FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Indonesia's Democracy Is Stronger Than a Strongman

Why Prabowo Would Find It Hard to Rule as an Authoritarian

BY BEN BLAND **February 13, 2024**

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In 1985, the CIA pondered who could rule Indonesia after Suharto, the authoritarian president who had reigned since 1967, eventually left the stage. In an internal intelligence assessment, agency analysts identified an energetic army captain, then just 33 years old, who might emerge as a successor. Given that he was a special forces commander with combat experience in East Timor, which Indonesia then occupied, they reckoned that he had a "good reputation for leadership." He came from an "old and respected family," they added, and had accelerated his prospects by marrying

one of Suharto's daughters.

Almost 40 years later, Prabowo Subianto's dream of becoming president of the fourth most populous country in the world finally appears within his grasp. As Indonesians prepare to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for February 14, Prabowo has a strong lead in the polls. Many analysts regard his potential win as a serious threat to Indonesia's young democracy: in the final years of Suharto's dictatorship, Prabowo was credibly accused of complicity in major human rights abuses. He is renowned for his short temper and his fiery nationalism, stoking concerns about how he might use the power of the presidency. These fears have been compounded by the unlikely alliance Prabowo struck with the outgoing president, Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi. Prabowo selected Jokowi's inexperienced 36-year-old son as his running mate after Indonesia's constitutional court controversially overturned a minimum age limit for presidential and vice-presidential candidates last year.

The election will indeed mark an important moment in Indonesia. Voters are choosing only their third directly elected president, and young people will have an outsize say; more than half of voters are under 40. But Prabowo, if elected, is unlikely to pose an existential threat to the country. Jokowi's successor will be under enormous pressure to live up to his record. A recent poll by Indikator Politik, a

respected Jakarta polling organization, found that 80 percent of Indonesians approve of his performance, a rating that most democratic leaders would kill for. And although some checks and balances have been eroded on Jokowi's watch, Indonesia's democracy in other ways remains resilient: a vibrant civil society sector, investigative media outlets, and the country's decentralized system now help restrain a president's power.

Prabowo's record is checkered. Yet the most dire narratives from abroad about a possible Prabowo presidency say as much about Western anxieties as they do about Indonesia. They reflect analysts' tendency to view Indonesia through the lens of imminent catastrophe or "turning point." (That trope even made it into *The Simpsons* in 2004, in an episode in which Homer looked up from a copy of *The Economist* and asked his wife, Marge, "Did you know Indonesia is at a crossroads?") A huge, multiethnic nation whose borders were arbitrarily set by Dutch colonialism, Indonesia presents a broad canvas onto which many different hopes and fears can be projected. Its political developments are variously seen as a sign of democracy's consolidation, as a harbinger of global democratic backsliding, as a beacon of tolerance or of economic development, or as an example of the dangers posed by rising Islamic extremism or protectionism.

These frames represent some genuine challenges facing Indonesia.

But in 25 years, the country has also developed a set of political norms that have shaped Prabowo's campaign and would likely constrain him if he wins the presidency. It might not resemble the Western vision of a liberal democracy, but the battles to shape the future of its political system will not end after the election.

If Prabowo wins on February 14, he still may not win enough votes to prevent a June runoff. But it is crucial both to understand why Indonesians may voluntarily choose such a figure and to consider what he might do in power. Indonesia is not just a symbol. It is the world's third most populous democracy, and it is likely to play a critical role in the increasingly fractious U.S.-China rivalry roiling the Indo-Pacific. Indonesian voters' enthusiasm for Prabowo does not represent a disillusionment with democracy; instead, it reflects their conviction that he will uphold Jokowi's positive economic legacy—and their implicit faith that their democratic institutions can rein in even a strong-willed president.

BAD BLOOD

Prabowo grew up in London, Zurich, and Kuala Lumpur while his father, an influential economist, was in exile after clashing with the government of Indonesia's founding president, Sukarno. After Suharto ousted Sukarno in 1967, the family returned to Indonesia, and Prabowo's father served as trade and finance minister. In 1970 Prabowo joined the military, which had a privileged place under

Suharto's rule. He commanded special loyalty from his troops, but he was also accused of overseeing some of the most brutal excesses during Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. Shortly after Suharto's fall in 1998, he was dismissed from the military amid allegations that he had orchestrated the kidnapping of student protesters.

