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Indonesia under the Next President: Continuity, PDIP Dominant, or Progressive Change?

Jefferson Ng

SYNOPSIS

*The policy preferences of the next Indonesian president and that of the party coalition supporting him will influence Indonesia's future trajectory. **JEFFERSON NG** charts out three distinctive pathways for Indonesia, depending on which of the three candidates wins the race.*

COMMENTARY

At its core, Indonesia's presidential elections are about competition between different groups of elites for control of the state budget and the appointment powers of the president. No genuine ideological difference divides political parties and politicians, a reality that tends to facilitate a transactional and patronage-based politics.

Thus, the expressed policy preferences of individual presidential candidates are in part deeply held individual beliefs and in part the tactical positioning of a presidential candidate in relation to his party backers and what he thinks best secures an electoral advantage for himself. This means that it is important to distinguish the candidate's personal preferences and that of his coalition partners to assess their domestic and foreign policy preferences once in office.



The candidates competing in the Indonesian presidential elections will forge three distinctive pathways for Indonesia from incumbent president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's presidency, depending on who wins the race. While Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto and Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo are likely to continue Jokowi-era policies to varying extents, Anies Baswedan is expected to review and refine such policies.

Image by Wikimedia Commons.

“Jokowi 3.0”: A Continuity Scenario

In his campaign to secure the presidency, Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto seeks to position himself as a successor to President Jokowi. Prabowo claims his coalition is part of “[Team Jokowi](#)”, composed only of the parties in the government coalition, therefore signalling his intention to carry on Jokowi-era programmes and policies.

Prabowo’s willingness to work with all parties and share power broadly continues the tradition of post-Reformasi Indonesian presidents, who have preferred to form rainbow cabinets in a supermajority coalition. In public statements, he has pledged to invite all parties to join his government, arguing that Indonesia should be a “democracy of family members” (*demokrasi berkeluarga*), which in practice means no substantive opposition presence or checks and balances.

His coalition is also a safety net for the multiple business interests that have benefitted from Jokowi-era economic policies, especially close economic engagement with China. Indeed, many of the Jokowi-era megaprojects, including the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, the nickel-processing Morowali Industrial Park, as well as many large-scale hydropower dams and coal power plants, are [projects under China’s Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#).

But in pursuing cooperation with China, Prabowo is likely to face a profound dilemma between his own admiration for China’s statist model of economic development and the growing Chinese presence in the North Natuna Sea. As a former military officer who styles himself as a firm and resolute figure, he is expected to significantly raise Indonesia’s defence spending and play a more active role in safeguarding Indonesia’s sovereignty and sovereign rights.

Thus, as far as possible, a Prabowo presidency will seek to play a dual game. Indonesia will seek to move closer to the United States and other Western countries for self-strengthening military modernisation while deepening economic ties with China.

PDIP Dominant

A presidency under Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo will usher in a historically unprecedented moment in Indonesian history. Since Indonesia's democratic opening in 1999, no political party has ever won the presidency for three consecutive terms.

Ganjar is a cadre of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), the country's largest political party and also the party of the incumbent president. It is projected to win 24% of the vote share (with the second-placed Gerindra party at 19%) in the legislative elections that will take place at the same time as the presidential election, a victory that will allow the party to control both the executive and legislative branches (if Ganjar wins).

PDIP's influence over government policy will be pronounced under a Ganjar administration. He is a staunch party loyalist, having joined the party during the New Order regime and being among the first batch of cadres from PDIP's party school. Having solidified a [partnership](#) with Puan Maharani, the current speaker of parliament and daughter of party chair Megawati, Ganjar and the PDIP heiress will coordinate party policy across the two branches of government. Ganjar has also signed a "political contract" with Megawati allowing the party to determine his running mate and multiple ministerial posts.

Ganjar therefore looks to be more beholden to PDIP than incumbent president Jokowi did in his first term. His cabinet is likely to feature a large number of PDIP loyalists and nonpartisan individuals enjoying close ties with the PDIP. Under his administration, PDIP's pro-poor and pro-people agenda is likely to take centre stage, including investments in education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. Like Prabowo, Ganjar is also expected to continue Jokowi-era policies.

Ganjar's inexperience at the national level and lack of foreign policy experience means that he is likely to rely heavily on the institutional memory of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reappoint key Jokowi aides. He will most likely continue a narrow, inward-looking, nationalist, and transactional foreign policy that focuses mainly on gaining concrete trade and investment benefits from Indonesia's economic partners. Such an approach could mean the expansion of Indonesia's economic engagement with China, as well as with other partners such as Japan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates.

Progressive Change for Indonesia?

An Anies Baswedan presidency will seek to review and revise Jokowi-era policies. Positioning himself as an opposition candidate seeking to change and refine Jokowi's policies, Anies aims to build an Indonesia that shows greater fairness (*keadilan*) and equality (*kesetaraan*).

Anies believes that the government should focus not only on accelerating economic growth, but also on promoting quality economic growth that benefits ordinary Indonesians, especially workers in primary industries. He has called for an objective assessment of Jokowi's mega-projects, based on whether they align with the principles of fairness, public interest, and common sense.

Such a review could affect many BRI projects and could lead to some being cancelled, re-negotiated, or modified to better suit the interests of Anies's coalition partners. For instance, we know that nickel processing activities at the Morowali Industrial Park have disproportionately benefitted Jakarta-based elites with close ties with China and damaged the local environment.

The Morowali Industrial Park has disadvantaged local business interests in Sulawesi, some of which are now supporting Anies's candidacy. The convergence of Anies's personal preference and the interests of his coalition partners indicates that he is likely to review and renegotiate the terms of Indonesia's economic cooperation with China. In addition, Anies has close ties with the West, opening up the possibility of deepening economic cooperation with the Western world.

Beyond economic issues, Anies has also promoted a pseudo-progressive agenda that seeks to win over the urban, educated, and middle-class voters. It includes reforms to strengthen democratic institutions, including improving government transparency and accountability, equality before the law, and involving more public participation in the lawmaking process. One of his proposals involves revising [a controversial law on electronic transactions](#).

Unfortunately, it is unclear whether an Anies administration will be able to win support from the political parties to enact any of his "progressive" plans. Like Ganjar, he is beholden to the parties that support him, and he is not a cadre of any of those parties. Without significant political capital of his own, he will be hard-pressed to make a dramatic break from Jokowi-era policies.

More Continuity than Change

From a domestic political standpoint, the 2024 elections look likely to be determined by the ability of candidates to convince voters of the efficacy of Jokowiomics and address key concerns relating to cost-of-living pressures, job creation and employment, as well as poverty alleviation, education, and healthcare.

From a foreign policy perspective, the major fault line here is contention over the role of China in Indonesia's economy, which has become uncomfortably visible in recent years. With China being a perennial concern, [anti-China rhetoric](#) has started to ramp up again in the lead-up to the elections.

In general, while all the three candidates will seek to engage in their own policy tinkering, Jokowiomics and China's role as Indonesia's most important economic partner are likely to continue into the next presidency.

Jefferson NG is an Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).