

Politics in Indonesia:: Resilient elections, defective democracy

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ANALYSIS

Politics in Indonesia: Resilient elections, defective democracy

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the eve of historic elections, a conundrum lies at the heart of Indonesian politics. Successive governments have built one of the most important foundations of a successful democracy: free, fair, and peaceful elections. However, while its electoral procedures are robust, Indonesian democracy is increasingly defective in other areas. President Joko Widodo, who is the favourite to be elected again in April, rose to power thanks to the competitive nature of Indonesian elections. Yet, he has proven to be a poor guardian of democracy.

Jokowi, as he is known, has sought compromises with corrupt politicians and intolerant religious leaders, and surrounded himself with former generals with little commitment to democratic principles. On his watch, human rights, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities have all weakened. A bitter form of religion-based identity politics seems to be embedded in the system. As Indonesia faces growing challenges, its future will be defined by how the next generation of leaders use the powerful mandate of electoral victory to overcome those who are seeking to stymie much-needed reforms and undermine democratic norms.

On 17 April, 193 million Indonesians will enter more than 800 000 polling stations spread over hundreds of islands to choose their leader in the world's biggest direct presidential election. For the first time, this election will be held on the same day as the legislative elections. Indonesians will be voting for the upper and lower houses of the national parliament, as well as provincial and district legislatures. There are more than 245 000 candidates running for over 20 000 seats in what may be the most complicated single-day election the world has ever seen.¹ Just over 20 years after the fall of Suharto's long-ruling authoritarian regime, free, fair, and peaceful elections have become the norm in Indonesia. President Joko Widodo's rise to power from obscurity illustrated the genuinely competitive nature of the electoral system. Encouragingly, a new generation of hard-working, more responsive local leaders is now looking to follow his lead.

Ironically, however, Jokowi, as he is known, has allowed human rights, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities to weaken since he was elected in 2014. Law enforcement has become politicised, with government critics arrested and jailed on questionable charges. Jokowi has blinked in the face of opposition from conservative Islamic groups, legitimising anti-pluralistic views that undermine the rights of Indonesia's minorities and galvanising the rise of divisive identity politics. And, surrounded by powerful former generals, he has countenanced an expanding role for the military in politics, threatening to undermine the reforms that followed the fall of Suharto in 1998.²

A decade ago, Rizal Sukma, one of Indonesia's most eminent policy analysts (and the current ambassador to the United Kingdom), published a paper arguing that the country's politics were characterised by "defective elections, resilient democracy".³ Now, Indonesian politics looks more like a story of "resilient elections, defective democracy".

Building a democracy in a vast, multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation is not a linear process that can be assessed by a simple measure of progress versus regression. Academics and human rights activists are right to raise the alarm about the backward steps on Jokowi's watch, which come at a time when democratic ideals and practices are being eroded across the world. It is important, however, to see recent trends in the context of Indonesia's history and the difficulties of moving from authoritarianism to democracy.

Many of the challenges to democracy in Indonesia today stem from the 'original sin' of *reformasi*, the reform movement that gave birth to the modern Indonesian state. By opting for a process of graduated change from within rather than a revolution, Indonesia avoided the immense bloodshed and extreme uncertainty that would have accompanied efforts

Many of the challenges to democracy in Indonesia today stem from the 'original sin' of reformasi...

to truly dismantle the ancien regime. Yet the price of a mostly smooth and peaceful transition has been to leave Suharto-era figures and institutions with a seat at the table of power. The arrival of freedom of speech and association has allowed all sorts of civil society groups to flourish, including hard-line Islamists who have reignited long-running debates about the role of Islam in the state and society.

Indonesia's transition to democracy has been far more successful than neighbouring Myanmar and Thailand — or most of the Arab Spring nations. However, it is no longer the beacon of democracy and tolerance that many world leaders proclaim it to be.⁴

This Analysis will explore the tensions between Indonesia's impressive democratic procedures and its troubled democratic practices. It will look at the four very different characters running for the presidency and vice-presidency — and how their backgrounds and views reflect contrasting pressures within the political system. It will briefly explain why Jokowi and running mate Ma'ruf Amin are the frontrunners. It will also analyse the resilient nature of Indonesian elections despite challenges from elite players in politics and business who would like to roll back this key accountability mechanism. Finally, this Analysis will examine the nature of democratic backsliding under Jokowi and discuss how these tensions in Indonesia's system might play out. It draws on face-to-face interviews in Indonesia with politicians, senior officials, human rights activists, and other key participants.

