

HISTORICAL TENSIONS AND CONTEMPORARY GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE CASE OF INDONESIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even before COVID-19 hit, Indonesia and several of its Southeast Asian neighbors were facing a series of profound and protracted political, economic, and social problems. Analysts have posited a range of sweeping theories to explain these governance challenges, from a global democratic recession to the increasing appeal of China's authoritarian model. However, Indonesia's contemporary difficulties are better understood as the result of long-running internal tensions, which in some cases date back to the struggle for independence.

Rather than backsliding, Indonesia is a nation that is still in the making, 75 years after it declared independence from the Netherlands. Like its neighbors Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand, Indonesia is struggling to find definitive answers to existential questions such as who controls state power, how the economy is oriented, and who can be a citizen. Many of the governance challenges facing President Joko Widodo today stem from three unresolved historical tensions: between democracy and authoritarianism, between Islamic majoritarianism and pluralism, and between economic nationalism and the need for foreign capital.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted weaknesses in Widodo's leadership, as the country faces a rising death toll and the government's response has been muddled. In the midst of the pandemic, the deeper conflicts over the political system, the role of Islam, and the orientation of the economy have persisted, exacerbating the situation. Until Indonesia can find stable answers to these foundational questions, it will struggle to realize the high expectations that many Indonesians and outsiders have for Southeast Asia's largest nation.

As the United States, Australia, and other Western governments look to deepen their engagement with Southeast Asian nations, it is more important than ever that they grasp the drivers of their domestic politics, which typically steer their foreign policy. Rather than framing their partnerships through the lens of competition with China, Western governments need to work with Indonesia and its neighbors on their own terms. To do so successfully, they need to develop a much better understanding of the long-running (and ongoing) challenges of nation-building in Indonesia and the wider region.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign observers of Southeast Asia have long flitted between optimism and despondency when tracking this important region. In the last few years, negativity has been on the rise as key Southeast Asian nations have become embroiled in protracted governance challenges. The five large Southeast Asian nations with fully or partially democratic systems — Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand — are all facing profound political and social problems. They seem to be moving in the wrong direction when it comes to key aspects of their economic, social, and democratic development. That is bad news for the United States, Australia, and other Western governments, which have been trying to intensify their engagement with these influential countries, in part as ballast against a rising China.¹

Analysts and academics have offered a variety of sweeping explanations for this trend, from a global democratic recession to the increasing appeal of China's authoritarian model and from deepening social inequality to the spread of divisive social media platforms. However, using the case of Indonesia, this paper will argue that it is more instructive to see the problems faced by these countries in their own unique historical context. In particular, this paper will argue that many of the major governance problems faced by Indonesia — as well as Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand — are the result of long-running tensions, which in some cases date back to the late colonial era and the struggle for independence. Rather than seeing these countries as backsliding, we should see them as nations that are still in the making. They are yet to find definitive answers to existential questions such as who controls state power, how the economy is oriented, and who can be a citizen.

Consider Indonesia, Southeast Asia's most populous nation, and its biggest economy. Despite a track record of steady (if unspectacular) economic growth, Indonesia's prospects appear clouded by a combination of weakening democratic governance, social polarization, and confused economic

policymaking. These problems, which have been highlighted by Indonesia's patchy response to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, are often laid at the door of individual political actors or new global trends. However, they are better understood as consequences of three main historical tensions.

Firstly, in terms of politics, Indonesia has developed remarkably resilient, free, and fair elections since the fall of Suharto in 1998. But Indonesia's democracy remains defective in other important respects because of the endurance of Suharto-era elites and institutions, as well as the deep roots of authoritarian and illiberal thinking and practice. Secondly, in terms of religion, Indonesia is still struggling to find a stable balance in the relationship between Islam and the state, a conundrum that stretches back to its origins as an independent nation in 1945. Thirdly, in terms of economic orientation, Indonesia remains caught between the nationalistic principles established at its foundation and its ever more pressing reliance on foreign funding and technology to maintain growth and job-generation.

DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTHORITARIANISM

Indonesia has developed one of the freest and fairest electoral systems in Southeast Asia. It demonstrated that again in April 2019, when the country pulled off the world's most complicated single-day election with impressive efficiency. But Indonesia's democratic system is increasingly defective in substantive terms.² President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo rose from obscurity to national leadership in a few short years thanks to the competitive nature of Indonesian elections — and he was meant to be the outsider who changed the system for the better. Yet, he appears to have succumbed to the system, proving to be a poor guardian of democracy.³ Six years into his presidency, Jokowi is showing increasing flashes of the authoritarianism that activists believed was in the past.⁴

Jokowi has sought compromises with corrupt politicians and intolerant religious leaders, surrounded himself with former generals with little commitment to democratic principles, and sought to weaken Indonesia's respected anti-corruption agency.⁵ On his watch, human rights, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities have all weakened. A decade ago, Rizal Sukma, one of Indonesia's most eminent policy analysts, published a paper arguing that the country's politics were characterised by "defective elections, resilient democracy." Now, Indonesian politics looks more like a story of resilient elections, defective democracy.⁶

Thanks to fiercely competitive elections, the Indonesian people can oust bad leaders and choose better ones. However, they lose much control and accountability in between elections. That can be seen in the "big tent" coalition Jokowi has built in his second term, including his twice-defeated presidential rival Prabowo Subianto, who he appointed as defence minister. The promiscuous power-sharing of Indonesia's post-Suharto presidents, and the concomitant weakness of the formal political opposition, has been characterised as "party cartelization, Indonesian-style."⁷ When Jokowi decided to stand for the presidency in 2014, he promised to reject the political horse-trading of his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and to build a more targeted and cohesive coalition. However, he quickly abandoned this pledge when confronted by the need to build a political support base.

Although Jokowi has come under sustained criticism for his big-tent Cabinets, his approach reflects a key structural fault in Indonesia's political system as much as a failure of personal resolve. The dominance of personality, patronage, and established political parties, and the lack of political finance reform, has entrenched the power of a small group of elite actors. 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 polity and ensured the ousting of long-ruling autocrat Suharto

in 1998. By opting for a process of gradual change from within rather than a revolution, Indonesia avoided the immense bloodshed that would have accompanied efforts to truly dismantle the *ancien régime*. 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, from Suharto's Golkar Party to generals with questionable human rights records such as Wiranto and Prabowo. In effect, the rules of the game changed in 1998 but many of the players stayed the same.

The burst of mass student protests across Indonesia in September and October 2019 were a reaction against the enduring power of the elite and its efforts to erode democratic practices and accountability.⁸ The students sought, very deliberately, to rekindle the spirit of 1998, and highlight what has been lost since, with their protest slogan "*reformasi dikorupsi*" (reform has been corrupted). However, a more accurate formation might be "reform has never been completed."

The tension between democracy and authoritarianism can be traced to the origins of modern Indonesia. Founding President Sukarno oversaw a brief period of democratic rule in the 1950s. However, within two years of the 1955 legislative elections – Indonesia's first nationwide voting exercise – he became frustrated by the country's divisive politics and took direct control in what he euphemistically called "guided democracy." As well as self-aggrandisement, this reflected Sukarno's philosophical qualms about Western-style liberal democracy, which he argued was ill-suited to Indonesia's collectivist character.

The contemporary academic orthodoxy suggests that Indonesia is one of many countries suffering from a global trend of democratic backsliding. Activists in Indonesia lay the blame for this at Jokowi's feet. But the problem is not that the president has deliberately sought to dismantle Indonesian democracy. Rather, his weak leadership has exposed the resilience of authoritarian actors, thinking, and institutions in Indonesia.

