



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Indonesia under Prabowo—promises, protests, and power

Description: A year into his presidency, Prabowo Subianto stands at a pivotal moment in Indonesia's political journey. Elected on promises of both continuity and change, his government has faced unrest in the streets, the dismissal of a long-serving finance minister, and questions over the strength of Indonesia's democratic institutions. At the same time, Jakarta's growing engagement with BRICS and its delicate balancing act between China and the United States are reshaping its global outlook. So, what does Prabowo's first year reveal about Indonesia's political direction? How resilient is its democracy under his leadership? And what kind of regional and global power is Indonesia seeking to become? Prof Tim Lindsey from Melbourne Law School and Dr Ian Wilson from Murdoch University join host Sami Shah to assess Prabowo's first year in office, and its implications for Indonesia's domestic politics and foreign policy. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Sami Shah:

Hello, I'm Sami Shah and this is Ear to Asia.

Ian Wilson:

The inherent instability of the Trump administration has seen Prabowo pivot quite strongly towards China and Russia. And in some respects, you know, I think politically may feel more at home there in terms of more broadly authoritarian systems. He's often spoken very glowingly of China's success.

Tim Lindsey:

Interestingly, it plays into a wider approach that Prabowo has taken - the sort of re-securitization of Indonesian public life. I think the fear that everybody has is a returning to the Sarto's New Order dual function defense model, whereby the Army was a key partner in government. That hasn't happened, but the way forward is much clearer and is legally legitimized.

Sami Shah:

In this episode. Indonesia under Prabowo - Promises, Protests and Power. Air Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

A year into his presidency, and Prabowo Subianto stands at a pivotal moment in Indonesia's political journey, elected on a promise of both continuity and change. He pledged bold growth targets and ambitious social programmes, all while signalling a steady hand after the Jakowi years. But how much of that vision has translated into reality? Budget cuts have reshaped ministries. Protests and unrest have

shaken the streets. A long serving finance minister has been dismissed, and questions linger about whether Prabowo is reinforcing Indonesia's democratic institutions or quietly reviving old habits of military and elite dominance. At the same time, Indonesia's foreign policy is evolving. Membership in BRICS places Jakarta more firmly on the global stage, while trade tensions with Washington and a shifting balance in Asia test its long standing strategy of multi-alignment. And as the world's fourth most populous country weighs its place in a post US dominated order, Prabowo's choices will shape not only his legacy but Indonesia's role in global governance. So what does the first year of this new presidency reveal about Indonesia's political direction? How resilient is its democracy under Prabowo's leadership? And what kind of regional and global power is Indonesia positioning itself to become? For comment, we're joined by regular Ear to Asia guests Professor Tim Lindsey, the Malcolm Smith Professor of Asian Law and director of the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society at the Melbourne Law School, and doctor Ian Wilson, a political sociologist of Indonesia and a senior lecturer at the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Murdoch University. Welcome back, Tim and Ian.

Tim Lindsey:

Thanks, Sami.

Ian Wilson:

Thanks, Sami. Happy to be back.

Sami Shah:

Let's give it a bit of a broad brush first. About a year has gone by since Prabowo Subianto assumed the presidency. Is he already making his mark on Indonesia? Ian, let's start with you.

Ian Wilson:

Well, the short answer would be yes, though perhaps not in the way he may have hoped. It's been a tumultuous first year. We've had significant protests. There's been the most recent ones, but there were ones earlier in the year as well. His promise to deliver, you know, a highly ambitious 8% growth, has been faltering somewhat. And the protests in many respects were underpinned by, a young population, who just aren't finding, decent paid jobs, against a high, cost of living. At the same time, he's been trying to consolidate his massive coalition of everybody, which has meant divvying out positions. He increased the size of government significantly, in part to capture, you know, this broad coalition. And many have argued that this has made it from the start, quite unwieldy, and quite ineffective, in terms of delivering on some of the big signature policies, that, that he campaigned on in, in particular, his nutritious meals, program, which is meant to deliver daily nutritious meals to school aged children throughout the country. That's been fraught with a whole range of difficulties. Most recently, you know, large numbers of poisonings. There was up to 7000 children, who've had food poisoning, as a result of food. So he's had a lot of challenges on the domestic front, and been very keen to consolidate some public legitimacy. But a lot of these issues, I think, have made that quite difficult for him to date.