THE 2019 ELECTIONS: WHO ARE THE CANDIDATES?

JOKO WIDODO, THE INCUMBENT

...Jokowi's workmanlike attitude, and his focus on short-term tactics... continues to be his greatest strength — and his greatest weakness.

From small-town mayor to president, Jokowi has always insisted that he will not change his nuts-and-bolts style.⁵ His soaring popularity, first as mayor of Solo in central Java, and then as governor of Jakarta, stemmed from his clean reputation, his man-of-the-people image and his focus on getting things done, from clearing riverbank slums to sprucing up decrepit markets. After he beat Prabowo Subianto to the presidency in 2014, a close adviser asked him how, as the leader of 260 million people, he could continue to govern through spot checks. "No problem," the new president replied. "Now I have a plane."⁶

Five years on, Jokowi's workmanlike attitude, and his focus on short-term tactics over long-term strategy, continues to be his greatest strength — and his greatest weakness. Following years of neglect under previous governments, the 57-year-old former furniture businessman has significantly accelerated the development of infrastructure, from toll roads to airports. After decades of delays and just in time for the April election, Jakarta finally got its first metro line, a big advance for the world's second biggest urban area after Tokyo. Jokowi has looked most happy, and most

authoritative, donning a hard hat and inspecting infrastructure projects across the country.

He has also pushed his government to extend access to education and health for the poor, and in the process helped promote demand among Indonesians for better services. During his first term, the official poverty rate has fallen from around 11 per cent to just below 10 per cent, although, as in many countries, there is scepticism about such official data being massaged for political ends.⁷ Economic growth, measured by GDP, has expanded by around 5 per cent per year on his watch, well below his early promise to boost it to 7 per cent but not bad compared to other countries in the region, China excluded.

However, Jokowi's paramount focus on infrastructure, and his ad hoc style, has limited his ability to tackle the complex political and social challenges facing this large and diverse Muslim-majority country.⁸ He has done little to confront the vested interests that have stymied the reforms needed to improve the uneven legal system, reduce corruption, and drive a faster-growing and more equitable economy.

Jokowi has followed the lead of his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, by entering into a big-tent coalition with a wide range of political parties. This has stabilised his political position but at the cost of progress. Like previous presidents, he has surrounded himself with a succession of former generals, from Wiranto, the chief security minister who was indicted by a UN tribunal for crimes against humanity in Timor-Leste, to Luhut Pandjaitan, the maritime affairs minister and a former special forces commander who was also active in Timor-Leste.⁹

With these Suharto-era figures advising Jokowi, his law enforcement agencies have embarked on a disturbing crackdown against government critics. The president has taken a similarly hard-line approach towards the drugs trade. He has overseen a new round of drug trafficking-related executions, causing a rift with Australia, and mimicked Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte's calls for the police to shoot drug dealers.¹⁰

Despite these signs of toughness, however, advisers say that Jokowi was taken aback by the rise of the strident Islamist groups that drove the campaign to unseat his political ally, former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama.¹¹ An ethnic Chinese and a Christian, Ahok, as he is known, was jailed for blasphemy and lost the 2017 gubernatorial election after conservatives and hardliners accused him of insulting Islam and being unfit to rule over Muslims.

A doer rather than a talker, Jokowi has struggled to come up with a convincing narrative to defend Indonesia's pluralist system and reputation for inter-religious tolerance. Instead, reflecting his instinct to avoid open confrontation, he has tried to co-opt his critics by appointing a conservative cleric as his vice presidential candidate and promising to

Jokowi's paramount focus on infrastructure, and his ad hoc style, has limited his ability to tackle... complex political and social challenges...

release a jailed terrorist leader, while empowering the law enforcement agencies to go after some of his most vocal Islamist opponents.¹²

Jokowi is best understood as a “bundle of contradictions”.¹³ According to those who have worked closely with him, Jokowi is a brilliant retail politician and tactician but lacks strategic thinking. He is an eager promoter of foreign investment who has embarked on a program of economic nationalism. He is a political and military outsider who cut deals with vested interests to stay in power.¹⁴ These tensions in the man most likely to lead Indonesia for the next five years reflect the wider conflicts at the heart of the political system.