PLURALISM VERSUS MAJORITARIANISM

Religious polarization, which has been intensifying in Indonesia over the last few years, came to a head in last April's bitterly fought presidential and legislative elections. Prabowo tapped support from hard-line Islamist groups and pitched himself as the defender of the faith. Jokowi picked a conservative cleric as his second-term running mate to neutralize criticisms of his commitment to Islam, while his supporters attacked Prabowo for a lack of personal piety. The election results suggested that the vitriol spreading through social media was reflective of real divides. Support for Prabowo surged in conservative Muslim provinces such as Aceh, South Sulawesi, and West Sumatra, while backing for Jokowi jumped among non-Muslims, 97% of whom voted for him according to exit polling by Indikator, a respected survey agency.⁹

Some academics have questioned whether this polarization runs deep in society or if it is more reflective of contingent political factors — including the fact that Indonesia has seen two bitterly opposed candidates facing off against each other directly, or indirectly, in three major election campaigns over the last five years.¹⁰ Jokowi's selection of Prabowo as his defence minister in October seems to support the idea, which was promoted privately by advisers in both camps during the election, that they can deploy identity politics during campaigning but put the religion genie back in the bottle afterwards and carry on with business as usual.¹¹ However, this view exaggerates politicians' ability to manipulate public opinion. Advisers to Prabowo and Jokowi were trying to exploit real religious divides, they did not create them. Indonesian Muslims have become more pious in recent years. However, the divisive debate over the role of Islam in the state — a battle between pluralistic and majoritarian visions — dates to the foundation of Indonesia as an independent nation in 1945.

Indonesia is in an extremely unusual position with regards to its relationship between religion and state. Most Muslim-majority nations fall into three camps. There are full-on Islamic states, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, which officially position the religion as a driving force behind their existence and their ongoing policy orientation. There are those with Islam as their official religion, such as Malaysia and Pakistan. And then there are secular states such as Senegal and Uzbekistan. The Indonesian state is neither secular nor explicitly Islamic, although it is often mischaracterised as the former and seen to be heading in the direction of the latter. Although nearly 90% of its 270 million people are Muslim, Indonesia has six official religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The constitution allows freedom of worship but says that the state is “based upon the belief in the one and only god.”

This compromise was designed to head off efforts to implement Shariah law at Indonesia's foundation in 1945.¹² But it was a very uneasy resolution. From the Darul Islam rebellion that began in 1949, with a mission to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state, to the growing political polarization around religious issues today, this fundamental tension still looms large. It can be seen in the increasing pressure on the political and human rights of religious minorities, from a rise in blasphemy prosecutions to the spread of local Shariah bylaws.¹³ Politicians who lack any clear ideological or policy differentiation have increasingly sought to exploit this religious divide as a tool of mobilization, even as Indonesia's Islamic political parties have struggled to increase their combined vote share significantly above 30%.

Jokowi's decision to bring Prabowo and his Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) into the government, peeling them away from their Islamist camp-followers, has cooled some elite political divisions over religion. However, it does not resolve the fundamental struggle for the soul of the Indonesian state.

ECONOMIC NATIONALISM VERSUS THE NEED FOR FOREIGN INVESTMENT

Despite the great potential of Southeast Asia's biggest economy, foreign investors and international development partners have frequently been disappointed in Indonesia. Just when they believe that the government of the day has finally committed to opening up to foreign capital, a policy U-turn suggests that the country is once more falling victim to protectionist forces. While often chalked down to the incompetence or weakness of the leadership, this flip-flopping is better understood as a consequence of a deeper tension between Indonesia's protectionist roots and its need for foreign funding.

Indonesia has many of the trappings of a socialist state, although communism is illegal — and alleged leftists were slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands in the mass killings of the 1960s that were painted as a response to a Communist coup attempt. There is a national planning ministry, price controls on everything from airline flights to off-street car parking, and a large and increasingly influential state-owned enterprise sector. The Indonesian constitution enshrines the need for self-sufficiency and a balance between “progress and unity” in the economy, as well as insisting that key economic sectors and natural resources are “controlled by the state.”¹⁴

While Jokowi promises to open the economy, he has simultaneously presided over a major push to deepen the role of state-owned enterprises.

