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Two Years Under Jokowi

Jokowi: King or Puppet?

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Joko Widodo has sought to neutralise the power of oligarchs, by balancing them with other actors. How does the recalibration of Indonesia's political dynamics shed light on Jokowi's approach to politics? What does this mean for Indonesia's democratic process?

Commentary

JOKO WIDODO as a new entrant in Indonesia's national political scene did not have substantial resources to make him an independent actor. Much of his capital to win the 2014 general election was 'borrowed' from political parties adding to the resource he accumulated from public trust in his humble persona. Consequently, Jokowi, as he is popularly known, has often come under the grip of an oligarchic political system in the course of his leadership of the world's third largest democracy.

One notable example was the case of Budi Gunawan, a former aide of Megawati Soekarnoputri, leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDIP). Despite warning from the Corruption Eradication Commission, he kept nominating Gunawan in early 2015 to be chief of police. Although it was eventually aborted due to massive public opposition, this disappointed many of his political supporters and strengthened the belief that he was merely a puppet of the oligarch.

Shaking Hands with the Enemy

After the 2014 general election, Jokowi was forced to make concessions with his

coalition partners. At the beginning, Jokowi sought to promote a transparent approach in selecting his ministers, by introducing potential nominees and opening them up to public scrutiny. He also proposed a slimmer and more efficient Cabinet by reducing the number of ministerial posts. Vice president Jusuf Kalla, who was one of major financial contributors of the Jokowi campaign, however, expressed disagreement over Jokowi's propositions as it would create difficulty in power sharing.

Thereafter, his choice of Cabinet members have upset many as it was deemed too accommodating to his party patron's interest by allocating 15 cabinet posts to political parties, as well as several ex-military generals or technocrats promoted by party oligarchs. Although this was not an ideal situation, it was important in order to cater, at least in part, to vested interest such as the political or business interests of his ruling alliance.

In addition, Jokowi also has to accommodate Megawati's wishes for instance appointing another retired Army general, Ryamizard Ryacudu, as the Minister of Defence. Although the decision attracting much criticism, Ryacudu's appointment served as appeasement and to secure the trust of Megawati as Ryacudu is Megawati's confidante. This indicated that Jokowi's lack of political capital has rendered him unable to fully escape the politics of transaction.

King in the Making?

Jokowi has, however, proven that he is not a puppet of the oligarch or a mere spectator. He has been facing down competing forces from every direction: his own party, his own Cabinet, oligarchs, and a fierce opposition. But Jokowi, has been able to maintain a balance and manage the different interests confronting him, while making them his own source of power.

Jokowi seems to combine two approaches to manage his administration: on one hand he accommodates the wills of ruling oligarchs by providing them some concessions, including some ministerial positions or projects of national scale. On the other hand, he also balances the preexisting oligarchic interests by installing some other powerful actors. In so doing, he has been able to create some leverage and deflect the strong power of any of the oligarchs to force a decision down his throat.

More importantly, he has also created a clear distinction between Megawati, PDI-P, and his image. This has given him more tactical room to manoeuvre in the future. The declining public image of the PDI-P, his major coalition partner, does not seem to have affected his own personal image. A poll conducted by Jakarta-based Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) in January 2016 showed that 63 percent of 1,220 respondents indicated they are pleased with Jokowi and his efforts leading Indonesia.

A public opinion survey published in February 2016 conducted by Kompas daily also found 84 percent of the respondents thought that Jokowi had done a good job. It is not unfair then to conclude that Jokowi's decisions at times do not completely follow his party, including cancelling Gunawan's nomination as the Chief of Police, have

worked in his favour. Jokowi is now able to tacitly manoeuvre between political parties and switch party allegiances even allowing his volunteers or *relawan* to form a party for him in the next 2019 election.

Future of Indonesia's Democracy

Jokowi's ability to survive and thrive by making friends and eliminating foes speaks to the still personalised nature of Indonesian politics. The whole political dynamics also highlights the unstable nature of politics in Indonesia, where political parties collectively dismiss their ideological and programmatic stances and fall in with the government for the sake of capturing state patronage. It also means that despite democratisation post New Order, Indonesia's political parties and institutions remain underdeveloped.

The whole situation, however, also gives optimism for the progress of democracy – that no political parties or powerful figures can escape public scrutiny. Jokowi's growing strategic autonomy is a result of support from the Indonesians populace that put pressure on the party owners to set aside their interests.

Still, as the movement to undercut the power of the public vote rises, as seen in efforts by PDI-P and other groups to abolish direct elections and attempts to introduce defamation law against public insults of the President Jokowi will have to avoid any efforts to neutralise the source of his power. Instead, he has to harness the power of the public - arguably his only trusted ally in Indonesia's muddy political environment, by empowering public participation and striving for more transparent government.

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