MA'RUF AMIN, JOKOWI'S VICE-PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Ma'ruf Amin, a 76-year-old Islamic cleric, was never meant to be the vice president of Indonesia. As Jokowi sought to replace 76-year-old incumbent Jusuf Kalla (who was seen by many as being too old), the president wanted to pick Mahfud MD, a younger and more dynamic figure who is also an Islamic party politician and former chief justice of the Constitutional Court. At the last minute, however, Jokowi changed his mind after pressure from his coalition partners. They feared that Mahfud could use the vice president role to start campaigning for the presidency in 2024, when Jokowi will be term limited, and preferred someone who would be too old to run next time.¹⁵

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Ma'ruf is the most powerful cleric in Indonesia. He is president of Nadhlatul Ulama, the country's biggest Muslim organisation, and chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), a state-backed but independent body that issues religious rulings on everything from Islamic finance to blasphemy. As such, Ma'ruf appears to be a strange choice for Jokowi. Having an ageing cleric by his side does little to support Jokowi's chief focus: improving economic performance. Ma'ruf has a history of promoting intolerance towards Islamic sects and other religious minorities. He was one of the driving forces behind the campaign against Ahok, which was the spearhead of a wider opposition movement against the president himself. In 2016, he issued a religious ruling that Ahok had blasphemed by rejecting claims that the Quran forbids Muslims from choosing a non-Muslim as their leader.¹⁶ This fatwa helped spark the mass protests and police investigation that led to Ahok losing the Jakarta governor election and being jailed for two years for blasphemy.

Ma'ruf is a contradictory figure. His long career has been characterised by a combination of political flexibility, in order to secure high-ranking and lucrative positions, and doctrinaire promotion of conservative Islam. He has regularly condemned “deviant” practices and promoted a greater role for MUI in setting Islamic standards for society and the economy.¹⁷

The latter aspect makes many commentators fear that Ma'ruf and his allies will use the vice presidency, if he and Jokowi are elected, to promote the Islamisation of the state, along the lines of Malaysia.¹⁸ However, as

noted to the author by one Islamic scholar who has worked with Ma'ruf over many years, he tends to shift with the political winds, despite his backing for intolerant religious rulings in the past: "In MUI meetings, he will often let people speak for and against a proposition before he concludes somewhere in the middle."¹⁹

PRABOWO SUBIANTO, THE VETERAN CHALLENGER

Prabowo Subianto, a 67-year-old former general who married (and later divorced) one of Suharto's daughters, has long believed he is destined to lead his country, according to those who know him. In 2004, Prabowo failed to secure the nomination of the Golkar Party. In 2008, he and his brother Hashim Djojohadikusumo, a natural resources tycoon, set up their own party, Gerindra. Prabowo ran as a vice-presidential candidate for Megawati Sukarnoputri in 2009 and they lost to Yudhoyono. He ran and lost in his own right against Jokowi in 2014 after a bitterly fought and expensive campaign that brought him within touching distance of his life's ambition.

That narrow defeat seems to have wounded a man who is known equally for his fiery jingoistic speeches and his eloquent table talk on politics and history. Before the nomination deadline in August 2018, Prabowo appeared reluctant to put his name forward, with the polls suggesting an uphill battle to beat the incumbent. On the campaign trail, he has failed to recapture the vigour of the 2014 campaign. Then, his brash swagger and vituperative outbursts against foreign puppets stealing Indonesia's wealth energised large swathes of the electorate, two years before Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte were elected thanks in part to a similar approach.²⁰

[Prabowo] has failed to recapture the vigour of the 2014 campaign.