Sami Shah:

Tim, what shift, if any, are we seeing away from the previous Jokowi era of policy and politics?

Tim Lindsey:

Yes. Look, it was really important at the start of Prabowo's election campaign to secure Jokowi's huge block of voters. Jokowi, the previous president. That's less important to him now, having won the election by parachuting in Jokowi's son Gibran Rakabuming as his vice presidential candidate. And while he therefore promised to continue Jokowi's policies, we've seen him now clearly moving away from a commitment to those policies. Jokowi was focused on huge infrastructure projects, including, of course, the national capital, a focus on an appearance, at least of investor friendly policies. Pretty cautious economic policy, limited but strategic subsidies and services for the poor. And what we're seeing now under Prabowo is, of

course, a move away from the national capital, which is increasingly looking abandoned in the forests of Borneo. We could say a bit more about that later, if you like. And, instead, expensive populist policies, the free meals program that Ian's just mentioned, food estates being set up with military involvement to try and provide food supplies and so forth. But also, controversially, a massive new sovereign wealth fund called Danantara, which is actually a consolidation of state owned enterprises pretty much directly under the president's authority, with figures from the inner circle in prominent leadership positions. In fact, what this does is take huge slabs out of the state budget, put it off record, if you like, and directly under the president's control. This has obvious potential to create a major slush fund or opportunities for elite corruption and patronage, or at the very least, to significantly reduce transparency and accountability of state expenditure. And I think what's happened with the Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani, the former Minister of Finance, is a good example of this drift away from Jokowi's platforms. She, of course, was a long serving, pretty much rusted-on finance minister. Her record is actually pretty amazing. She was finance minister under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from 2005 to 2010, then a managing director of the World Bank, and then back again as finance minister for the whole of Jokowi's ten years, and then still there with Prabowo. From last year until the 8th of September, she was the first finance minister to serve under three presidents. And this made her a really important sign of continuity because she was internationally respected as a prudent, cautious technocrat. The stock market loved her, but she had openly criticized Prabowo's populist policies while Jokowi was still in office, and many believe Sri Mulyani was not keen to be part of Prabowo's populist agenda as it would force her to front policy she didn't believe in. But she was obviously put under massive pressure to stay in the job, and she did. And this meant that her home was targeted in the recent riots because she'd become the face of policies that many think she didn't agree with, but which she was obliged to front. And those policies, as Ian said, have been creating huge hardship for many because funding these projects, such as the Free meals and Danantara the wealth fund and so on, have resulted in huge cuts to education, health and other services that are biting very hard at the declining middle class and the growing poor. So she became a target, aggravated by her self-evidently correct statements that a higher tax revenue levels were required. Indonesia is one of the lowest levels of tax compliance in Asia, just around 10%. So her house was sacked in the riots, and it looks as if Prabowo took the opportunity to scapegoat her and sack her, replacing her with another minister, Purbaya. So I think that stands as a symbol of how Prabowo's populist agenda is taking over policy-making in the government and detaching it from the platforms and approach of Jokowi that he was meant to be continuing.

Sami Shah:

So she's a perfect example, then, of the next question that I was going to ask, which is what's remained the same? You know, Prabowo's campaign's platform was one of continuity as well. What has remained continuous?

Tim Lindsey:

Well, I think one of the key aspects of Jokowi's management of power was the creation, again, as Ian said of a huge coalition that allowed Jokowi, the previous president, to dominate the legislature. Now, what Prabowo has done is taken that to the next level. So he has an almost complete, completely dominant coalition, a super coalition now, which means there's almost no opposition in the legislature any longer. Theoretically, one of the largest parties, Megawati's PDIP, is not in the coalition, but it has publicly stated that it will support the government's policies. So it's hardly an opposition either. I think we can say that Megawati's PDIP, whilst not in the coalition, is a de facto member of it, and so that means there is no real opposition and indeed no real discussion about policy in the legislature. With that over 100 member cabinet, about half of them ministers and half of them vice ministers, the real issues are just intra elite squabbles about who gets access to which particular set of resources, rather than debates about policy. So that's continued, but up to the next level.

Sami Shah:

Ian, what challenges does Prabowo face then in putting forward his agenda other than the reaction from the public?

