

*The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

No. 068/2023 dated 20 September 2023

## **Prabowo Subianto's Electoral Strategy: Jokowi, New Persona, and National Prestige**

*Adhi Priamarizki*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Over the past year or so, Defence Minister and presidential hopeful Prabowo Subianto has orchestrated a dramatic shift in his electoral fortunes. Previously a distant second, he is now running neck and neck with frontrunner candidate Ganjar Pranowo. **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** discusses Prabowo's electoral strategy and challenges.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto is known as the only man who, despite repeated losses, had run in three previous presidential elections – once as the vice-presidential candidate in 2009 and twice as presidential candidate in 2014 and 2019. In 2019, he was seen to have betrayed his coalition partners by joining the government of incumbent president Joko Widodo as his new defence minister. Despite all the odds, his political star has not dimmed, and today he is in a strong position to win the presidency in 2024.

I argue that Prabowo was able to raise his electability over the past year or so owing to three strategies. First, Prabowo is actively positioning himself as a successor to the highly popular incumbent president and has therefore won significant support from President Jokowi's supporters.

Second, Prabowo has managed to rehabilitate his public image, showing a calmer, personable and less explosive side. In addition, he has sought to attract young voters and engage his detractors, notably activist groups. Third, Prabowo's strong

performance as defence minister and his ability to tap Indonesian nationalism has resonated with voters.



Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto has raised his electability over the past year owing to several electoral strategies, including positioning himself as successor to the highly popular incumbent President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and imitating Jokowi's communication style. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

### **From Enemy to Protégé: Prabowo's Relationship with Jokowi**

When Prabowo was appointed by Jokowi to serve as minister of defence, there was considerable surprise given that Jokowi had beaten Prabowo twice in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. Prabowo's entry into the government coalition strengthened Jokowi's position but also raised Prabowo's visibility and profile.

In public, Prabowo has positioned himself as a keen student and follower of Jokowi's leadership [style](#), and each meeting between the two men has been used to great effect by Prabowo's social media team. Prabowo has even dubbed his current party coalition the "Onwards Indonesia Coalition", which constitutes a clear nod to continuity as it re-uses the name of the current Jokowi cabinet.

In a sign that his strategy has borne fruit, [a recent survey by Kompas](#) indicated that there is an increasing trend of Jokowi supporters picking Prabowo as their preferred presidential candidate. The percentage rose from 27.7% in January 2023 to 36.4% in August 2023, although it should be noted that a majority of Jokowi's supporters (63.6%) still prefer Ganjar.

Prabowo's ability to position himself as Jokowi's successor has enabled him to attract the support of key political parties in the government coalition. His coalition consists of his own Gerindra party, Golkar party, the National Mandate Party (PAN), the Crescent and Star Party, and, recently, the [Democrat Party](#). [Several Jokowi volunteer groups](#) have also pledged their support for Prabowo's presidential bid.

## **Change of Style: From *Pendekar* to *Pengabd***

Prabowo has also refashioned his public image in Jokowi's likeness. He is famous for his force of personality and fiery oratory, likening himself to a modern-day warrior (*pendekar*). In recent months, Prabowo has sought to be more conciliatory and moderate in his style of engagement, seeking to position himself as a patriot ready to serve his people (*pengabd*).

This "new" Prabowo had already been quite evident in a June 2023 interview with a well-known [Indonesian YouTube personality](#), during which he adopted a more relaxed style. He also did not protest the recent [withdrawal of the National Awakening Party \(PKB\)](#) from his party coalition, instead saying that the people would decide who was most suitable to run the country.

Another factor that has boosted Prabowo's electability is his strategy of engaging younger people and activists. The first of these constituencies is important as some 53–55% of registered voters are [below 40 years of age](#). The swing towards Prabowo here has been quite substantial: Prabowo now [leads](#) voter preferences among Gen Z (below 26) and millennial (27–42) Indonesians. He was previously on the [back foot](#) barely a year ago. This shift is primarily due to Prabowo's savvy [social media game](#), including a well-curated Instagram feed, which has boosted his electability among younger voters.

Additionally, Prabowo has managed to engage with activists who had previously criticised his human rights record. His success in this regard was evident when Budiman Sudjatmiko, a former activist and recently fired cadre of the Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), joined his [camp in August 2023](#). Among other former activists who joined Prabowo's Gerindra party in recent years is Pius Lustrilanang, a national parliament member from 2009 to 2014. Pius joined Gerindra in 2008. Another former activist who joined Gerindra in the same year and played an important role in the party was the late Desmond Mahesa, who served as a member of the national parliament from 2009 until his death earlier this year.

The key takeaway is that many Indonesians are now willing to look past Prabowo's [chequered human rights track record](#), pointing to how he has successfully rehabilitated his image.

## **Prabowo as Defence Minister: A Skilful PR Exercise**

Moreover, Prabowo has skilfully leveraged his ministerial appointment as defence minister to raise his profile and visibility. Indeed, Prabowo landed multiple big ticket defence purchases during his stint, tapping latent nationalist sentiments among the Indonesian body politic. These purchases include the [French Rafale jet fighters](#) in 2022 and [American F-15 jet fighters](#) in 2023 as well as a plan to procure [French Scorpene submarines](#) in 2023. He has also actively pursued [defence diplomacy initiatives](#), brokering cooperation deals and joint exercises with international partners. Combined, these efforts have raised popular perceptions of his effectiveness as a minister.

Being in the cabinet also means that Prabowo is frequently seen in public, accompanying the president. Such appearances, as noted earlier, have allowed Prabowo to increase his media presence and social media content, positioning himself skilfully as Jokowi's successor.

Those in the defence sector, no doubt, have [criticised](#) Prabowo's defence modernisation plan for lacking in clarity and being poorly conceived and implemented. Yet, it is clear that Prabowo's term as defence minister has been broadly popular with ordinary Indonesians.

### **What Could Go Wrong?**

Forging a closer relationship with Jokowi, refashioning his public image, and enjoying a successful stint as defence minister have boosted Prabowo's electability in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election. Yet, Prabowo could still very well score an own goal if he does not rein in his erratic and grandiose tendencies.

His controversial "peace proposal" to resolve the Ukraine conflict during the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue is one example. The proposal caught both the international audience and [the Indonesian government](#) by surprise. He later backpedalled on his peace proposal in a recent [joint statement](#) with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, calling for Russia's complete and unconditional withdrawal from Ukrainian territory.

Another controversy arose when Prabowo announced a Rp 1769 trillion (about S\$164 billion) procurement budget back in June 2021. It was later revealed that [President Jokowi had not yet approved](#) the procurement budget when Prabowo made the announcement. Although these missteps have not affected his electability, they do indicate a certain brashness.

Prabowo's continued rise in the ongoing presidential contest will depend on his ability to carefully manage his image, emphasise continuity between himself and Jokowi, and avoid being his own worst enemy.

***Adhi PRIAMARIZKI*** is a Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.