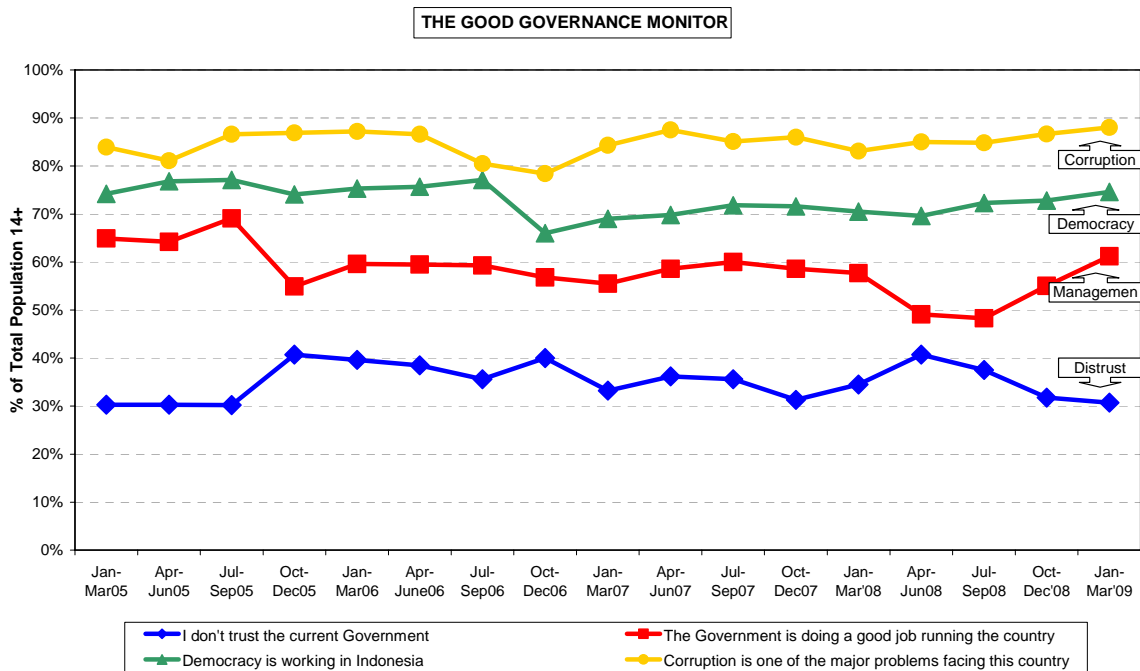


Behind the polls, other signs also indicate political continuity.

In the run-up to the next election, just about every poll is registering the growing preference for President Yudhoyono regardless of his running mate. In business circles, most conversations about the election are tinged with the hope of continuity. From the people’s perspective, the vote of confidence is also gathering steam.

The Good Governance Monitor sheds more light on that momentum. In the first quarter of 2009, all four indicators moved in the right direction strengthening the hand of the government in power. Only 31 per cent of Indonesians 14 years and older agree with the statement “I don’t trust the current government”. A key factor, the SBY administration now enjoys a level of trust as high as it did when it first swung into power. “The government is doing a good job running the country”, says 61 per cent of the population. That score is up 6 per cent from the previous quarter.

No wonder that “Democracy is working in Indonesia” is also on the rise. That indicator of the public pulse is almost as high as it ever was, with 75 per cent agreeing. This measure is also up 2 points from the previous quarter, yet another pat on the back for the administration. Even the heightened awareness of “Corruption is a major problem affecting this country” appears to be influenced by candidate SBY’s ‘corruption-fighter’ message over the airwaves. With almost 9 out of 10 Indonesians agreeing, up 1 point from the previous quarter, the message is obviously striking a positive chord with just about everyone. All things considered, Indonesia’s leader is enjoying the same level of public support as President Obama and Prime Minister Rudd enjoy in their countries. In the free world, these three leaders are now in a league of their own in the popularity stakes. That Indonesia is a new democracy, that it is a country with a predominantly Moslem population, makes that achievement that much more creditable for President Yudhoyono.





These conclusions are based on the most recent findings of the Good Governance Monitor, updated quarterly. 6540 respondents were interviewed in the January-March period, in tandem with Roy Morgan Single Source. The syndicated survey conducts interviews with over 25,000 Indonesians 14 years and older, each year. That national database is updated every quarter, reflecting changes as they occur in the unpredictable times we live in. Almost 90 per cent of the population is covered, in both urban and rural Indonesia.

There's no denying that simultaneous declines in the global price of food and fuel had a lot to do with all this adoration. Everywhere, people vote with their wallets. In developing countries, the price of onions can topple a government from power. Managing the price of essentials, to ease the pain for the overwhelming majority usually on survival mode, is a tall order for any administration. Juggling those fundamental priorities with the pressures of free market principles, globalisation and FTAs is often a contradiction in terms. But politicians with their instinctive ability to make the most of the worst of situations, always come out on top.

The global financial crisis is in many ways a situation that leaders like Obama, Rudd and Yudhoyono can and are taking advantage of. Faced with a crisis of gigantic proportions, most people don't understand it, much less have any idea of what to do about it. Those who claim they do, appear to be incapable of anything more than chanting worn-out economic theories. In the meantime, these three very different people seem to have grasped one major opportunity that has presented itself. Amidst the chaos, they see a window that won't stay open for too long. It is an opportunity to spend money they don't have, to level some of the inequalities that exist in their three different societies. Ideologues can call them names, but they seem determined to use the panic of these turbulent times to get back to nation building, in the most fundamental of ways. Create jobs, alleviate poverty. Or so I fondly hope.

International market forces will hinder the ability of an Indonesia to power its own way out of the mess we are in. The return to a 'positive feedback loop' is critical to all nations, big and small. But the need for capital flows and the sources of funding are somewhat different in developing economies. For example, it's no secret that the return of Indonesian monies stashed overseas would have a major impact on resources available. If the improvements in the number of taxpayer registrations had a corresponding impact on taxes collected, a 'new' source of capital would become real. These are the kind of challenges and opportunities that the next administration will need to focus on if it is serious in combating inequality, if it is going to pull the entire nation out of everyday pain.

That such efforts are good for the consumer economy would find no dissenters, from any side of the political spectrum. More consumers with more spending power is good for all. In today's global environment, Indonesia is better poised than most developing countries to push ahead towards those goals. The buoyant mood of the people is an asset that should not be underestimated, or wasted.

The writer can be contacted at Debnath.Guharoy@roymorgan.com