Ian Wilson:

Yeah, well, I mean, the big populist policies and again, the nutritious meals program is probably the best example to use, requires, you know, a degree of, of logistics that requires, you know, a high level of competency at all different levels of government to deliver the program effectively. And that's going to be a challenge when he has an approach towards governing, which is about keeping everyone inside the tent. And it's probably worth maybe briefly just revisiting sort of Prabowo's political vision in the context of discussions of continuity with Jokowi is that Prabowo has a very, conservative, within the context of Indonesian political thought, view of Indonesia's democracy. He's openly hostile to the idea of, of liberal democracy, of oppositional forms of democracy, and really has what, what many have referred to as an integralist view that everything, that the state is an organic whole, and the interests of different of states and groups are inseparable. Now, when it comes to the practicalities of ruling, this approach, ideological approach has a lot of challenges. Because how do you manage having everyone inside the tent, particularly when everyone wants a piece of the pie? And so issues around corruption and collusion. And there's been a lot of commentaries, certainly a few months ago from business and industry in Indonesia saying that they'd noticed or experienced, you know, an uptick in attempts at extortion, not just by the usual characters such as, you know, gangsters and criminal elements, but also from the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce. There was a very well, a controversial case of video recordings of Indonesian Chamber of Commerce officials basically trying to extort huge amounts of money from foreign investors. So to return to your question, the problem that he has is of managing this huge, unruly tent in which he wants to include everyone because he doesn't want opposition. And there's two ways you can approach that. One is you co-opt everyone, and that's his preferred model. And the second is that when those are going to be recalcitrant outside, they may be criminalized or dealt with in other kinds of ways. But when it comes to the functionality and the practicalities of ruling and governing and delivering on promises, I think this approach to governance, you've seen this clash between this ideological view that he has, and it's very one that kind of crystallized during the New Order, he brings in as some have have mentioned, a 1990s view of how to govern Indonesia. But of course, it's 2025 now. And I think that's creating a lot of significant challenges and is likely to do so going forward as well.

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah. And just on that, you know, I mean, it's his political party, Gerindra still has on its website as its number one objective being to return to the original 1945 Constitution, which is the version of the Constitution before the democratising amendments were introduced between 1999 and 2002. And Prabowo has spoken openly about that being desirable. So his party platform and his own position is they need to return to the pre-democratic system. Now, whether he'll be able to do that or not is another question altogether, but it's still there as an objective.

Sami Shah:

Tim's previously mentioned the budget cuts to government ministries that the new administration has implemented, shifting funds to populist programs, what has been the impact so far then on the government itself and governance? Tim.

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah, look, one of Prabowo's key election promises was 8% GDP growth. Indonesia has been bumping along between 5% and 6% despite its own best efforts. In fact, it's stuck there. And most economists said from the start there's almost no chance of 8% being achieved. And actually, if anything, it's now likely the growth may slide from where it was under Jokowi. Far from reaching 8%, this is because the huge cost of the school meals program has led to 8.5% cuts to the budget. Massive cuts presented as efficiency but now looking very much like austerity measures. Another 300 trillion of spending allocations in Jokowi's era have been cut to finance the nutritious meals program and the new sovereign wealth fund. And this is having a

massive impact on the budgets leading to those cuts we described that is making things very difficult for the poor and the shrinking middle class. So this slashing of government services and social welfare programs and a collapse in spending is causing the economy to slowly grind down and with growth falling about 0.8% in a recent quarter. So this is creating a really big problem because public services are going to have to be cut further to keep funding Prabowo's signature projects, or something's going to give. This is a huge problem, I think, for the government now.

Sami Shah:

The global press has been awash with stories of nationwide protests and riots in Indonesia, particularly after what took place in Nepal recently. Can you run us down with what have been the consequences of these riots? We know what's behind them at this point. But what's been the outcome of any of them? Tim.