Still, few politicians would have the stamina — or the temerity — for a fourth run at the top job in 15 years. Given his age, and the likely field of younger candidates in 2024, this may be Prabowo's last shot. He has been campaigning on promises to deliver better jobs for Indonesians and to ensure the stability of food and daily goods prices.²¹ However, as usual in Indonesian elections, beyond vague promises there is little policy substance.

Despite his strongman image, Prabowo has the chameleon-like qualities of many Indonesian politicians. He continues to promise voters that he will curb foreign involvement in Indonesia's economy and to warn that hostile outside forces are trying to steal the election from him. In meetings with foreign diplomats and journalists, however, he talks more reservedly about the need to increase Indonesia's tax to GDP ratio and curb corruption.²² As one Western diplomat in Jakarta noted to the author: "I think our politicians would probably get on better at a personal level with Prabowo because he's eloquent and educated overseas but I'm not sure they would trust him."²³

Dark allegations hang over Prabowo's head: that he directed the killing of separatists in East Timor during the 1970s and 1980s, and that he

oversaw the kidnapping of student dissidents and orchestrated anti-Chinese riots as the Suharto government collapsed during the Asian financial crisis. He has always denied wrongdoing, insisting that he simply carried out orders and was made a “fall guy” when his father-in-law’s regime fell.²⁴

Jokowi’s proximity to other Suharto-era figures with questionable human rights records, such as Wiranto, neutralises the relative political impact of these allegations. And, with 40 per cent of Indonesia’s 193 million voters below the age of 35, many are simply unaware of or uninterested in his chequered past.²⁵ This suggests that it will be Prabowo’s ability to project a strong image for Indonesia’s future, rather than his own history, that will determine whether he can seize the ultimate prize at last.

SANDIAGA UNO, PRABOWO’S VICE-PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

In a lacklustre campaign, Sandiaga Uno has often seemed to be the only candidate proactively running for office. The 49-year-old businessman, who is by far the youngest of the four candidates, has regularly posted images of himself jogging, swimming and playing basketball during his non-stop trips around the country. His infusion of energy has helped the Prabowo campaign generate buzz from the mainstream media and attract younger voters on Facebook and Instagram, which have a wide, enthusiastic, and growing user base in Indonesia.

Partly educated overseas like Prabowo, Sandiaga co-founded two investment firms that flourished as the Indonesian economy took off in the mid-2000s after recovering from the Asian financial crisis. He entered politics in 2015 when he joined Prabowo’s Gerindra Party as an adviser. He made his breakthrough in the racially and religiously charged Jakarta gubernatorial election of 2017, when he was elected as deputy governor alongside Anies Baswedan, a former education minister in Jokowi’s Cabinet. Both vice-presidential candidates played a direct role, therefore, in unseating Jokowi’s ally Ahok.

...Sandiaga has played up his image as a hard-working Muslim boy done good, rather than focus on his experience as an internationally trained financier.

Ironically, though, while Jokowi caved in to pressure to appoint a cleric as his running mate, Prabowo, who has received backing from and given succour to outspoken Islamists, went for a businessman.²⁶ It helped that Sandiaga was willing to fund most of the campaign — around US\$100 million by his reckoning.²⁷

On the campaign trail, Sandiaga has played up his image as a hard-working Muslim boy done good, rather than focus on his experience as an internationally trained financier. To conservative Muslim supporters, his background stands in stark contrast to the ethnically Chinese, non-Muslim tycoons who dominate Indonesia’s rich lists and have backed Jokowi in the past.

Yet, in Sandiaga’s own recounting, Prabowo’s choice was driven by the need to look to the future: “This is not about picking Muslim clerics. We

need to focus on transitions to the next generation of leaders. We need to give signals that Indonesia is ready and our focus will be the economy.”²⁸ Sandiaga’s mention of the next generation is important. With the odds against him and Prabowo, Sandiaga is also campaigning for 2024 and, to the chagrin of his rivals (including Anies Baswedan), he now has a strong head start.²⁹

WHO IS LIKELY TO WIN?

