

The right man for the job

INDONESIA IS QUIETLY EMERGING UNDER ITS NEW LEADER AS A POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT COUNTERBALANCE TO ISLAMIC EXTREMISM.



Retired four-star general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, known universally as SBY, has consolidated his position as Indonesia's newest political phenomenon by becoming the country's first democratically elected president.

Given virtually no chance of becoming president in opinion surveys until his resignation from his position as Minister for Politics and Security in the incumbent Megawati administration, Yudhoyono has struck a chord with voters with his message of clean and firm leadership.

He inherits a number of challenges that could make even the most hard-boiled general blanch. Since the 1998 fall of dictator Suharto, Indonesia has been losing ground on several fronts and is beset by economic problems, civil strife, separatist movements and

KEY STRENGTHS

SBY faces many challenges in transforming Indonesia from a sluggish economy plagued by militant Islamic factions to a genuine democracy that can become a successful trading power. However, in rallying support behind the newly formed Democratic Party he will be helped by six key personal strengths.

- His physical appearance. SBY is an imposing figure – tall, elegant and good-looking, he is imbued with a rare personal confidence and straight-talking style that transmits well to audiences. His clean image is important at a time when corruption is seen as a major problem.
- This quiet strength has made him an empathetic leader who seems to be able to inspire people from across the republic's diverse racial and religious mosaic.
- Having studied abroad, he is an erudite and fluent English-language speaker who is at ease with both the international media and global leaders – an enormous advantage for a nation that is often criticised for being far too introspective.
- Unlike former President Habibie, SBY is not rash. He believes in collating 'comprehensive' views and crafting 'integrated' solutions, and this disciplined approach could bring much-needed stability to the country.
- His experiences in the military have taught him about the importance of management. He understands the significance of giving orders, processing them and then ensuring that there is a follow up. This may sound self-evident, but Megawati lacked such basic management skills.
- Finally, his secular and nationalist approach to public affairs will please the entire region. There is an unspoken anxiety (especially in Singapore) about the rise of conservative Islamic forces, but an SBY administration will steer the world's largest Muslim nation more confidently toward religious moderation and progress – towards a true democracy.

terrorism. Just 11 days before the election, suicide bombers detonated explosives outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta, killing nine and wounding 182. The country is also involved in a protracted dispute with Islamic separatists in the province of Aceh – recently, the military unleashed a brutal crackdown that left over 2000 dead.

Maintaining civil order is clearly a top priority for the incoming administration – and addressing the domestic terrorist threat is high on the list of things to do. As President Megawati's senior security minister, Yudhoyono has been highly visible in the fight

However, if he is to be tougher on terrorism than his predecessor, SBY must do so because it is a threat to his own people and a rising problem in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries – not because Washington demands he does so. He must be seen as taking anti-terrorism steps in concert with those of neighbouring countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, rather than acting at the behest of the US.

Indonesia's recent bloody past has led to calls for the new president to display 'tough love' – Paul Rowland of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs in Jakarta has called for

THE SBY FILES



BORN

1949, East Java, Indonesia

EDUCATION

PhD from Bogor Institute of Agriculture, Indonesia, 2004. MA in management, Webster University, Kansas City, Missouri, US, 1991; National Military Academy, Indonesia, 1973.

against terrorist groups, and was a central figure in the drafting of Indonesia's first counter-terrorism law. One of the reasons the charismatic, straight-talking military man was elected was the perception that he would be more resolute and upfront than the uncommunicative Megawati.

A career soldier (he is a graduate of US military training programmes at Fort Benning, Columbus and the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Texas), Yudhoyono is very much an international figure, comfortable dealing with overseas governments and the media, and is considered the perfect spokesperson for a country looking to bridge the gulf between Western and Islamic ideologies. "I love the United States, with all its faults. I consider it my second country," the *International Herald Tribune* quoted him as saying last year. He has also said he wants to rebuild relations with Australia, which have suffered in recent years.

Indeed, his image abroad could do wonders for Indonesia. The *Washington Times* has called his election victory "a sign of hope in Southeast Asia," and his appointment has been welcomed around the world as evidence of Indonesia's progress towards democracy.

MILITARY CAREER

Graduated through the ranks under Suharto. Chief of staff of the territorial forces in East Timor. Ran army's political wing from 1998-1999, but pushed out for limiting the military's involvement in politics.

POLITICAL CAREER

Mining Minister, 1999-2001. Security Minister, 2001-2004. Led crackdowns on separatists in Aceh and on al Qaeda-linked terrorists. Sought to settle the 28-year separatist insurgency in Aceh by negotiating a six-month cease-fire with the rebels, but Megawati pulled out of the deal under pressure from hard-line generals.

PRESIDENTIAL FUTURE

Won Indonesia's presidential election run-off in a landslide. Vowed to create jobs, stamp out corruption and fight terrorism. Has asked the international community to work with the world's most populous Muslim nation.

"a firm leader, but not an iron fist" – and in this respect, SBY could be a shrewd choice. In a country wary of military dictatorships and human rights violations, he projects an image of cautioned discipline, a fact reflected in his nickname of 'the thinking general'.

In his earlier role as security minister in the Megawati administration, Yudhoyono was outspoken on the threat of terrorism. However, it's not yet clear how he'll deal with the radical Islamic group Jemaah Islamiyah. Indonesian police claim the group is responsible for acts of terrorism, but it still hasn't been officially outlawed – Jemaah Islamiyah translates as 'Islamic community' and banning it remains a very sensitive issue in a country that is 85 percent Muslim.

Overall, most believe Yudhoyono is the right man for Indonesia and the region. Tough, proactive and sufficiently international, many hope he will be able to shake the republic from its seven-year slump. But to do that, he must first address the challenge of countering terrorism within his own country and make tough decisions over what to do with the politically thorny issue of Jemaah Islamiyah. Only then will he be able to restore the international confidence necessary to revolutionise the country's economic fortunes. ■