However, after Western-trained economic technocrats (the so-called Berkeley Mafia) ascended to influential positions under Suharto's leadership from the late 1960s onwards, Indonesia started to liberalize its economy and bring in foreign capital and technology to generate growth and ensure political stability. Today, as Jokowi watches rapid growth in neighbouring countries

such as Vietnam with envy, Indonesia is still looking to foreign investors to fill the gap, in terms of both capital and expertise. But, while Jokowi promises to open the economy, he has simultaneously presided over a major push to deepen the role of state-owned enterprises. He has also overseen a broad programme of nationalization, which has moved some of the country's biggest resource projects (including the large mines previously controlled by U.S. companies Freeport and Newmont and a major gas block operated by France's Total) into state control.

This parallel push for foreign capital and state control of the economy confuses many investors. And this approach certainly leads to some confounding results in international measures of competitiveness. In his first term, Jokowi released round after round of supposed deregulation packages that were meant to make the country more attractive for foreign investors. And, on his watch, Indonesia surged up the World Bank's closely watched “ease of doing business” ranking from 120th to 73rd place.¹⁵ But despite some permitting processes being streamlined and some foreign investment limits being reduced, it is hard to find foreign investors who believe that it has got any easier to do business in practice. They still complain about the same structural problems: corruption, red tape, disjointed governance, weak rule of law, and protectionist impulses across the government. Despite the World Bank ranking improvement, Indonesia's regulatory regime for foreign direct investment is one of the most restrictive of the 68 middle- and lower-middle income countries assessed in a recent survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.¹⁶

However, as with identity politics and the concerns about democratic backsliding, Indonesia's economic tensions are as much the result of unresolved historical tensions as they are the result of contemporary personality and policy questions. Politicians promote protectionist policies — and rent-seeking tycoons, politicians, and officials exploit this approach — because there is genuine public

support for, and a constitutional commitment to, a more protectionist economy. Investors hoping for a liberal Indonesia that embraces foreign investment will be in a for a very long wait.

AS INDONESIA BATTLES COVID-19, DEEPER CONFLICTS PERSIST

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unforgiving test of states' governing capacity and the agility of their political leaders. Indonesia is not faring well, with a rising case load and a government that has failed to set out a clear strategy for tackling the twin health and economic crises.¹⁷ Part of the problem is a lack of capacity in the health system and the government more generally.¹⁸ But the crisis has also highlighted some of the long-standing tensions discussed in this paper.

The president is not actively trying to roll back democracy. But he is reaching for the levers of power that he thinks will get him quick results, and in doing so has highlighted the limits of *reformasi*.

While often disregarding experts in public health and epidemiology, Jokowi has looked to the military and the police to lead the response to COVID-19.¹⁹ This approach reveals the enduring power of the military, more than two decades after the post-Suharto reforms that ended its “dual function” role in civilian government. It also underlines the persistence of authoritarian figures and authoritarian thinking in the Indonesian government. The president is not actively trying to roll back democracy. But he is reaching for the levers of power that he thinks will get him quick results, and in doing so has highlighted the limits of *reformasi*.

Remarkably, the ideological conflict over the role of Islam has also persisted at this time of crisis. In the midst of the pandemic, Jokowi's Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) was busy

pushing a bill to promote the national ideology of *Pancasila*, which was invented by Sukarno, the father of PDI-P chair Megawati Sukarnoputri.²⁰ The five abstract principles of *Pancasila* — belief in one god, a just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy guided by collective wisdom, and social justice — were designed as a compromise between nationalists such as Sukarno and Islamists who wanted Shariah law enshrined in the Indonesian constitution. The bill, which may have been intended as a sop to Megawati, prompted a backlash from Islamists who argued that it was designed to dilute the religious character of *Pancasila*. Facing determined opposition, Jokowi's government dropped the bill. But the row highlighted the enduring potency of this fundamental dispute at the heart of the Indonesian state.