Jokowi is the overwhelming front runner for the presidency. Of nine reputable polls carried out over the past four months, all put Jokowi well ahead of Prabowo. Taking an average of those polls, Jokowi is preferred by 54 per cent of voting Indonesians and Prabowo 33 per cent, with the rest undecided or with no view. There has not been a significant shift in sentiment over the period up to March, although a recent poll by *Kompas*, Indonesia’s most-respected daily newspaper, had Jokowi’s lead at just 12 percentage points.

Presidential race: Comparison of polling data (%)

	SMRC	Kompas	Alvara	LSI	Indobarom	Populi	Cyrus	Charta	Indikator
Polling period	Feb–Mar	Feb–Mar	Feb–Mar	Feb	Feb	Jan	Jan	Dec–Jan	Dec
Jokowi	58	49	54	59	50	54	55	53	55
Prabowo	32	37	35	31	29	31	36	34	35
Don’t know/ No answer	11	13	11	10	21	15	9	13	10

Source: *Reformasi Weekly*, March 2019

Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to decimal place rounding

Beyond the polls, it is hard to find a political expert in Indonesia who sees a viable path to victory for Prabowo. Jokowi has all the advantages of incumbency. He has the vast machinery of government behind him and has won the support of most of Indonesia’s major media owners, who are keen to keep good relations with the man they expect to win. Similarly, political parties representing 60 per cent of the seats in the parliament are behind him and his coalition claims that 30 out of 34 provincial governors are on his side.³⁰ While Indonesian voters do not blindly follow voting instructions from provincial leaders or legislators, it could harm Jokowi’s campaign if these figures were lining up against him.

There is only one precedent in Indonesia of a directly elected incumbent president facing re-election: Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who won a decisive victory in 2009. While there is some debate about the effectiveness of Jokowi’s infrastructure push, and he has upset human rights activists, his approval ratings remain high.³¹ Prabowo has criticised Jokowi for failing to create enough quality jobs and for allowing food prices to rise too high. However, this line of attack has not yet persuaded many Jokowi supporters to switch allegiance. Short of a sudden and unexpected

calamity, such as an economic shock or a major political or corruption scandal, the omens for Jokowi look good.

Advisers to Prabowo admit privately that they are facing a tough battle to unseat Jokowi, although they claimed in mid-March that their own polls gave Jokowi a narrower lead at just under 10 percentage points.³² Still, Jokowi's campaign team understands that this high level of confidence in victory could breed complacency. Recent electoral upsets from the United Kingdom and the United States to Malaysia have made many politicians and pollsters more circumspect. "Elections seem to be getting harder to predict and we need to make sure our core supporters turn out," one adviser noted.³³

Pre-election polls in Indonesia are usually taken at least a month before they are released, and as with all polls, are only hypothetical indications of voting intention. In 2014, Jokowi started with a lead of more than 30 percentage points but Prabowo fought a stirring campaign that brought him close to victory before he finally lost by a margin of 6 percentage points.³⁴ So while the data and precedents point strongly to a victory for Jokowi, neither side is taking the result for granted.

TENSIONS IN INDONESIAN DEMOCRACY

RESILIENT ELECTIONS, PARTY CARTELS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

Emerging from the ashes of authoritarianism, Indonesia has built a trusted and resilient electoral system over the past 20 years. The April vote will be the fifth national legislative election and the fourth direct presidential election since 1998. The results have ultimately been accepted by the people and the participants. Presidents have willingly handed over the reins to their successor, without the sort of manipulations often seen in other countries emerging from authoritarian rule.³⁵ A robust and contestable electoral system, in which governments truly fear being ousted, is one of the cornerstones of a real democracy. The election of Jokowi, a political outsider, as president in 2014 was a high point for those tracking Indonesia's democratic development.³⁶ What better proof of the open and competitive nature of the political system than a hard-working former mayor securing the presidency on a platform of better health and education, more economic reform, and respect for human rights?

Jokowi's path to the top job via two directly elected local government positions also suggested that the decentralisation that accompanied democratisation after the fall of Suharto was paying dividends. Other ambitious, younger politicians such as Anies Baswedan, the current Jakarta governor, Ridwan Kamil, the governor of West Java, and Ganjar Pranowo, the governor of Central Java, now see a successful period in local government as a viable route to the presidency.

