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Indonesian Elections in 2024: Political Controversies and Potential Foreign Policy Implications

Cheng Ousa

Introduction

The Republic of Indonesia is the third-largest democracy and the fourth-most populous state in the world. The 2024 election in the Republic of Indonesia marks a significant and transformative moment, representing a historical shift that has unfolded for a decade. The reason is President Joko Widodo who is presently the president of Indonesia, has completed his maximum two terms in office. Approximately 204 million out of Indonesia's total 270 million people are eligible to vote, and although voting is not mandatory, Election Day is observed as a public holiday, resulting in generally high voter turnout.¹ During the 2014 and 2019 elections in Indonesia, there was a clear division among the electorates.² They were split between those who supported the incumbent President Joko Widodo and his challenger, Prabowo Subianto, highlighting a noticeable ideological divide within the country.

¹ Al Jazeera. "Indonesia Election 2024: All You Need to Know." Last modified February 9, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/9/indonesian-elections-2024-all-you-need-to-know>.

² Sastramidjaja, Yaton. "Indonesian Voters' Preferences in 2024: Less Determined, More Diverse." FULCRUM, Last modified February 1, 2024. <https://fulcrum.sg/indonesian-voters-preferences-in-2024-less-determined-more-diverse/>.

However, in the current election, the dynamics have changed. With three sets of candidates competing namely Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD, and Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, the preferences of Indonesian voters are not as predetermined, and their opinions about the candidates are varied.

Moreover, the 2024 election in Indonesia is overshadowed by many critics, one of which is political endorsement, which is arguably not a breach of the Indonesian Democracy. In terms of foreign relations, regardless of who is the president of Indonesia, Indonesia is not likely to shift away from its existing policy of hedging between the US and China.

Political Endorsement

Indonesia operates under a presidential system, where the president is elected directly and holds the roles of both head of state and head of government. To promote a peaceful transfer of power, there is a maximum limit of two terms for the presidency. However, there is an accusation of political endorsement to boost Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka. Prabowo Subianto is a former military general working closely with President Jokowi. Gibran Rakabuming Rak, Jokowi's son, initially did not meet the age requirement for presidential candidates but was allowed to run after a ruling by the Constitutional Court.³ This decision was met with accusations of nepotism due to the court's head being Jokowi's brother-in-law.⁴ On the 12th of February 2024, a large number of students and activists staged protests in Yogyakarta by creating noise with bamboo instruments and displaying posters, alleging that President Jokowi had misused his authority to support Prabowo's campaign.⁵ Despite this criticism, Prabowo and Gibran are the most

³ "Voters Mull Party or Family As Indonesian President's Son Runs for Office." *Al Jazeera*. Last modified February 5, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/5/scepticism-as-gibran-rakabuming-raka-runs-for-indonesias-vice-presidency>.

⁴ Llewellyn, Aisyah. "Indonesian Leader's Son Brushes off 'nepo Baby' Tag in Feted Debate Showing." *Al Jazeera*. Last modified December 23, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/indonesian-leaders-son-brushes-off-nepo-baby-tag-in-solid-debate-showing>.

⁵ Teresia, Ananda. "Indonesia students protest alleged poll interference by Jokowi administration." *Reuters*. Last Modified on February 12, 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-students-plan-protest-alleged-poll-interference-2024-02-12/>

popular candidates in comparison to the other two pairs, but it still remains to be seen whether they can win the election without having to resort to a runoff election in June.⁶

Nonetheless, under Indonesia's multiparty presidential system, legislative elections result in a highly fragmented distribution of seats in the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR), with the largest party typically holding around 20% of the seats. The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) is currently the largest party, holding 22% of the seats.⁷ Therefore, to effectively govern with such a fragmented legislature, the president must form a coalition with at least three legislative parties. So, even if there is support from President Jokowi for winning candidates, there is still some ground for fair competition among the three pairs because of the possible runoff election that requires a presidential candidate to secure a minimum of 50% of the total national vote and also secure at least 20% of the vote in every province.⁸

