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Indonesia's Presidential Dilemma: Can Jokowi Avoid the Accountability Trap?

By Jonathan Chen

Synopsis

Joko Widodo's rapid ascent to the Indonesian presidency had been strongly associated with ground support among disparate volunteer groups. As he forms his cabinet, can he appease his supporters without alienating the parties in his coalition?

Commentary

EVEN THOUGH Joko Widodo's official inauguration as Indonesia's seventh president is still two months away, a high-powered transition team to assist his administration had already made its debut. The five-member team comprised prominent figures headed by former minister of trade and industry and close confidant of Megawati Sukarnoputri, Rini Mariani Soemarno. Among the various undertakings the advisory team will have to grapple with is the contentious appointment of cabinet ministers.

Jokowi, as the president-elect is better known, had resolutely maintained that "professional competence will be the primary condition" for appointment holders. He also promised a "fresh and clean" *zakenkabinet* (or working cabinet) under his administration. With the Jokowi-led coalition commanding less than 50 percent of seats in the House of Representatives (DPR), his insistence on this approach suggests a strong resolve to break away from informal party-positioning within his cabinet for now.

Rainbow Cabinet no more?

Incorporating all players in the political divide by adopting a political quid pro quo approach had been a constant feature of the Indonesian government. Starting with President Abdurrahman Wahid followed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, cabinet positions since *Reformasi* have consisted of reciprocal exchanges in a bargaining process where almost everyone was in and no one was out.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's first United Indonesia Cabinet (or *Kabinet Indonesia Bersatu*) did not deviate much from his predecessors. At that time the newly-formed Democrat Party (DP) had only seven percent of seats in the DPR; President Yudhoyono was pressured to be politically accommodating by circumstance to ensure an effective administration. In 2009, his second United

Indonesia Cabinet took a more representative turn by prioritising the country's various regions, religions and ethnic groups over political party personnel in the form of a matrix. By this time, the DP-led coalition had controlled close to 60 percent of parliamentary seats.

Such rainbow cabinets however were no guarantee of a less rambunctious parliament. Early into Yudhoyono's second term as president, three of six coalition partners including members of the Golkar Party voted against him, condemning the government's decision to bail out Bank Century in November 2008.

Vertical accountability, or the reciprocal relationship between the masses and the elites, ensures that the president is responsive to the common national will. Horizontal accountability, or the president's relations with state institutions including political parties, ensures that presidential powers are checked at the constitutional level.

An 'accountability trap' scenario had evolved in post-*Reformasi* politics in which a president is deeply beholden to a wide range of political persuasions in the sharing of spoils of government and gradually loses respectability with his constituency. Correspondingly, a president that alienates other political interests in parliament risks suffering the repercussion of a hostile parliamentary backlash.

The main scourge of post-*Reformasi* democracy is that more often than not institutional and structural horse-trading at the elite level takes precedence over the common national will. Whoever wins the presidency in Indonesia does not necessarily gain unhampered autonomy in governance and decision-making. Striking a balance between vertical and horizontal accountability had proven to be an almost impossible task.

Overcoming the accountability trap?

The rise of Jokowi as president-elect broke the glass ceiling of an elite-dominated presidency. The informal processes that go into the selection of cabinet posts and appointment holders however have yet to be put under public scrutiny.

Public-spirited efforts at compensating for such a deficiency had resulted in an online polling forum known as *Kabinet Rakyat* 2014-2019 (or the People's Cabinet 2014-2019) in which Indonesians can vote for their favourite candidates among the various ministerial positions. A similar initiative had been set up within the Jokowi Centre website by volunteers.

In addition, a *KawalMenteri* website had been launched to allow the public to monitor and assess the performance of ministers. While such initiatives appear to be a form of rudimentary accountability to the people, it still remains to be seen whether they are effective in the long run.

Party cartel strikes back

Jokowi's strategy now seems fixed upon a direct challenge to the "rainbow cabinet" formula espoused by his predecessors. Nonetheless it is also limited by his slimmer coalition that won less than 40 percent of parliamentary seats. There are worries that the transition team is too exclusive and that this could compromise the formation of the new cabinet, for which the transition team is also tasked to give inputs. Many fear that their recommendations may have the effect of weighing heavier over Jokowi's own.

Already an alliance of parties had allowed for a Legislative Institution Bill known by its abbreviation as MD3 to be passed that worked quickly in stripping the position of parliament speaker away from the leading party in the DPR, the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP). Other amendments by the MD3 law have been designed to meet short-term political objectives like securing the chairs of legislative committees and getting rid of some checks and balances within parliament – in effect neutralising the dominance of the PDIP-led coalition.

These can be seen as the initial signs of concerted efforts by the oppositional alliance in weakening a Jokowi presidency if their demands are not met. Will Jokowi be pressured to accommodate unruly elements in parliament just as Yudhoyono did in his presidency?

The *Merah Putih* (Red-White) coalition of defeated presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto may be a paper tiger for now but that does not detract from the fact that relatively sizable parties like Golkar and DP will not swing over to Jokowi's coalition without a fair compromise. Unresolved personal estrangement between Megawati and Yudhoyono makes such a process even harder.

Therein lies the accountability trap that a Jokowi presidency will inevitably face, complicated by the fact that he is not a party leader and will likely have to take Megawati's opinions into account. On one hand, Jokowi will need to strengthen his current minority coalition by allowing an opening for political parties from the *Merah Putih* coalition to eventually join his side. On the other hand if such a manoeuvre is perceived not to be handled sensibly by the public, he may risk compromising the popularity he currently enjoys among his volunteers.

Jokowi's first test will be in the selection of his cabinet line-up. This will be indicative of whether decision-making is firmly in his hands and how he would approach the accountability trap.

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