The eagle has crash-landed

Despite an unprecedented media campaign, Prabowo Subianto’s political fallen flat – for now

Dirk Tomsa

Ten years ago it seem Subianto’s political care had really begun. Durin New Order, the former notorious special forces a power struggle again and was subsequently military. Accused of inv abduction of student ac instigation of the anti-Ch May 1998, the former s president Suharto consi the country and go into self-imposed exile in Jo attention to business, m international oil and gas number of high-stake d billionaire brother, busir Djohadikusumo.

In the meantime, Prabo days in the army, Wiranto, enjoyed a brief moment in the sun. Having outmaneuvred turbulent days of the transition, the former adjutant of Suharto was instrumental in he Wahid to an unexpected stint at the presidency in 1999. But to Wiranto’s disappointm Wahid did not bring the desired recompense. Instead of being rewarded with the vice make do with a ministerial post. Shortly afterwards, Wahid added insult to injury wher from the cabinet. Thus, merely two years after the fall of Suharto it seemed, for a sho there was no place for either Wiranto or Prabowo in Indonesia’s new democracy.

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It did not take long for the two to attempt political comebacks. In 2004, Wiranto and Prabowo candidates in Golkar’s national convention to select a presidential candidate. Wiranto had huge amounts of money at the convention in order to secure a place in Indonesia’s first presidential election. In the end the former commander-in-chief of the armed forces did not make it to the palace, finishing third in the presidential election.

Undeterred by the defeat, Wiranto then moved on to found his own party (Hanura) and began to get ready for the next elections. In contrast to his half-hearted campaign in 2004, he meant business. Assisted by a high-profile media consultancy firm from the United States, he crafted an elaborate strategy which he hoped would eventually elevate him to the highest office in the country. His strategy consisted of three main pillars: first, mobilisation of support for his bid; second, enhancement of his organisational vehicle; and third, finding a niche in the political spectrum that would distinguish himself from other candidates.

**Finding the right vehicle**

Prabowo’s first step was to assume control over one of Indonesia’s biggest mass organisations: farmers’ association HKTI (Himpunan Kerukunan Tani Indonesia). Created during the corporatist tool for Suharto to monitor Indonesia’s millions of peasants, this organisation had been politically obliterated after 1998, but its vague affiliation with the rural masses made it an ideal vehicle for Prabowo because it provided him with an opportunity to begin his image-building campaign. By December 2004 he was elected HKTI chairman, thereby winning votes – never mind that he was not even a member of the association at that time.

The HKTI position provided Prabowo with valuable access to an organisational base, which he needed more than the chairmanship of a mass organisation. Indonesia’s election law dictates that only candidates who are nominated by political parties are allowed to contest an election, so in order to avoid dependence on the goodwill of an already existing party that various other retired generals had done before him: he created a new party of his own. Movement for a Great Indonesia (Gerindra) was born, a party with a fierce-looking Garuda eagle (Garuda is the centrepiece of Indonesia’s national coat of arms). From the day of its founding in 2008, Gerindra dedicated itself almost exclusively to promoting the presidential ambitions of its leader, Subianto.

At first sight, Gerindra appeared to be not much different from the various other parties established by retired generals in recent years. Just like Edi Sudrajat’s PKPI, Harto Subroto’s PSP, recently Wiranto’s Hanura, Gerindra too seemed to stand for little more than conservative politics imbued with a touch of New Order nostalgia. And yet, many observers were much more interested in Gerindra than the other parties formed by retired officers. A closer look at the composition of its advisory council reveals why. Formally led by a largely unknown forester called Suhardi, Gerindra provides a political home for a number of controversial former generals, who are dogged by persistent allegations of gross human rights violations. Amongst the most notorious is Kairupan, a former intelligence officer with a dubious track record in East Timor. Much against his exoneration by a Jakarta court is widely believed to have masterminded the murder of human rights activist Munir in September 2004, and of course Prabowo himself, whose list of human rights violations includes abduction, torture, and instigation of large-scale anti-Chinese riots. For this reason, Prabowo caused particular alarm among human rights advocates, many of whom protest against his presidential campaign this year.
In order to dispel this image, Prabowo pursued an ingenious plan. To the disbelief of activists who now opposed his candidature, Prabowo approached some of his former them to join his party. Why exactly former student activists like Desmond Mahesa or Haryanto Taslam, a former leader of Megawati Soekarnoputri’s PDI-P, all three of whom Prabowo’s troops in 1998, agreed to support the presidential ambitions of their forme the subject of much speculation. Some observers have argued that they were simply claim they may suffer from Stockholm syndrome (a psychological condition in which \ become emotionally attached to their hostage-taker). The three men themselves have speculation and simply maintained that after Prabowo had apologised to them, it was