Foreign Affairs

The 2024 Indonesia election coincides with a critical period for Indonesia as it has become a key player in the escalating rivalry between China and the United States.⁹ Indonesia pursues a purposeful hedging policy, cultivating economic ties and diplomatic engagement with China while maintaining autonomy and flexibility, which is unlike the nonalignment. This approach involves taking calculated risks by developing ties with both China and opposing powers to maximize benefits and minimize risks.¹⁰ While every candidate shares common objectives, such as fostering a stable relationship with Indonesia's Southeast Asian neighbors, navigating the tensions between

⁶ Washington, Jessica. "Q&A: Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto 'confident' of Election Victory." Al Jazeera. Last modified February 11, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/11/qa-indonesias-prabowo-subianto-confident-of-election-win>.

⁷ The House of Representative of the Republic of Indonesia. "About the house" Accessed February 14, 2024. <https://www.dpr.go.id/en/tentang/fraksi>.

⁸ Tan, Clement. "Millions in Indonesia Head to the Polls to Elect Jokowi's Presidential Successor." CNBC. Accessed February 14, 2024. <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/14/indonesia-2024-elections-indonesians-are-electing-jokowis-successor.html>.

⁹ Anwar, Dewi F. "Indonesia's Path Between the Reefs." Foreign Affairs. Last modified February 13, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/indonesia/indonesias-path-between-reefs>.

¹⁰ Anwar, Dewi F. "Indonesia's Path Between the Reefs." Foreign Affairs. Last modified February 13, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/indonesia/indonesias-path-between-reefs>.

the United States and China, and resolving territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, they hold distinct perspectives on the methods to achieve these goals.

This can be clearly illustrated in the debate of the presidential candidates on Indonesia's strategies for the South China Sea, and each of the three participants presented distinct perspectives on this significant security concern involving China.¹¹ Ganjar Pranowo recommended that Indonesia should adopt temporary measures in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to uphold peace and security. Anies Baswedan advocated for a unified approach within the ASEAN region. On the other hand, Prabowo Subianto emphasized the importance of bolstering Indonesia's maritime defense capabilities specifically in the North Natuna Sea. From here, it seems that Ganjar Pranowo's approach to all foreign relations is the closest to the current Indonesian President Jokowi who had affirmed Indonesia's stance on the universality of UNCLOS during the discussion with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr on the South China Sea.¹² Furthermore, one of the edges that Ganjar Pranowo has is experience. With an extensive military background dating back to the 1970s and having held the position of Jokowi's defence minister for the previous five years, Ganjar Pranowo possesses significant experience in defence and foreign policy matters.¹³

Conclusion

At the end of the day, it is important to note that regardless of which president will come to the office, Jakarta will definitely remain robust and neutral due to its country's interest, economic benefits, security ties, and great sense of autonomy in which they have been doing so for the past years. Indonesia will remain to play an important role in ASEAN, in Global South and Global North relations, and the US-China rivalry. Despite the criticism from many stakeholders for the

¹¹ "Assessing Indonesia's Potential Presidents' South China Sea Strategies." East Asia Forum. Last modified February 12, 2024. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/13/assessing-indonesias-potential-presidents-south-china-sea-strategies/>.

¹² "Hanoi, Jakarta Discuss South China Sea During Indonesian President's Visit." Radio Free Asia. Last modified January 12, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/jokowi-vietnam-01122024054252.html>.

¹³ Dominguez, Gabriel. "How Could Indonesia's Presidential Vote Affect Foreign Relations?" The Japan Times. Last modified February 13, 2024. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/02/12/asia-pacific/politics/indonesia-election-foreign-relations/>.

2024 election, Indonesia is showing progress toward democracy allowing and giving people's voice to choose their president through elections, and a possible runoff election in June.

Cheng Ousa is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

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