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Golkar and the 2024 General Election: Internal Consolidation and Electoral Improvement

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SYNOPSIS

*The Golkar (Functional Groups) party faces another internal rift amidst the party's preparation for the 2024 General Election. It is not the first time Golkar Chairman Airlangga Hartanto has faced an internal brouhaha. **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** discusses some of the party's challenges amidst the 2024 General Election.*

COMMENTARY

Once a hegemonic party that was an integral part of Soeharto's New Order regime, the Golkar party faces a looming threat of another electoral decline. Golkar's number of seats in parliament has been declining steadily since the party secured a marvelous legislative victory back in 2004. Golkar had pledged to push its chairman, Airlangga Hartanto, who is also the current Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, to become a presidential nominee. Nevertheless, [Airlangga's electability](#) as a presidential candidate was too low to make a great fight in the 2024 presidential election.

Golkar initially formed a coalition, dubbed as [United Indonesia Coalition](#), with United Development Party (PPP) and National Mandate Party (PAN). However, the coalition was short-lived. PPP has officially declared its support towards Ganjar Pranowo's presidential bid and forged a coalition with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). Meanwhile, PAN preferred to support Jokowi's favoured presidential candidate. This circumstance momentarily puts the Golkar party in a limbo in the run-up to the 2024 General Election.

Given the unclear direction, a number of senior Golkar members had threatened to hold an [extraordinary congress](#) (munaslub) to replace Airlangga before his term ends in 2024. There was even [a rumour](#) that the current Coordinating Minister for Maritime and Investment Affairs wanted to replace Airlangga as Golkar chairman. Other potential contenders were current Minister of Investment Bahlil Lahadalia, [who was sidelined by Airlangga](#) in the party's current top structure, and Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) Bambang Soesatyo, who ran against Airlangga to become Golkar chief in 2019.

Airlangga responded to the munaslub proposal by holding [a dinner meeting](#) on 2 August with previous Golkar chiefs, namely Akbar Tanjung, Agung Laksono, and Aburizal Bakrie. A few days earlier, Airlangga also held a closed-door meeting with all the party's provincial branches, which concluded with an agreement to reject the extraordinary congress proposal. Additionally, former Golkar chief Jusuf Kalla voiced [his rejection to the munaslub idea](#), reminding the party that Airlangga has been given a mandate and calling for unity within Golkar. Airlangga's swift moves to gather support from both Golkar senior and structural members seem to have neutralised the munaslub threat. Furthermore, [Golkar's recent declaration to support Prabowo Subianto's presidential candidacy](#), together with Gerindra, the National Awakening Party (PKB), and PAN, gives a clearer indication of Golkar's plan for the 2024 General Election. Nevertheless, much work is still needed to improve the party's standing.



Although Golkar chairman and Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto swiftly responded to quell the threat of an extraordinary congress (munaslub), Airlangga and Golkar have much work ahead to improve the party's standing. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Elite Factionalism, Absence of a Popular Presidential Candidate, and Catch-All Party Trend

While Golkar remains among the top three in the legislative elections, it reflects a declining trend in parliamentary seats. Here, we can at least identify three shortcomings preventing Golkar's political machinery from working maximally. First, the continued internal friction within Golkar has certainly diverted the party's energy and resources for internal consolidation. The absence of one dominant faction among Golkar's top elites has established a volatile power configuration within the party. Top elites often quarrel with, and in some cases, sabotage, each other. It is also not uncommon for Golkar elites to support a different presidential candidate than the one

officially endorsed by the party. Furthermore, while these factions do have the power and resources to compete in national politics, they do not have enough to emerge as a single dominant power.

Another issue plaguing Golkar is the lack of popular candidates contesting in the presidential elections. A popular candidate is a key element to ensure victory in Indonesia's current presidential elections. Indonesia's electoral system is in such a way that the ability to triumph at the political elite level does not guarantee the same achievement at the grassroots level where popularity is the sine qua non. Golkar's support for Prabowo's presidential bid practically overrode Airlangga's ambition to run in the presidential race. Although it is still possible for Airlangga to join the race as a vice-presidential candidate, his stagnant electability may be a hindrance. Another possible candidate is the current governor of West Java, Ridwan Kamil, who just joined Golkar in January 2023. According to various recent surveys, Ridwan has considerable electability capital to become a serious contender for vice-president. However, there is still doubt over his popularity and electoral performance beyond the West Java province.

Third, Golkar has been labelling itself as a "centre" party or "being in the middle". The party aims for all segments of society to be its voters regardless of their political ideology. However, this existing catch-all strategy is gaining popularity among other Indonesian political parties, leading them to move away slightly from their ideological core and adopt a more pragmatic approach to accommodate larger voter bases. This means that these parties, including Golkar, are competing for more or less the same group of voters. Thus, Golkar is unable to differentiate itself well from other parties in terms of voter segmentation to win niche voter bases.

From Hegemonic Party to Major Coalition Partner

Golkar should prioritise addressing its elite factionalism, the absence of a popular presidential candidate, and the lack of differentiation compared with other political parties to prevent further damage to the party's electoral performance in the long run. Continued friction among party elites will preserve the high political cost for internal consolidation. Jusuf Kalla recently revealed that it costs Rp500-600 billion (\$44-52 million) [to become Golkar chief](#). The big money requirement consequently limits Golkar chairman candidates to a handful of people who have access to financial resources. Next, Golkar is neither here nor there in terms of its electoral stature. Failure to get niche voter bases and the absence of a highly popular candidate contribute to the declining electoral trend of the Golkar party. A survey conducted by Kompas Newspaper in February 2023 indicated that Golkar has a relatively lower party identification (28.4%) compared to PAN (50%) and PDIP (45.7%). Strengthening party identification among Golkar voters is thus necessary.

Given the current composition of party elites and members, Golkar can still perform better than most Indonesian political parties. Golkar's capable political machinery and political capital of its elites and members are valuable assets for the party to thrive in the 2024 General Election. Thus, Golkar has established itself to be a major coalition partner that is attractive enough as a political ally but has limited power to single-handedly determine the coalition's political outcomes. Aiming to re-establish its

dominant party status will be a herculean task for the party. Success in taming internal friction could be an initial step to improve Golkar's electoral performance.

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