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Jokowi's Rise and Indonesia's Second Democratic Transition

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Vibhanshu Shekhar, Scholar-in-Residence at the ASEAN Studies Center, American University, explains that “A new political voting class in Indonesia is now beginning to emerge that is keen to play a role in the country’s democratic politics, is well-informed of issues and interests, and expects a government that is accountable.”

The electoral battle for the presidency in the world’s largest Muslim—and Asia’s second largest—democracy finally came to a close on July 22 when the Indonesian Election Commission (KPU) announced Djoko Widodo, popularly known as “Jokowi,” as the winner. Jokowi’s victory highlights the growing popular and political support for a new kind of democratic politics in Indonesia that is progressive, transparent and broad-based, and that thrives on the expectations of a generation of young people born in a democratic Indonesia. Jokowi’s rise marks the beginning of Indonesia’s second democratic transition. The official announcement of the result has put an end to weeks of divisive and emotionally charged campaigns, and two weeks of post-election stalemate that pushed the country towards political uncertainty. Both candidates—Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto—had each claimed victory based on unofficial counts. Prabowo has accused the KPU of “massive, systematic and structural cheating” and petitioned before the Constitutional Court, Indonesia’s apex body on election matters, for an annulment of the KPU results and its declaration of Jokowi’s victory. It should be noted that the Constitutional Court received such petitions during both the previous presidential elections of 2004 and 2009, and rejected them.

Out of the approximately 135 million valid votes cast, Jokowi received 53 percent and won the majority of votes in 23 provinces, whereas Prabowo won the majority of votes in 10 provinces in West Java and further west. Jokowi received the majority of his votes from the most populous island of Java—approximately 54 percent—and the outer islands of Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Papua. He also won a majority of votes in those provinces where minority communities are in the majority, such as Bali, Papua, and West Papua, highlighting support for his policy of inclusivism. Total eligible voters in Indonesia are nearly 190 million.

Jokowi’s victory, besides putting democracy in Indonesia on a much stronger footing, has highlighted the changing characteristics of democracy in that country, which can well be viewed as Indonesia’s second democratic transition. While the *Reformasi* movement of 1998 introduced democracy to Indonesia under a negotiated settlement between the political elite and civil society, this second transition has witnessed civil society effectively wresting control of the political process from the hands of the political elite. This is what Philips J. Vermonte of CSIS Indonesia terms the “beginning of an end of old oligarchic politics,” an ascent of a new generation of leadership without any political legacy or long-standing patronage system. Indonesian democracy no longer feeds off an elite-led political framework and Indonesia’s elected leaders need not have a military background or connection with political families or business elites. For the first time, a village (*kampung*) boy and a commoner with no political legacy managed to defeat a powerful coalition of traditional political elites that had gathered around Prabowo Subianto, who is a former military general and son-in-law of former Indonesian dictator Suharto. The bulk of Jokowi’s election financing came in the form of small donations, in comparison to Prabowo’s large-scale contributions from a small group of elites.

Megawati Sukarnoputri, the leader of Jokowi’s party, the Indonesian Party of Struggle (PDI-P), read the winds of change better than her counterparts. Sensing the growing popularity

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and electability of Jokowi, Megawati decided to hand over the mantle of the PDI-P to him and nominate him as her party’s presidential candidate, shunning both her own and, moreover, her daughter’s budding presidential ambitions. Jokowi’s victory, along with his sporadic and spontaneous mobilization of voters, took place despite his unorganized election campaign and the continuing unpopularity of Megawati.

A new political voting class in Indonesia is now beginning to emerge that is keen to play a role in the country’s democratic politics, is well-informed of issues and interests, and expects a government that is accountable. They are assertively pushing forward an agenda of good governance and transparent leadership that is reform-oriented and free of corruption. They treat democracy as intrinsically ingrained in their identity and place a premium on transparency and accountability. As their expectations are going up, this new-emerging techno-savvy voter bloc is demanding effective responses from the political elite over various issues, such as countering corruption, addressing current economic challenges, and a more responsive government. Their continuing frustration with the political parties is evident from the fact that no single party received more than 20 percent of votes in the April general elections. On the other hand, Jokowi’s lackluster and commoner’s image attracted their attention, and their vote.

Rules of the game in Indonesian politics have become more democratic with political parties, institutions and citizens adhering to democratic norms. For example, even though the recalcitrant Prabowo had objections to the KPU process, he has, to date, adhered to the institutional procedures laid out by the electoral rules and regulations. Indonesian democracy has just survived the nerve-racking pressure of political mobilization amidst a highly charged emotional situation, and at the same time, successfully resisted the temptation to resort to violent conduct. No major case of violence was reported on the actual day of the presidential elections, during the process of tallying votes, or during the celebrations afterwards. This trend of democratic consolidation is also discernible from the increased capacity of the different governing institutions to regulate and manage the election process. Indonesian elections are being managed with increased efficiency by the relevant agencies and institutions carrying out their allocated roles, notwithstanding procedural complexities, and logistical difficulties associated with the elections. The KPU has delivered very efficiently and without bias. Indonesia conducted this electoral exercise twice within three months, first to elect the parties and candidates for the national, provincial and municipal legislative bodies (April 9), and then to elect the country’s president (July 9). In total, approximately 190 million citizens exercised their voting rights twice. Each of the elections took place in a single day, making it the largest electoral exercise in the world.

The failure of Prabowo’s Suharto style of politics of fear and intimidation in bringing about the desired result augurs well for Indonesian democracy to let go of its extremely difficult and torturous past under Suharto. Jokowi’s presidency now offers Indonesians another five years to move beyond beyond the baggage of Suharto’s dictatorship and usher the country into another chapter of solidifying real democratic governance. Many, both within and outside of Indonesia, had feared that the Prabowo variant of elite-led politics dominated by moneyed interests, oligarchs, and religious extremists along with his advocacy of strong leadership, would arrest Indonesia’s democratic momentum and plunge the country back into the dreaded authoritarian politics of the Suharto era. It was in this context of safeguarding their fledgling democracy that two Indonesian newspapers—the *Jakarta Post* and *Media Indonesia*—went to the extent of officially endorsing Jokowi and breaking their neutrality on the ground that stakes were too high in this election. Notwithstanding Jokowi’s rise, Indonesia’s second democratic transition remains a work in progress. It is a not going to be a completely smooth process, due primarily to the minority nature of Jokowi’s government and the inevitable continuity of coalition politics within Indonesia. A rough road lies ahead for the Jokowi presidency, particularly in the legislative body that will offer strong resistance from the conservative elite to any effort to introduce more democratic change and politico-economic reforms. Now that voters have had their say, the difficult act of balancing various political forces and factions will require deft diplomacy from newcomer Jokowi.

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