Similarly, on the economic front, the pandemic has reinforced the tension between Indonesia's need for foreign capital and its desire for self-sufficiency. In response to the crisis, Jokowi's government has emphasised the need to intensify the domestic production of key medical and pharmaceutical products, as well as foodstuffs. At the same time, however, it has expressed a desire to attract more foreign investment, as the economy heads for its worst crunch since the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98.²¹ With such contradictory aims, it is little wonder that Indonesia is facing mounting difficulties. Part of the problem is poor leadership from the president and his Cabinet.²² But even a much more strategic and decisive leader would struggle because of the deep-seated structural problems discussed in this paper.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some analysts interpret the political, religious, and economic tensions outlined above as failures of leadership by Jokowi and those around him. Others tend to situate them in the context of global trends, whether it be democratic recession, rising protectionism or technology-driven polarization. However, this paper argues that Indonesia's

biggest challenges emanate to a great extent from unresolved questions about what sort of nation it should be. Less than 75 years have passed since Indonesia was jolted into existence as an improbable nation forged out of the arbitrary territorial limits of Dutch colonial expansion. So it is not surprising that Indonesia is still a nation in the making. And it is far from alone in the region in its struggle to answer existential questions about how to orient its politics, economy, and society.

In Malaysia, a reformist opposition coalition won power in 2018 for the first time ever. But it fell apart in less than two years as it struggled to overcome personality disputes and the fraught, inter-linked problems of race, religion, and economic inequality.²³ In Thailand, the decades-long battle between the monarchy, the military, and those who want democracy looks no closer to a stable resolution, despite the junta eventually coming out on top in a heavily manipulated electoral process last year.²⁴ In Myanmar, an election is due in November 2020 but it is unlikely to offer any clear path forward on the fundamental questions of how the military shares power with civilians and how to forge a united, peaceful nation from the country's disparate ethnic groups and myriad conflicts.²⁵ And in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's disturbing leadership reflects deep faults within the country's politics, from the primacy of personalistic leadership and the dominance of dynasties to the weaknesses of democratic institutions.²⁶

The depth of these domestic challenges should be a concern for the United States and Australia as they hope to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia. Countries embroiled in existential crises are not likely to step up in tackling regional challenges. However, Western governments should not succumb to resignation in the face of these seemingly intractable problems. Rather, they need to better understand the historical roots of Southeast Asia's contemporary governance issues, to craft their assistance accordingly, and to settle in for a long ride as these countries grapple with delicate and long-standing questions of nation-building.

They should:

- *Be ambitious but realistic.* Expectations of Indonesia have risen to the point where disappointment is likely to set in. Western officials regularly talk of Indonesia as an economic powerhouse and an emerging great power in Asia. But Indonesia is facing a series of enduring, fundamental challenges that are unlikely to be resolved any time soon. By setting the bar so high, there is a risk of rapid disillusionment. The United States, Australia, and other Western nations are right to be ambitious about their relationships with Indonesia. But they need to understand that Indonesia is still a nation in the making. They should temper their rhetoric and work harder with Indonesia on solving today's practical problems. Outsiders cannot force Indonesia to be more democratic, economically liberal, or religiously tolerant. But they can help it to become a more resilient, effective, and equitable country.
- *Deepen cooperation with civil society in Indonesia.* Western leaders are fond of calling Indonesia a beacon of democracy in Asia and the Muslim world. But this phrase glosses over the real challenges facing Indonesian democracy today, and the enduring power of authoritarian thinking and authoritarian actors. Western governments need to acknowledge this fragile reality and work more with civil society groups in Indonesia. In recent years more development funding has gone straight to government and some of this needs to be re-directed to strengthen NGOs, which were already struggling financially before the pandemic hit. The focus should not be on "democracy-building" per se but supporting the wide range of groups that are working to build a fairer, more transparent and accountable country, whether by boosting women's economic empowerment or exposing corruption and environmental degradation.

- *Engage with Indonesia in its own right, not as a part of plan to counterbalance China.* There is an increasing tendency for security analysts in Washington, Canberra, and other Western capitals to see the relationship with Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations through the lens of competition with China. This is a mistake. As it struggles with the profound historical tensions outlined above, Indonesia sees its biggest challenges coming

from the inside, not the outside. Jakarta's deep commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy is specifically designed to prevent external conflicts from reopening old wounds in the Indonesia body politic. The best way to get closer to Indonesia is to help it tackle its domestic challenges, not to push it to take on an international role with which it is not comfortable.

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