Tim Lindsey:

Look, I don't think there's any doubt that the protests that took place are the result of a genuine outburst of long simmering grievances against the political elite. There were originally protests against the extraordinary decision of legislators to grant themselves enormous housing allowances of around about \$4,700, which is extraordinary when the minimum wage in Jakarta is just \$500 a month. And then when a 21 year old gig economy motorbike taxi driver called Affan Kurniawan, who wasn't involved in the protest, was just near them, was run over and killed by a police vehicle, the protests against the greed of the legislators exploded into major protests, which were driven and guided by a whole range of what you call grassroots organisations, such as motorcycle taxi driver organisations and other groups like that, and then brought in technical college students and other student groups. And the reason why this was so explosive is that symbolism was so stark - a precarious gig economy, gig economy workers struggling to support his family on tiny wages, crushed by an armored vehicle driven over him by the police, who is seen, I think rightly, as corrupt and oppressive agents of the political elite. And that encapsulated these problems, which, as Ian said, have been growing and growing protests under Jokowi, under Prabowo as well. So that led to the explosion. And I think Ian can talk more about what the dynamics of that were. But I think the situation now is that Prabowo, having called protestors, accused protestors of committing treason and subversion and calling on the police to be determined has started a crackdown. There have been thousands arrested and detained and just a bit under a thousand still in detention, including some leaders of NGO groups and activists, law reform activists and others. The question now, I think, is whether that crackdown continues and gets deeper or not. It remains to be seen.

Sami Shah:

Ian, would you like to add anything?

Ian Wilson:

Yeah, sure. I think one of the the interesting things about the most recent protests was that they began, as you know, protests often do in Indonesia. They were led by university student organisations, together with trade unions. But it was the actions of the police, you know, the death of Affan Kurniawan but more generally their repressive response that really was the match that set alight a tinder box of kind of resentments and angers that are felt through, I think, vast swathes of Indonesian society, and particularly young people. Just, you know, going back to the earlier question about continuity and change, you know, the one thing of high continuity from the Jokowi administration into the Prabowo administration is the kind of jobs that have been created. It's four out of five jobs over five or six years now that have been generated, all in the informal sector and also the gig economy. So you have a whole generation of younger people who basically, often with college degrees, with university degrees, who can't find stable employment. And the resentments that are simmering there are immense. So you saw this explosion of anger around the country coming from, you know, gig workers, online taxi drivers, people who occupy city streets, etc., young people who may be unemployed, there were large numbers of high school students, as well. And we see this in the recriminations that have come since that it's sort of I guess a set piece in Indonesia, when there are large demonstrations and some, you know, rioting as there was, though I think

it's important to note that the property destruction was very targeted. It targeted government buildings and it targeted police stations. We didn't see the kind of looting that you've seen, say, in 1998 and people have tried to make some comparisons there. But the government has been very keen to make it clear that there were, you know, there were architects of this, that this. They don't want a narrative that this represented an explosion of a simmering resentment amongst large swathes of the population, particularly young people. And so the arrest really identified a narrative that they want to construct, that there were particular agents who provoked people towards property destruction. And in many of the arrests, for example, have claimed that that these people are incited young people towards violence. So I think you see the government trying to construct a narrative around what happened. In some respects, I think a denial of reality and it's very generational, young people feeling really, aggrieved, feeling that things aren't getting better. And of course, the triggers we're seeing, the ostentatious displays of wealth. One of the reactions to the riots was to say, we have to have no more flexing, flexing being a term that's used for people in power, parliamentarians, etc. flaunting or displaying their wealth on social media, really a kind of a 'let them eat cake' kind of attitude. But yeah, in terms of the recriminations, we see these, these arrests which are trying to construct this idea that the riots, and the large scale upheaval was the result of malicious actors. There's also been a large targeting of anarchist groups, and anarchist networks with anarchism, a sort of set of ideas that's quite popular, actually, particularly among teenagers, and that's something I think that the government is quite unsettled by. But you've also seen the instigation of New Order-ish type responses. We've seen the military call for the establishment of Pam Swakarsa, which are civilian militias, joining in patrols with the police and the military. You saw the Minister of Home Affairs issue a regulation requesting the reinstatement of Posis Kamling which a community based policing sort of outposts or command stations. So a sort of a re-instigating of New Order-type architectures of surveillance and control in response.