**An unprecedented media campaign**

For Prabowo, people like Haryano, Desmond and Pius represented important human used in his bid for the presidency. But the real weapon in Prabowo Subianto’s struggl was an unprecedented media offensive which in mid-2008 ushered in the second ph campaign. While other parties were still in the planning stage, Prabowo began to inur public with an unparalleled bombardment of political advertisements.

**Buoyed by a self-confidence bordering on hubris, Prabow advertisements to liken himself to statesmen ranging from Napole to Barack Obama**

Buoyed by a self-confidence bordering on hubris, Prabowo used these advertisement array of past and present statesmen, ranging from Napoleon and Sukarno to Barack advertisements featured the majestic Garuda eagle and consistently highlighted the Suharto administrations featured the majestic Garuda eagle and consistently highlighted the Suharto administrations to realise Indonesia’s huge economic potential. To fund this soldier-cum-businessman-cum-politician had to dig deep into his pockets (and those According to a Gerindra official, the media campaign alone cost about US$100 million for speculation about just how much more was spent on other campaign activities.

Throughout his media offensive, Prabowo portrayed himself as the only presidential c liberating Indonesia from the yoke of rural poverty, unemployment and foreign debt. S What very few observers had predicted, however, was the solution Prabowo propose alleged malaise. Driven by the need to distinguish himself from his rivals, the man who largely to strategic maneuvers on global financial markets and to his connections to s most powerful elite families campaigned on a quasi-socialist platform, criticising the g privatisation agenda and proposing revisions of existing contracts with foreign compa and Exxon. Given Prabowo’s background, this may sound cynical, but the ‘anti-neolit to stand out from his rivals. And in view of the electoral success of other big-spending Hugo Chavez or perhaps Thaksin Shinawatra the strategy made sense, especially in financial crisis.

**Was it all in vain?**

So why did it not work? Even though Prabowo had implemented his campaign strateg start, Gerindra got less than five per cent of the vote (Wiranto’s Hanura party fared ev only about three per cent). A number of reasons probably account for this poor result, discomfort amongst many Indonesians about Prabowo’s hardline image and his hum; as widespread apprehension about his links to the Suharto family. Taken together, th provided a substantial deterrent for many voters. Arguably the most important reason despite the global financial crisis the overall socio-economic conditions in Indonesia v the emergence of a populist saviour.
The man who owed his fortune to strategic global financial connections to some of Indonesia's most powerful elite families could hardly be described as a quasi-socialist platform.

Thanks largely to the government’s three-phase ‘direct cash assistance’ (BLT) program, many Indonesians appear to be quite satisfied with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s performance. Significantly, the third phase of the BLT program was implemented in late March 2009, shortly before the election, and merely two weeks before the election more than 18 million poor families received yet another sponsored cash injection of Rp 100,000 per month, to be distributed over a period of six months. Even though these measures taken by the incumbent president, it is hardly surprising that few of the poor and fisherfolk targeted by Prabowo saw a need for a radical overhaul of the economy. Even those who may actually have seen this need were apparently reluctant to believe that such a measure would be, of all people, Prabowo Subianto, who, to put it lightly, is hardly known for his philanthropy.

Another important reason for Prabowo's failure to push Gerindra to a better result was essentially regressive. Despite the professional outlook of the advertisements, Gerindra was preoccupied primarily with romanticising the past rather than outlining the future. This was epitomised in a statement by Gerindra's deputy chairman Fadli Zon who maintained that Gerindra would rebuild Indonesia just like how it was in the past when people gained prosperity from fishing'. Clearly, the election result showed that very few Indonesians share this desire for the past. Thus, it could be argued that Prabowo may have revolutionised the style of political action, but he failed to match his impressive style with a convincing message.

So Prabowo will not become Indonesia's next president, and neither will Wiranto. Does this mean that there really is no place for these two in Indonesia’s democracy? Not quite. Despite the poor approval ratings in most opinion polls, both Prabowo and Wiranto will be vice-presidential candidates for Megawati and Jusuf Kalla respectively. This may look bad, but it will ensure that the two will continue to have a place in the system for year. One day, they might even run for president again in 2014.

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