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Jokowi's Cabinet Reshuffle: Juggling Performance, Patronage and Politics

By Leonard C. Sebastian, Tiola Javadi, and Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

President Joko Widodo is set to reshuffle his cabinet. While performance is one determining factor, it is likely to be overshadowed by patronage and political calculations.

Commentary

ALMOST NINE months after President Joko Widodo announced the line-up of his working cabinet, a deteriorating economy and slow progress of reform are the driving forces determining the necessity of a cabinet reshuffle. While many question whether it would be too soon to judge the ministers in their respective roles, cabinet reshuffles are not an unusual exercise in post-Reformasi administrations.

Former President Abdurrahman Wahid reshuffled the cabinet four times during his two-year tenure. President Yudhoyono, the predecessor of President Widodo, or Jokowi as he prefers to be called, changed his cabinet line-up 14 months after his first-term inauguration, and had a total of five reshuffles during his two-term presidency.

Balancing performance, patronage and politics

Unlike Yudhoyono who dominated his political party, Jokowi had limited political space in composing his working cabinet, and is likely to have limited freedom in reshuffling it, too. Since his inauguration, Jokowi had to contend with pressure from his political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and its chairperson Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Moreover, PDI-P, is not the only political player that will influence the composition of the new cabinet, as the parties that are part of his coalition as well as those from opposition camp will also join the fray. Under such circumstances, besides the ministers' performances, patronage and political calculations are likely to affect Jokowi's choices. A recent poll by Kompas showed that 59% of the people are disappointed with the government's performance.

Among the top concerns were the government's failure to maintain a stable price for basic commodities and its limited efforts in eradicating corruption, particularly with regard to enforcing the law against elites involved in corruption. Should he reshuffle his cabinet, which will affect several key

ministers, Jokowi is likely to go by three parameters: institutional organisation, budget utilisation, and policies.

Jokowi reportedly had been focusing on the economic ministers. Although the president acknowledged that they had good skills, he believes they have failed in stimulating the Indonesian economy and in keeping commodity prices stable.

While the US dollar's strength had hit emerging market currencies in general, the rupiah did worse than other countries, where it has fallen around seven percent since Jokowi was elected. In the first quarter, Indonesia's economic growth declined to 4.7 percent, the slowest in five years, while inflation accelerated by 7.1 percent this May.

Political ministers, political cost of reshuffle

Besides the economic ministers, Jokowi is also reportedly focusing his attention on the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Tedjo Edhy Purdijanto. The president highlighted Tedjo's statements on the conflict between the National Police and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which caused a huge controversy.

On the other hand, among the apparently effective ministers are Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti and Religious Affairs Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin due to their breakthrough approaches and thoughts regarding illegal fishing and religious intolerance, respectively.

While changes are needed, Jokowi will have to calculate the political cost of composing the new cabinet. Given his limited political power, patronage becomes a prominent element in clinching the reshuffle. In this, there are two factors to consider. Firstly, Jokowi is not the sole decision maker in PDIP as Megawati Soekarnoputri still holds the throne. Secondly, the President Jokowi also needs to retain the loyalty of his coalition members by including their cadres in the cabinet. Defection by anyone in his coalition camp will loosen his grip on parliament. Jokowi may need to engage in a trade-off between improving his cabinet and retaining the loyalty of a coalition partner.

The new cabinet is also an opportunity for the party oligarchs to strengthen their "wealth defence mechanism" by replacing some cadres seen as rebellious and unfaithful to them. Therefore we could see more party loyalists surfacing if those political parties manage to drive the reshuffle process. These old cadres, especially those who have sacrificed themselves for the party, have a big opportunity to return to the spotlight.

Jokowi to fight back?

To gain more power in parliament, President Jokowi may also appoint ministers from the opposition, such as the National Mandate Party (PAN). Although this issue has been widely discussed in the media, whether it will finally materialise depends on the administration's calculus of political balance.

Jokowi nevertheless may choose to resist pressure from the party oligarchs, such as Megawati Soekarnoputri and Surya Paloh, as well as the Vice President Jusuf Kalla and fight back. This scenario could emerge if Jokowi feels he has enough political power to contest the oligarchs. Inviting new power groups to his circle to balance the current political order is an initial step for this scenario to come to fruition. Political transactions will be an inevitable consequence of this manoeuvre.

These new factions definitely will ask for some share of government positions and the decision making process, or even political protection and government projects. By doing this, the president is likely to face greater political instability due to the fractious nature of coalition politics rather than consolidate the current order. That is, unless he is willing to accommodate both the new groups and his current partners in an expand coalition. However, a large coalition does not always produce positive results. A downside is a slow decision-making process as all parties need to be involved.

Besides bringing in an outside coalition group, President Jokowi could appoint those from within his own circle to corral the oligarchs. Jokowi however would find difficulties in nominating his own people due to his relatively small political network drawn from contacts established when he was Surakarta's

Mayor and Jakarta's Governor leaving him with limited options. Furthermore, political contestation is likely if his appointees fail to add political weight to the president's camp.

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