

Jokowi saves Indonesia's democracy (and maybe Southeast Asia's too)

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Many years from now, the electoral victory of Indonesia's president-elect Joko Widodo (Jokowi) may be seen as pivotal to the fate of democracy and regionalism in Southeast Asia. A win by Jokowi's opponent Prabowo Subianto would have been a retrograde step for Indonesia, promising shades of authoritarianism even with a popular mandate. Jokowi's victory, on the other hand, bodes well not just for Indonesia's future but also for the region's democratic prospects and ASEAN's forward momentum.



Even as societies become more advanced, economically and technologically, when it comes to political development, democracy is not always permanent. While democracy prevailed over authoritarianism and autocracy in the twentieth century, its trajectory remains uncertain.

In Southeast Asia, economies are generally expanding, and societies are becoming more sophisticated, industrialised, globalised and connected. Its forms of government are mixed and diverse, ranging from absolute monarchy to democracies to communist-party rule. But the balance has been tipping in favour of more authoritarianism and less democracy: Thailand's recent military intervention is a case in point, but Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar have exhibited signs of regression.

Much was thus riding on Indonesia, the largest Muslim country and the third largest democracy in the world. Indonesia is a very young democracy that emerged from a period of colonialism and then military authoritarianism.

The contrast between the candidates was stark. Jokowi rose from humble beginnings to become a successful furniture-exporting businessman and an effective governor of Jakarta. Prabowo is a former army general and the son-in-law of late president Suharto. Jokowi ran on a platform of reform and progress. His persona signified hope and a better democratic future, whereas Prabowo offered decisiveness and the charisma and instincts of a strongman, appealing to and capitalising on what was good about the past. The result was close, with around 53 per cent of the vote for Jokowi to 47 per cent for Prabowo.

What is crucial to note at this point is the strength of the country's democratic institutions. Like most developing countries, Indonesia has its fair share of scandals and intrigues, such as the conviction of the former head of the Constitutional Court, Akil Mochtar, for corruption. But this election was free and fair, unmarred by violence. The voter turnout was also high: more than 70 per cent, in an archipelago with many far-flung islands.

Most important in any decent democratic contest is that the winner has to be allowed to rule and the loser has to accept defeat without endless remonstrations.

Although Prabowo has protested, some of his coalition allies have thrown in the towel, including outgoing president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The controversy over the quick post-poll vote counts and the final tally by the General Election Commission may reach the Constitutional Court, but it is hard now to deny a Jokowi presidency.

Indonesia's democracy appears to be consolidating incrementally. Its electorate participates in democratic contests and stands by the results. Its institutions of accountability stand by the electorate's decision. This is not the case in countries like Thailand, where free and fair election results can be overturned time and again, or [Cambodia where manipulated polls can keep incumbents in power](#)^[1].

As for Jokowi, he will have to learn that Indonesia is not Jakarta. Expectations are running high after Yudhoyono's perceived ineffectual leadership. The new president will have to form a capable cabinet. And he will need a team of credible policy professionals in the foreign ministry to maintain Indonesia's role in the G20 and to provide thrust for ASEAN. Yudhoyono set a fine example for Indonesia's global standing, having assembled a technocratic team around foreign minister Marty Natalegawa. The president-elect, who will be Indonesia's first leader without any personal connection to its authoritarian past, will also need to be assertive with his party's matriarch, former president Megawati Sukarnoputri.

If Jokowi lasts a full term and Indonesia can usher in another steady presidential changeover, the prospects of a democratic consolidation will brighten and inspire weaker Southeast Asian democracies, indirectly imposing constraints on democratic reversals by force of example.

Cambodia's problematic election results from July 2013 have been resolved by a compromise that will allow its national assembly to convene in full. This is the right direction for Cambodia's fledgling democracy to take. It has to become less authoritarian in practice prior to the next election, and its opposition party has to offer viable leadership and attractive policy programs in the interim.

Myanmar and Thailand are the next test cases. Both are set for elections next year. [Myanmar's leadership contest is fierce](#) ^[2], weighed down by communal and religious violence and beset with growing restrictions on freedom of expression, and violations of human rights.

Currently under a military government, [Thailand remains stuck in its cycle of coups, constitutions and elections](#) ^[3]. It is supposed to end up with a better democracy after its latest military coup. It is doubtful, though, that Thai democracy can be properly restored after being interrupted by its military. Ironically, Thailand is more similar to Myanmar these days than to Indonesia, even though Indonesia used to emulate Thailand just 16 years ago.

Indonesia is the most successful democracy in the region at this time — though all democracies in Southeast Asia have their defects. Jokowi's victory will provide ASEAN with regional leadership as the 47-year-old organisation moves into an ambitious phase under the ASEAN Community plans. It is also a boon for democratisation in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood. Had Indonesian democracy suffered a setback with a Jokowi defeat, it would have dealt a major blow to regional democratisation. In a long view, Jokowi's triumph may have saved the future of democratisation in Southeast Asia.

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[1] Cambodia where manipulated polls can keep incumbents in power:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/10/30/cambodian-opposition-boycotts-parliament-to-what-end/>

[2] Myanmar's leadership contest is fierce:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/23/will-myanmars-military-exit-the-political-stage/>

[3] Thailand remains stuck in its cycle of coups, constitutions and elections:

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