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This new generation of leaders, who owe their rise to democratisation, are both promoting and benefiting from a shift from supply-driven to demand-driven politics. Since the fall of Suharto, direct elections at a national and local level have been dominated by members of dynasties, influential businessmen, and former military officials competing for public support based on their backgrounds and networks. Jokowi won by listening and responding to voters' demands for better services and relying on grassroots volunteers more than the standard machinery of oligarchic politics. The likes of Anies, Ridwan, and Ganjar have taken a similar approach, building local support networks rather than simply relying on patronage as often happened before.

The emergence of better candidates — and more demanding voters — has only been possible because of successive administrations' commitment to uphold free and fair elections, and its willingness to resist pressure from powerful vested interests to roll back this competitive system. Prabowo and his backers have repeatedly called for direct elections to be scrapped and leaders to be chosen by parliaments, ostensibly to save money and better accommodate Indonesians' preference for consensus politics.³⁷ They are pushing back precisely because they understand that competitive direct elections provide a vital check against the money politics and patronage systems that stifle progress in Indonesia.

The high cost of participating in elections, and rules that make it hard for new political parties to be set up, benefit the country's established parties. One of the reasons that elections in Indonesia are so expensive is the practice of vote buying, in which candidates or their agents hand out cash or staple goods in the expectation that voters will support them. As many as one in three Indonesians are given such bribes during elections, according to one expert study.³⁸ However, secret voting means that candidates have no way to ensure that voters do as asked. Several candidates running for the main chamber of Indonesia's parliament, known as the DPR, said that vote buying did not guarantee success but that, without handouts, it was much harder to get attention from voters.³⁹

After elections, established political party leaders use other methods to try to maintain their grip on power. Rather than go into opposition, many prefer to line up behind the president in the hope of winning access to Cabinet seats, protection from prosecution for corruption, or other forms of patronage. Since first elected, Jokowi has relied on this "party cartelisation, Indonesian-style" just as much as Yudhoyono before him.⁴⁰ This lack of concerted parliamentary opposition has led experts to question whether Indonesia is anything more than a "procedural" democracy.⁴¹ Yet Indonesia's genuinely contestable elections put clear water between it and authoritarian regimes such as Myanmar or Thailand, where those in power use other forms of manipulation to ensure they retain their grip on power despite the holding of elections.⁴²

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While Indonesia's parliament continues to be beset by corruption and remains under the influence of political party cartels, direct elections have allowed a generation of impressive political leaders to emerge at a local level. Although they must work with political parties, their direct mandate from the people gives them significant leverage against the parties and requires them to be responsive to public needs. However much political party bosses might want pliable candidates who will sustain their rent-seeking practices and patronage networks, they need people who can win elections. And Indonesian voters are demanding more from their leaders.

INCREASING DEFECTS IN INDONESIAN DEMOCRACY

Despite the manner of his election as president, Jokowi has been a weak guardian of democratic principles. Observers inside and outside Indonesia who greeted his election now blame him for presiding over what has been termed an "authoritarian turn" or a "retreat from democracy".⁴³

The evidence of democratic backsliding under Jokowi is extensive. His administration has made increasing use of vague and illiberal laws to criminalise criticism of the government and other official institutions including the military. It has weakened the fight against corruption in the name of political stability. Jokowi's government has compounded the rise of sectarian, identity politics by co-opting and criminalising conservative and hard-line Muslim critics. And it has undermined successful efforts to put the armed forces back in the barracks, most notably with a recent proposal to deploy senior officers into the civil service (ostensibly because there are not enough appropriate jobs available in the military).

Many of these issues stem from forces that were either unleashed or unreformed after *reformasi*. From tough-talking former generals to billionaire oligarchs and Islamists who want Shariah law, these disparate figures share an interest in rolling back some elements of Indonesia's democratic system. Too often, Jokowi has been unable or unwilling to take on these vested interests, preferring short-term political stability over long-term political change.