But during the next decade, Prabowo started to build a political career promoting a muscular brand of nationalism that promised to free Indonesia from foreign exploitation. Indonesian voters seem forgiving of Prabowo's past, partly because the current electorate is young. But this willingness to forgive and forget is also a feature of modern Indonesia. Problematic aspects of the country's history are little discussed in the educational system or in the society at large. Only small groups of activists, for instance, bring up the mass murders of hundreds of thousands of leftists Suharto organized as he rose to power with Western governments' assistance. Instead of pursuing transitional justice after Suharto's resignation, Indonesia opted for a more pragmatic, forward-looking policy of *reformasi*, or reform, which focused on democratization, decentralization, and development. In Indonesia's new democracy, old players such as Prabowo could stay in the game—if they followed its new rules.

When Jokowi, a furniture manufacturer turned mayor, broke into national politics by running in 2012 to be the governor of Jakarta, Prabowo became one of his key backers. Prabowo hoped to boost

his presidential prospects by leveraging Jokowi's popularity—not expecting that Jokowi would mount his own presidential campaign in 2014. That move prompted Prabowo to turn viciously on Jokowi. Prabowo's presidential campaign that year painted Jokowi as a puppet of foreign interests and cast doubt on his ethnicity and religion.

But Jokowi proved enormously popular, presenting himself as a man of the people who could deliver improvements in education and health care, trading on his record as Jakarta's governor. As president, Jokowi kept the economy growing by around five percent a year and revitalized Indonesia's inadequate infrastructure, completing the country's first high-speed rail project, as well as building countless airports, ports, and toll roads. Despite Jokowi's high approval ratings, Prabowo tried to defeat him again in the 2019 election but lost by an even bigger margin. After both the 2014 and 2019 election defeats, Prabowo's team contested the results, although there was no serious evidence of rigging, adding to the doubts about Prabowo's commitment to democracy.

UNITE AND RULE

Given this bitter history—and Jokowi's enduring popularity—Prabowo looked highly unlikely to become Jokowi's preferred successor. But in the aftermath of the 2019 election, Jokowi appointed Prabowo as his defense minister. Five years later, with

Jokowi's son as Prabowo's vice-presidential candidate, the pair appear to be allies again, although Jokowi has not formally declared his support for Prabowo, hoping to avoid accusations of blatant favoritism.

In fact, this kind of alliance between former foes has become commonplace in Indonesia's democratic era. Jokowi, as well as his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, built big-tent coalitions in parliament in a bid to reduce the opposition and increase their powers. When Jokowi was first elected president, in 2014, he had just 40 percent of legislators behind him. Now, he has corralled 82 percent of Indonesia's house of representatives into his coalition, allowing him to push through legislative changes with minimal opposition.

Political factions are steered by big personalities, and politicians jump promiscuously between parties. Ganjar Pranowo, a member of Jokowi's party, is challenging the ticket that includes Jokowi's son. Anies Baswedan, the other presidential candidate, is a former adviser to Jokowi and was backed by Prabowo during his successful bid to become the governor of Jakarta in 2017.

As part of an effort to build his own big-tent coalition, Prabowo has tried to revamp his image. He has reiterated his pledges to make Indonesia less reliant on foreign imports, but he has ditched much of his former rabble-rousing rhetoric, presenting himself instead as

the continuity candidate—someone who can take up Jokowi's mantle and pursue the incumbent's plans, including a $33 billion project to construct a new capital in the jungles of Borneo. His campaign consultants have been particularly active online, using TikTok, Instagram, and digital cartoons to present the former general as a cuddly, grandfatherly figure.

POWER PLAY

Is the charming elder statesman—and dutiful Jokowi ally—the real Prabowo? Prabowo's opponents argue that his record of military brutality and antidemocratic election denialism has merely been obscured by a smart campaign and that power would be dangerous in his hands. The manner in which his running mate was selected has compounded fears that his candidacy represents democratic backsliding.

