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The Spectacular Rise of Joko Widodo: How Long Can He Last as President?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The inauguration of President Joko Widodo today, 20 Oct 2014, has raised hopes of a new beginning for Indonesia. Can he assuage doubts about his political longevity?

Commentary

THE RISE of President Joko Widodo ushers in yet another chapter - a significant one - in Indonesia's long and seemingly unending transition to civilian democratic rule. The new President's assumption to office today has been accompanied with much anticipation, promising hope and refreshing change - a clear break from his predecessors.

President Jokowi, as he is fondly known, is not from the military, unlike Suharto or Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Though Muslim, he is neither from the Islamic voting bloc – a powerful constituency which only the military can balance. He is also not from the elite strata like previous presidents Sukarno, Habibie and Megawati, or the religious class like Abdurahman Wahid. The 53-year-old Jokowi literally emerged from the slums where he grew up; he was a furniture entrepreneur who virtually came out from the woodwork to become mayor of Solo in 2005, governor of Jakarta in 2012 and now president of the world's fourth largest country in three gigantic leaps in just nine years. This is as spectacular as it is unprecedented.

Rapid rise, rapid opposition?

Jokowi's popularity is due to his fresh face, coupled with the simplicity and humility of the *wong cilik* – the 'small man' - with a big mission of reform. It is an exciting prospect for the millions of voters who had grown tired of the usual slate of leaders from the military and political establishments.

However, despite months in the limelight as a competitor for power, President Jokowi's enigma is yet to be fully unpacked: much of his potential is yet to be discovered or unleashed. Still, his supporters hope he will lead them to a new Indonesia – as a developed country with a place in the sun for every Indonesian regardless of background; an archipelagic state of 250 million who see their destiny as a regional maritime power in this part of the world.

It is therefore only natural that, having won the presidential election in July this year on a popular wave, Jokowi was widely expected to lead a strong government, with professional talent rallying around him to help tackle the country's key challenges ahead: the economy which has to be kept galloping so that millions of jobs could be created; the growing budget deficits due to burgeoning fuel subsidies; the underdeveloped infrastructure; the notoriously endemic corruption; and the bloated bureaucracy. Jokowi has rightly resolved to bypass the politics of coalition and horse-trading that has weakened previous administrations. But despite having rightly identified the core problem, he does not possess the necessary levers of power.

How long can he last?

Indeed, as quickly as he has rapidly risen to the top, questions are already being asked, even as early as August: how long can he last as President? That such doubts about his political longevity are emerging so early is troubling. There have even been predictions of him not going past two years. The chief reason is this paradox: while he has won the presidential election, he is losing the power game:

Jokowi's supporting parties in the Great Indonesia Coalition (*Koalisi Indonesia Hebat*, KIH) has only 37 percent of the seats in the new House of Representatives (DPR). Control of the House, by 63 percent, is in the hands of the Red-White Coalition (*Koalisi Merah Putih*, KMP) led by Prabowo, the defeated presidential contender. This was the result of the April parliamentary election prior to the July presidential race which Jokowi won, together with running mate Jusuf Kalla.

Having failed to challenge the legitimacy of Jokowi's victory in July, Prabowo's KMP moved with ruthless efficiency to secure key positions in Parliament by first changing the rules of filling DPR leadership posts in favour of voting, which suits its interest. The KMP then flexed its muscle by winning the posts of House Speaker and Deputy Speakers.

As if this is not enough, the opposition-dominated Parliament scrapped direct elections of regional leaders such as governors and mayors (*Pilkada*), giving back that power to the local legislative councils. It has also put on notice its desire to similarly roll back direct presidential elections and return the power to elect the president to the upper House, the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). This was precisely how Suharto ran the presidential elections until he was deposed in 1998 and direct presidential elections introduced in 2004 during the *reformasi* era.

Throughout all this, Jokowi's coalition appears helpless as the incoming president was busily preparing to form his cabinet. Jokowi has been trying to change the power balance by winning over some members of KMP, but to no great success so far. The earlier plan to swing the biggest opposition member, Golkar, has also fallen flat; Golkar leader Aburizal Bakrie has openly declared his loyalty to KMP in its role as a constructive opposition – amid Prabowo's conciliatory stance towards Jokowi of late.

The implications are ominous for President Jokowi. His government is under threat from a possibly hostile parliament. To make things worse, he has inherited from President Yudhoyono a budget with a "time bomb" due to the growing deficits. In all, the Prabowo-led coalition could block the minority government's budgets and policies at whim. In other words real power to run the country lies in the hands of the Legislature, not the Executive.

Jokowi needs a high-powered cabinet, to be announced this week, to help him deliver in spite of the huge obstacles ahead. Failure to fulfill his campaign promises could lead to public frustration with his leadership and eventually perhaps to moves to impeach him.

What now?

Jokowi's counter-moves are two-fold: the first - to restructure the parliamentary power balance by winning over some members of the Prabowo-led coalition - is making only limited headway. A significant swing could still happen if other KMP parties defect in sufficient numbers to give him the simple majority he badly needs. The second counter-move is to appeal directly to the people and put pressure on Prabowo's KMP. If Jokowi still fails, a political crisis may develop leading to his downfall.

“He has to revamp the 2015 budget, otherwise the people will not have faith in him. If he does not come up with a sophisticated breakthrough, Jokowi may last for only two years,” former coordinating economic minister Rizal Ramli was reported as saying in late August. Nothing much has changed to alter the validity of this prediction.

So President Jokowi will spend much energy fighting his way through Indonesia’s byzantine politics rather than building a new Indonesia. Hopefully beneath his enigma lies some hidden strengths. Otherwise he will end up in the pantheon of short-lived presidencies like Habibie, Abdurahman Wahid and Megawati. To be the saviour of post-Suharto Indonesia, Jokowi must keep the flame of hope alive.

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