The rise of Islamic identity politics

Some of the biggest challenges to democracy in Indonesia today are a result of the growth of identity politics and the associated rise of a more pious and strident attitude to religion.⁴⁴ These tendencies seem to reflect global shifts that are transforming the developed and developing world, exacerbated by the explosion of social media and its potentially divisive effects.⁴⁵

Indonesia's Islamic political parties have failed to capitalise on this trend at the ballot box, and their vote share is predicted by some pollsters to decline at this election. However, a motley combination of conservative clerics such as Ma'ruf and hard-line Islamist groups such as (the now banned) Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the thuggish Islamic Defenders

Some of the biggest challenges to democracy in Indonesia today are a result of the growth of identity politics...

Front succeeded in driving Islamic issues up the mainstream political agenda. Indonesia's non-Islamic political parties (which are known as 'nationalist') have been trying to capitalise on this trend at a local level for some years. These nationalist parties have been promoting shariah local by-laws that mandate everything from the wearing of headscarves by schoolgirls to the quantum of *zakat*, Islamic charitable giving. This may reflect rising religiosity from nationalist party politicians. However, it is also part of an effort by these local leaders to harness support from Islamic voters and organisations, in addition to creating new revenue streams.⁴⁶

The Ahok case was an example of politicians instrumentalising religion and identity on a much bigger scale. Jokowi's political opponents, including Prabowo and Sandiaga, saw the anti-Ahok movement as an opportunity to weaken the president ahead of the 2019 election. Shaken by the scale and vociferous nature of the campaign, Jokowi went into damage control mode. He seems to have played into his critics' hands by conceding ground on some matters, while using the police against them, thereby enforcing the narrative that Jokowi is attacking Islam.⁴⁷

Jokowi's choice of Ma'ruf as his running mate was designed to neutralise criticism from hardliners. Similarly, Jokowi has chosen to play up his own personal piety, while his supporters have taken to attacking Prabowo's personal religious credentials on social media.⁴⁸ And, in a moment of opportunism, he promised to release jailed terrorist leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir on humanitarian grounds — before quickly reversing course because of intense domestic and international criticism.⁴⁹

Cracking down on critics

Even as he gave succour to the hardliners and conservatives with these moves, Jokowi also empowered the law enforcement agencies to go after them — another demonstration of his heavy-handed tendencies. The government banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, the local offshoot of a global organisation committed to founding an Islamic caliphate. The police effectively drove Habib Rizieq Shihab, the hard-line cleric who founded the Islamic Defenders Front, into exile after pursuing pornography charges against him following the leak on the internet of a purported sex chat between him and a woman. The charges were dropped in 2018 but Rizieq remains in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ A host of other supporters of Prabowo and critics of Jokowi have been arrested, prosecuted or convicted for their public comments. Ahmed Dhani, a rock star, was jailed for tweets that were contentiously judged to amount to hate speech. And Robertus Robet, an academic, was charged for singing a Suharto-era song that mocked the military. The police have also broken up or cancelled a series of anti-Jokowi political events on specious grounds.⁵¹

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While this crackdown was largely reactive, rather than part of a premeditated plan, it has undermined democracy and the rule of law in Indonesia. Far from achieving the desired effect of curbing opposition, it has provided further fodder to Jokowi's critics and put more power in the hands of Suharto-era securocrats such as Wiranto, who is in charge of the powerful coordinating ministry for political, legal, and security affairs. In the latest example of his approach, Wiranto recently called for Indonesia's draconian terrorism laws to be used against those spreading fake news related to the election.⁵²

Conceding to vested interests

Other measures taken under Jokowi's watch look like backward steps towards the Suharto years.

Other measures taken under Jokowi's watch look like backward steps towards the Suharto years. The military wants to put several hundred generals and colonels who cannot find appropriate armed forces positions into the civil service, undermining two decades of successful efforts to unwind Suharto's *dwi fungsi* (dual function) system, which gave the military security and political roles.⁵³

The fight against endemic graft has been undercut by the apparent willingness of the government (led by a president whose personal image remains clean) to cut deals with those of questionable background in exchange for political support. The most often-cited example is Hary Tanoesoedibjo, a media tycoon and ardent Jokowi critic, who started backing the president in 2017 after he was charged with threatening a public prosecutor — a case that has not progressed since.⁵⁴ Civil society activists such as Usman Hamid, Executive Director of Amnesty International Indonesia, also argue that the powerful and theoretically independent Corruption Eradication Commission has been "neutered" during Jokowi's tenure: "It no longer has full autonomy from politics."⁵⁵