Previously, candidates for Indonesia's presidency and vice-presidency had to be at least 40 years old. But in October, Indonesia's Constitutional Court—chaired by Jokowi's brother-in-law—created an exception for people who already hold elected office, allowing Prabowo to add Jokowi's son to his ticket. The court's ethics council removed the chief justice from his position in November because of the glaring conflict of interest, but the decision still stands, and he remains a judge.

This is just one example of how checks and balances have been

eroded on Jokowi's watch. Despite his economic successes, Jokowi has a more checkered record on governance. With Jokowi's acquiescence, Indonesia's parliament significantly reduced the independence of the country's Corruption Eradication Commission, founded in 2002 to tackle rampant graft. His government's police have arrested critical activists and journalists.

There is some reason to worry that Prabowo might further bend this weakened system to his will. But there is also strong counterevidence that if he becomes president, he will struggle to exert total control over a political system in which power has become far more diffuse than it was 25 years ago. Indonesia's mix of shifting coalitions, scattered power centers, and short political memory might appear chaotic. But these factors also make it hard for individuals to amass too much influence, contributing to the country's democratic resilience. As defense minister, his first civilian post in government, Prabowo himself traded in strong rhetoric but was unable to dramatically change the military.

To win policy victories, Indonesian presidents have to manage the multiple, often querulous parties in their coalitions; align ministries with overlapping roles and competing bureaucratic interests; and get sign-off for decisions from many layers of local government, in which elected provincial governors, city mayors, and councilors wield broad powers and often try to frustrate the will of the central

government. In the past, Prabowo has suggested that Indonesian democracy is inefficient, and even Jokowi complained in 2017 that there was "too much democracy" in Indonesia. But Indonesian public opinion, too, now constrains Indonesian presidents. Jokowi's allies repeatedly floated ending presidential term limits or delaying this year's election to keep him in office. Their efforts failed, however, when it became clear the public would not stomach them.

Prabowo will also have to manage a complicated relationship with Jokowi. And no matter how much Jokowi hopes to retain influence over the government through his son, he may have a hard time directing Prabowo.

DIVIDED AND THRIVING

Beyond Indonesia, Prabowo, if elected, would likely sustain Jokowi's pragmatic approach toward China, looking to Beijing to fund Indonesia's infrastructure development and support the growth of fast-expanding sectors such as e-commerce, minerals processing, and the manufacturing of batteries for electric vehicles. Jokowi, however, was not a major presence on the world stage. He disliked the formality of summits; in ten years, he never attended the UN General Assembly in person. Prabowo is much more likely to relish a global role. Having grown up in Europe, he enjoys meeting Western diplomats. As Suharto sought to align Indonesia more closely with the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, Prabowo

developed his own links with the U.S. military, studying at Fort Benning.

Prabowo has also inveighed more openly than Jokowi ever did against the West's hypocrisy on democracy and human rights. In November, he suggested that Indonesia no longer needed Europe as an economic and diplomatic partner because the balance of global power had shifted to Asia. He would still likely want Indonesia to steer well clear of any conflict between China and the United States. Given his nationalistic credentials, however, he would likely bristle at some of China's more blatant attempts to pressure Indonesia or challenge its fishing fleets in its exclusive economic zone.

If Indonesia's presidential race proceeds to a runoff, the contours of the campaign will likely change, becoming a more divisive contest. But as the candidates ratchet up their rhetoric in the finals days before polls open, nearly six million election workers—more than the entire population of Ireland—are finalizing their preparations to record the vote tallies. Organizing free and fair elections in a country of thousands of islands and many remote highland communities is a feat in itself.

Given the elite machinations around the new Prabowo-Jokowi alliance, some deride Indonesia as a "procedural democracy," not a true democratic culture. Yet getting those procedures right is hard. And if Prabowo finally secures the presidency after multiple failed

attempts, it will be largely because Indonesian voters see in him something they want: a continuation of Jokowi's economic development efforts coupled with muscular leadership, albeit in a purportedly milder flavor. Whoever becomes Indonesia's next president will find that governing the country is hard work and that democracy is a complicated, messy business. And the bulk of Prabowo's supporters want him to lead Indonesia's democracy, not dismantle it—even if they like his tough talk.

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