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Jokowi's Cabinet Reshuffle: Will It Beat COVID-19?

By Richard Borsuk

SYNOPSIS

President Joko Widodo has reshuffled his cabinet in a bid to better manage efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and end the country's recession. For the first time, Indonesia will have a health minister who is not a doctor.

COMMENTARY

PRESIDENT JOKO Widodo's major cabinet reshuffle this week is aimed at improving Indonesia's efforts to be on top of the COVID-19 pandemic and get the country out of its first recession in more than 20 years.

Six months after he rebuked his "Onward Indonesia" cabinet for not treating the pandemic as the crisis that it was, the president replaced the military radiologist who was health minister with a banker who is a respected manager, and dropped the trade minister for a non-politician with business experience. Jokowi, as the president is known, also filled vacancies created recently when two ministers were detained as suspects in corruption cases.

Improving Cabinet's Performance

The latest cabinet reshuffle "presents a few upgrades in terms of execution and public messaging," says Aaron Connelly, a research fellow with the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). With the changes, "hopefully there will be meaningful improvements for the wider community", tweeted social scientist Ariel Heryanto of Monash University.

The most significant change in Jokowi's second-term cabinet, formed in October 2019, is the dropping of Terawan Agus Putranto as health minister, and his replacement by

Budi Gunadi Sadikin, who was previously deputy minister for state-owned companies and chair of the National Economic Recovery Task Force.

There has long been strong criticism of Terawan, who downplayed COVID-19 when cases first emerged in the country and told Indonesians that prayer could fend it off. Terawan struggled to work through the Health Ministry's bureaucracy, which was frustratingly slow to spend budgeted funds and increase testing from woefully inadequate levels.

Replacement of Terawan "was long overdue", said Connelly, adding it was "not clear if it will improve the COVID response much, as Jokowi long ago began to work around Terawan".

New Health Minister

Budi will be Indonesia's first health minister who is not a doctor or have a medical background. But he is an experienced manager, and that could be just what Indonesia needs at the ministry, especially for the period of vaccination — which hopefully will start soon in 2021 but will pose huge logistical challenges.

Budi has solid management credentials. He was president-director of state-owned Bank Mandiri and then ran Indonesia's mining holding company, PT Inalum, which bought majority control of the country's giant Freeport gold and copper mining operation.

Another key appointment is of Muhammad Lutfi, Indonesia's ambassador to the United States, who succeeds Agus Suparmanto of the National Awakening Party (PKB) as trade minister. Lutfi was previously chairman of the Investment Coordinating Board and briefly served as trade minister in the last cabinet of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Jokowi's predecessor as president. Lutfi also has worked in the private sector.

Lutfi had just presented his credentials in Washington in September, and his appointment as minister means Indonesia will be without an ambassador there when Joe Biden is sworn in as president on 20 Jan 2021. But the trade post at home is important, especially as Indonesia needs to boost exports to help end the contraction of its economy.

Long-Awaited Reshuffle

Consumption, and not trade, is the big engine of the Indonesian economy, accounting for more than half of GDP, but it is still sputtering because of COVID-19 and its spiking case load — which is keeping many Indonesians from shopping.

The economy is expected to shrink close to two per cent this year, which has caused big increases in joblessness and poverty. As of 22 Dec 2020, Indonesia had the biggest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia — more than 650,000 — and the biggest number of deaths, about 20,000.

Jokowi's cabinet reshuffle has long been expected. Some analysts prematurely projected it to come soon after he lambasted ministers in June about a lackadaisical

approach to fighting the pandemic. Then in the past month, two ministers were detained as suspects in corruption cases, casting a shadow on Jokowi's government.

One of those cases was particularly embarrassing as the then-social welfare minister is suspected of siphoning off money from the budget for putting a safety net for Indonesians impoverished by COVID-19. The dropped minister, Juliari Batubara, has been replaced by popular Surabaya mayor Tri Rismaharini.

Coopting Another Political Opponent

Also significant from the reshuffle is the appointment of Sandiaga Uno, the vice-presidential candidate who ran with Prabowo Subianto to oppose Jokowi and his running mate Ma'ruf Amin in the April 2019 presidential election. Sandiaga was named the new minister of tourism and creative economy. So there is the unprecedented development in which political opponents in a presidential election subsequently joined the winning candidate's government.

When forming his cabinet for the second and final term that ends in 2024, Jokowi, who likes inclusiveness, controversially made Prabowo defence minister even though the outspoken former general had rejected the legitimacy of the 2019 presidential election – as well as the previous one in 2014.

Equally of note is the appointment of Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, leader of the youth wing of the giant Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as religious affairs minister in place of retired general Fachrul Razi. This portfolio has traditionally been for an NU figure, so NU was not happy to have been bypassed for the post last year. Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

Jokowi clearly hopes the cabinet changes give his government a fresh start with more than two-thirds of his final five-year term left. He will be judged on how Indonesia deals with COVID-19. How his government performs with the coming rollout of the massive vaccination programme will be as much a test of Jokowi's leadership.

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