Jokowi's advisers say that before he became president, he naively thought that he could shift these big institutional obstacles with the force of his personality. Hit hard by reality, he is now simply trying to survive in what can be a very dirty game.⁵⁶ He is certainly pragmatic. And his chief focus has always been on economic progress, not human rights and the principles of democracy. His illiberal, if not authoritarian, responses, probably also reflect his own upbringing in the Suharto era. Whatever the motive, the trend is worrying. Given how many in the Indonesian elite would like to roll back the power of democracy to hold them to account, Jokowi looks careless at best.⁵⁷

"Jokowi tends to be pragmatic with everything, but how low can you go?" notes one former Cabinet minister from Yudhoyono's government. "If you give everything away, what's left?"⁵⁸

COMPETITION VERSUS CONSTRAINTS

Indonesia has built a robust system for holding free and fair elections, despite considerable logistical and political challenges. However, at a time of growing global concern about democratic regression from the United States to the Philippines, the broader democratic system is under attack on various fronts. This tension between resilient elections and defective democracy partly reflects the political compromises of *reformasi*, which ended the Suharto regime and kick-started democratisation. The tension is embodied in Jokowi who won power because of competitive elections but has presided over a period of democratic backsliding, whether through neglect or intent.

The pressures on Indonesian democracy are not likely to abate under a second-term Jokowi or a Prabowo presidency, given their characters and their political coalitions. Religious-infused identity politics, which many analysts argued would dissipate after the fall of Ahok, seems to be embedded in the system for now. Faced with criticism and challenges to their authority, both candidates are likely to respond with illiberal methods. Law enforcement agencies and the military have been emboldened by the expanding political roles given to them. And establishment political parties will continue to form powerful cartels until structural reforms break their hold over the system.

In the view of one veteran Indonesian journalist, his country is living proof of philosopher Karl Popper's "paradox of tolerance".⁵⁹ Democracy has given the rights of free speech and association to those who are opposed to those rights, from hard-line Islamists to former generals, tycoons and other elites who want to dismantle nascent accountability mechanisms.

Amid the fears for the future of Indonesian democracy, however, there are signs of hope. The resilient election system has allowed a new slate of more effective and responsive local leaders to emerge, including Sandiaga, Anies Baswedan, and Ridwan Kamil. They are now eyeing the 2024 election, when Jokowi will not be able to stand if he is elected this time as the polls predict. These ambitious, younger politicians mostly come from outside the party, military and religious elite, and their politics has been much less defined by the Suharto era. However, they will face a similar dilemma to Jokowi: must power come at the price of real reform? Or can bolder leadership overcome vested interests without destabilising the political system?

Indonesia's international partners cannot rely on comforting rhetoric about it being a beacon of democracy and tolerance in the Muslim world. Instead, they should prepare themselves to deal with a nation that is becoming more complex as different actors fight for power and influence within a competitive but flawed democracy. "We're more democratic than any other country in Southeast Asia but we're still facing a lot of problems," one adviser to Jokowi's government noted. "We need other countries to bear with us because our political system is still a work in progress."⁶⁰

The pressures on Indonesian democracy are not likely to abate under a second-term Jokowi or a Prabowo presidency...

In the past two decades, Indonesia has come through an incredible array of calamities, including separatist conflicts, devastating natural disasters, the Asian financial crisis, and the messy end of a 32-year authoritarian regime. That success should not breed complacency. Indonesia appears to be settling into a more divisive pattern of identity politics that risks stoking further intolerance and distracting from the debate about political, legal, and economic reforms. The country is not about to return to military rule or become a formal Islamic state. However, the tensions within Indonesia's political system will undermine its ability to tackle a growing list of domestic and international challenges, as the world enters an era of increasing complexity and risk. Resilience is a vital quality for survival. To thrive, Indonesia needs deeper reform.

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