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President Jokowi's 'Ordinary' Style: Simplicity and the 'Wealth of Poverty'?

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

Indonesia's recently-elected President Joko Widodo has captured the attention of the world media by his manner of dress and unassuming character. But this simple self-presentation has a long history in Southeast Asia, where assuming an ordinary character is also a form of cultural capital that carries huge symbolic power.

Commentary

INDONESIA'S PRESIDENT Joko Widodo (Jokowi) made international headlines recently when he flew economy-class from Jakarta to Singapore with his wife to attend the graduation ceremony of their son. Jokowi's aide pointed out during the trip that the "President was travelling as a father, and not in his official capacity as President", and thus did not avail himself the use of the presidential aircraft normally used for official visits.

His quick and quiet trip however, was reported across Asia and the West, and it was noted by many media commentators that this marked an impressive and visible shift from the style of leadership of previous Indonesian presidents, whose visits, and official events were often characterised by the show of pomp and grandeur.

Two cultures of power

It is, however, important to note that President Jokowi's plain and simple style does have long historical precedents in Southeast Asia, and that he is not the only leader who has opted to go down the path of simplicity and modesty, although he may well be the most manifest in recent years.

Asian societies have always had two very different cultures of power and wealth, each with its own register of meaning and symbols. While it is true that in the pre-modern precolonial era power and wealth were often understood and expressed in demonstrative ways – through the construction of vast temple and palace complexes, complicated and formalised codes of dress, and arcane rites and rituals of courtly behaviour; there has also been another equally long tradition of power-accumulation that rests upon the deliberate (and publicly-visible) rejection of the very same symbols of power and social status.

Southeast Asian epics and myths are full of examples of men (and women) of power and high social standing who deliberately cast aside the symbols of power and wealth: In the Jataka Buddhist tale of Prince Vesantara (Wetsandon), the Prince gives away all his belongings, including the sacred white elephant as well as his own children, on his path of self-realisation – before he is accepted as a truly noble man deserving of power.

In Java, where Jokowi hails from, there are plentiful tales of rulers and nobles (both real and fictional) who gave up their lives of luxury to meditate in caves and mountains – only to gain even more spiritual power and moral legitimacy. In these instances, the negation of the symbols of power and wealth do not make the individual weaker or poorer, but more powerful instead. It is a case of the ‘poverty of wealth’ being replaced by the ‘wealth of poverty’, where assuming a life of simplicity purifies the individual’s persona, adds to his social charisma and to his store of cultural capital as well.

From past to present examples

There have also been more contemporary examples of such deliberate, calculated efforts to re-invent one’s political persona in the region: After the victory of the Communist party in Vietnam, its leader Ho Chi Minh was elevated to the highest office in the state. Those who have paid a visit to Hanoi may have also visited Ho Chi Minh’s modest lodgings in the small house at the back of the monumentally impressive Presidential Palace, that was built during the French colonial era in beaux-arts style.

Ho Chi Minh’s decision never to reside in the palace was to make the point that he would not allow himself to be swayed by the culture and luxury of the French colonial era, and that he would remain ‘untainted’ by wealth and power. It was a political decision that was symbolic in meaning, and understood by millions of Vietnamese who revered him all the more for it.

In Malaysia and Singapore other leaders have also opted for a simpler life in the past: Malaysia’s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman lived in a government-owned bungalow at Kenny Hills, Kuala Lumpur; while in Singapore the country’s founder-leader Lee Kuan Yew set the tone for the government by living in his family bungalow instead of moving into the official residence of Sri Temasek in the Istana domain; while Singapore’s first President Yusof Ishak stayed in a small villa behind the Istana. Having no home in Jakarta after moving from Solo where he was mayor, President Jokowi is staying at his official residence at the Merdeka Palace.

‘Poor’ is not ‘weak’

President Jokowi’s ordinary style is thus in keeping with a long tradition of political self-representation that dates back to the premodern era in Asia. At a glance it gives the clear impression of being a style that is popular and resonates with the ordinary masses, but it also happens to be a statement of intent in many other respects: It signals a rejection of empty formality and ritualism while placing value on pragmatism and real work; it signals a detachment from petty concerns about social status and popular prejudice and entails a higher evaluation of performance and delivery. It has certainly boosted his image as a no-nonsense, get-straight-to-work leader who will manage things personally.

This approach is also in keeping with President Jokowi’s pledge to turn things around for Indonesia as fast as possible, in order to deal with real issues such as logistics, institutional inertia, supply and demand blocks, etc., all of which happen to be real issues of political-economy that can only be solved through methods and work-practice that are rational and programmatic, rather than rhetorical flourishes or nostalgia for the past.

By rejecting a presidential style that is overly formal and ritualistic, Jokowi has shown that he is the man in charge, and that appearing ‘poor’ does not mean that he is ‘weak’ in any way – but that he is ‘above’ such concerns and that he operates on the highest level of all, as President of the republic of Indonesia.

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