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Jokowi's Second Anniversary: Aiming for History?

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

Jokowi took office as a weak president, yet within two years, he has succeeded in consolidating his position politically, winning control of the executive and national parliament. His commitment to infrastructure projects is proving to be a game changer that could earn him a place in Indonesian history.

Commentary

JOKO WIDODO, or Jokowi for short, broke tradition by becoming Indonesia's seventh president in October 2014. He did not come from the traditional political families; neither was he a general. He did not even hold a national political office prior to this except for being a mayor of a small city, Solo and for a short while, the governor of Jakarta.

Yet, by the second anniversary of his presidency this month, he has proven wrong most pundits who doubted he would survive politically. He has scored successes on many fronts and seems to be aiming for a place in history as an effective president. Yet, there are daunting challenges that he cannot ignore.

Achievements So Far

Jokowi has given priority to building the country's infrastructure to enhance national and international connectivity. With savings from cuts in fuel subsidies, he has been able to finance many infrastructure projects. His achievements include building new or upgrading 150 ports, 3 east-west maritime toll routes, 2600 kilometres of national roads, 1000 km of toll road and the 4300 km Trans Papua highway. A high speed

railway between Jakarta and Bandung is under construction. Investments in the MRT and LRT in Jakarta made prior to his taking office have been pushed ahead.

Seventeen new airports are being built with 32 airport terminals revitalised. Some 49 new irrigation plants are being constructed, especially in drought-hit eastern Indonesia. The national electricity capacity is being enhanced with the addition of 35,000 megawatts to drive the country's industrialisation and meet rising domestic needs of a population of nearly 265 million.

Indonesia's economy has been doing well despite the global downturn. Red tape has been cut and business regulations have been streamlined. The tax amnesty scheme has been successful, with S\$379 billion declared in the first phase (end September 2016).

In foreign and defence policy, there has been no serious challenge. It is in the political arena that Jokowi's achievements are prominent. Even though he won the presidency narrowly and the opposition controlled the national parliament, by the second anniversary, there is no major challenge to Jokowi. All key political parties are part of Jokowi's coalition, allowing the president to push through policies in parliament with little resistance.

Factors Behind his Political Strength

In part, this has to do with Jokowi's personality. He is corrupt-free, stubborn in his commitment to key policies, concerned with details and decisive. His credibility and personal ratings remain high. He has the making of a strong president, something that was hardly associated with him.

Jokowi's political strength and power in Indonesia today is due to two main political groups. The first comprises strong political personalities co-opted into the policy making circle. After two cabinet reshuffles, his strong team includes Luhut Panjaitan, Wiranto, Ryamizard Ryacudu, Sri Mulyani, Rini Soemarno and Susi Pudjiastuti, with the support of most political parties such as PDIP, Golkar, PAN, Nasdem, Hanura and PKB.

However, it is the second political group - the unseen kitchen cabinet of Jokowi - that has played a crucial role in ensuring Jokowi's all-round success. They are the 'Magnificent Seven' who have helped Jokowi to remain ahead of the political curve. The key advisers are Pratikno, Anggit Nugroho, Sukardi Rinakit, Teten Masduki, Ari Dwipayana, Johan Budi and Pramono Anung.

Based in the Presidential Palace, the seven are Jokowi's brains trust. They have been effective in ensuring that the right policies are calibrated and implemented despite competing priorities and pressures that may be brought to bear on the president. The power of the Indonesian president is not just to persuade but also to implement policies regardless of their popularity, such as cutting fuel subsidies that were undertaken early in Jokowi's term.

Jokowi's Challenges

Despite the achievements, there are some challenges confronting him. These are mainly on the economic and political fronts. With the global economy sliding downwards, any recession on a worldwide scale will have a debilitating effect on Indonesia and its people. While the macro economy has been growing, more needs to be done in terms of spreading the wealth horizontally to prevent the income gap from widening. Corruption remains endemic and the anti-corruption agency gravely weakened by its conflict with the police which fall under Jokowi's purview.

Even though Jokowi is not from a political dynasty, he still has to deal with powerful politicians with competing interests, including from his own party, the PDIP. This has made political wrangling and compromise part of the political culture, most evident in the appointment of the police chief. Security remains a major issue, especially the threat of extremism and terrorism. In January 2016, Jakarta's city centre was hit by terrorist attacks.

Finally, the worsening Sino-American competition in the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea which borders Indonesia, is threatening to affect Indonesia, especially in the Indonesian-owned Natuna region. If Indonesia is forced to choose sides in the growing Chinese-American conflict or if there is an accidental firefight between China and Indonesia in the Natuna region, this could complicate Indonesia's defence and foreign policy.

While he is barely 24 months in his presidency, most major and minor political parties, including former opponents such as Golkar, are already championing Jokowi for a second term as president. In addition to being a stable hand, a unifier and introducing a new type of mass politics, his commitment to infrastructure development will make him the president who launched Indonesia into the next phase of economic development.

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