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Two Years Under Jokowi

Jokowi's Power Consolidation: At What Cost?

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Starting weak, over the course of two years, Indonesia's seventh president Joko Widodo (Jokowi), has been able to solidify his power. This victory, however, has come at several costs.

Commentary

JOKO WIDODO's victory in the 2014 presidential election was celebrated as it represented a major progress of democracy in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. The rise to power of Jokowi, as he is also known, was unprecedented as it was largely the collective effort of volunteers and a strong social media presence that largely helped his humble persona and credible achievements during his term as mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta. This had inspired high expectations that he would be able to enact much-needed political and economic reforms as president.

These expectations however, lost momentum as the new leader struggled to navigate a political system dominated by party oligarchs and the military. Jokowi's own party, the Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDI-P), had managed to constrict his room for manoeuvre, and this was evident in the selection of candidates for ministerial posts in his first Cabinet. Continued infighting within his first Cabinet further compromised the efficiency of the Jokowi administration. Without a military background, his unfamiliarity with party politics in the country, and the existence of a potentially hostile opposition-led parliament all conspired to pose considerable obstacles for Jokowi's presidency.

Jokowi's Winning Streak

Jokowi's astute political manoeuvrings, however, has got him into a position where he has gradually gained the support and trust of the public as battles with entrenched interests continue. It is in light of these challenges and obstacles that Jokowi's political decision, including the recent Cabinet reshuffle in July, must be understood.

There are four reasons to believe that President Jokowi's position has strengthened two years after coming into office. First, by retaining several loyal and powerful figures in Cabinet, Jokowi has been able to balance against oligarchic powers confronting him. Two such figures are Luhut Pandjaitan and Rini Soemarno.

By moving Luhut from the post of Coordinating Minister of Politics, Law, and Security to Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs, Jokowi has appointed his trusted lieutenant to a key position that would oversee arguably the most ambitious item on the presidential agenda –Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum initiative.

In the case of Rini Soemarno, despite pressure from various quarters in the PDI-P to dismiss her, she has been given the responsibility to handle investments from China as State Enterprises Minister, most notably the ongoing Jakarta – Bandung high speed train project.

Gaining Ground

Second, Jokowi has been able to expand his coalition within the House of Representatives (DPR) by bringing the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the Functional Groups Party (Golkar) to his side, holding some 67 percent of the parliamentary seats. This has effectively reversed the situation immediately after the 2014 election, which saw the opposition coalition controlling the majority of parliamentary seats. As concessions, however, he has to put in place Asman Abnur from PAN as the new Minister of State Apparatus and Bureaucratic Reform, and Airlangga Hartarto from Golkar as the new Minister of Industry.

Third, by dismissing several Cabinet ministers known to have been at odds with him through a reshuffle, such as Anies Baswedan and Ignasius Jonan, Jokowi has also demonstrated a leadership style that echoes traditional Javanese political culture where leaders have low tolerance for dissent. This is a show of power, which highlights the importance of obedience over performance.

Finally, Jokowi has also been able to consolidate power by bringing in the military to his side. Jokowi's appointment of retired general Wiranto, the chief patron of the Peoples' Conscience Party (Hanura), to the position of Coordinating Minister of Political, Law, and Security Affairs, despite alleged human rights abuses, not only compensated for his removal of two Hanura ministers during the previous Cabinet reshuffle, it also strengthened the president's relationship with the military.

The Cost of Political Consolidation

Although Jokowi is consolidating his power, no doubt, this political victory comes with several costs. After the 2014 general election, having held only 109 of 560 seats, Jokowi was forced to make concessions with his coalition partners. As a result of political transactions, Jokowi is saddled with a rainbow Cabinet, comprising nonpartisan professionals and ministerial positions held by party members' representatives in order to balance the demand of his ruling coalition in DPR.

Doubtless, this is important in order to cater, at least in part, to vested interests such as the political or business interests of his ruling alliance. Nonetheless, given the pivotal role of personality in leading much-needed bureaucratic reform in various Indonesian ministries, these concessions resulted in lost opportunity to have credible technocrats in Cabinet.

His tacit alliance with the military also comes at the cost of halting the advancement of civilian control over the military. Indonesia has witnessed the increasingly vivid presence of retired and active military generals in decision-making circles and in public debates, who also actively encouraged the deployment of military personnel to address emerging social and economic issues.

In February 2016, at the height of public discussion over the legality of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement in Indonesia, Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu made remarks comparing the demand for freedom of such movement to being even more dangerous than nuclear warfare. Ryacudu then suggested the need to increase military presence to educate the populace to counter such a movement. This is one example where military leaders in power inevitably assert their own independent political conclusions on issues which are not only beyond their area of expertise, but also encroached directly upon civilian control.

Indeed, constrained within a tangle of oligarchic politics, Jokowi has to do what needs to be done to advance his political goals. The puzzling question is, however, whether these political transactions, will in the long run, be worth it for Indonesia's democratic progress.

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