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah. And that that plays into, interestingly, it plays into a wider approach that Prabowo has taken, the sort of re-securitization of Indonesian public life. Now, in fact, that really started under Jokowi with amendments to civil service law passed in 2023, which allows active members of the army and police to occupy civilian positions. And then there were further amendments under Prabowo in March this year, which confirmed that civilian posts can be occupied by serving military members, and those laws also expanded the Army's organizational structure with a whole lot of new military commands, almost one for every province doubling or I think more than doubling with 100 new battalions planned, 500 more, a 37% increase for the armed forces. We've also seen former Army buddies, senior military officers, appointed into cabinet, into the powerful Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs, Defence Ministry, an old former buddy, also as a special advisor to the President and so on. So this is I think this is again, continuity from Jokowi's era because Jokowi started this process. But it's increasing and accelerated, and the response to the riots is going to facilitate that. And it's a step back towards reinstating the New Order territorial system under Suharto, by which the army shadowed the civil administration across the country, embedding military personnel and government institutions helped that regime consolidate, control and suppress dissent. Now, we haven't quite got to that stage yet, but we certainly now see a clear pathway through that has legal legitimacy in a formal structure for that to happen. And I think as well as a crackdown on civil society that's already happened and may get more significant I think these riots are going to usher in a pathway towards that re-securitization. And I think the fear that everybody has is of returning to the Suharto New Order dual function model, whereby the Army was a key partner in government. As I said, that hasn't happened, but the way forward is much clearer and is legally legitimized. The last consequence from these riots, it's worth pointing out, is that in January, Prabowo's popularity was just about 80%, according to polls. It's now down to 56%. So there's been a really significant drop in his popularity. Polls, as politicians famously say, come and go, but nonetheless, I think that is a significant indication of 'buyer's regret' from the millennials who played such a key role in electing Prabowo.

Sami Shah:

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Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access. At melbourneasiareview.edu.au, you'll find articles by some of our regular Air Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Air Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by political sociologist Dr Ian Wilson and Asian law professor Tim Lindsay. We're talking about what's going on in Indonesia one year into the presidency of Prabowo Subianto. Ian, Tim has just talked about the military and its role in the civilian government and is expanding, etc. What about the political elites and oligarchs? Are they safe under a Prabowo presidency?

Ian Wilson:

Yeah. Well, again, Prabowo's idea of governing is the integralist idea of having a big tent in which everyone's a part of it. And, you know, to answer your question in relatively succinctly, as long as you're inside the tent, then things are probably going to be fine for you. No one's going to stick their head up as being in opposition to Prabowo. And insofar as, you know, oligarchs and the kind of sources of big capital Indonesia play along with his administration, then they're likely to do quite well. And a lot of the big projects that he's proposed for obvious reasons, a lot of focus is on the nutritious meals program, but there's been another a number of other projects which he signaled interest in, such as the Great Seawall Project, which is building a significant seawall to ostensibly protect Jakarta from rising sea levels and any inundation. This is something that's been signaled as a kind of a feeding frenzy for many of the big property developers and others. So he's had a couple of meetings where he's brought together some of the big oligarchs of Indonesia. Basically, you would assume to make sure that they're all roughly on the same page, and to offer assurances of a kind that as long as they work together, they'll be able to do as they like. When it comes to, you know, political parties we've seen a couple of interesting cases. We had the corruption cases against Tom Lembong, who is a former advisor to Jokowi during the Jokowi administration. And then he later was supportive of the presidential campaign of Anies Baswedan. And then also **Hasto** Kristiyanto who's a senior figure in the PDIP and these were both cases that began under Jokowi and Prabowo, I think a couple of months ago, commuted those cases. He intervened as President to basically end those corruption cases. And this was sort of read in a few different ways. One that he was trying to sort of distance himself from cases that were started during the Jokowi administration. But another was a signaling that as long as you stay on the same page as me, then everything will be fine in the context where the KPK has been seen as being highly weaponized and used as a political instrument to sort of discipline those within political elites who are seen as becoming oppositional or antagonistic to the government. So he's seen as having a slightly different approach, perhaps to Jokowi, but nonetheless using the instruments of state to offer, you know, with both carrot and stick to oligarchs and particularly his big projects, which, of course, are a contractor's and a subcontractor's dream. All the money, the state money, that's there to be divvied out, but politically also offering some carrots, but with the well understood proviso that this is about being part of the team and not being oppositional.

Tim Lindsey:

I'd just add a couple of points to that. I completely agree with that. And I think the law enforcement apparatus, prosecutors, police and anti-corruption commission, the KPK, were weaponized by Jokowi, still weaponized under Prabowo, and are no longer independent and can be used by whoever the power holder is to pick off critics and enemies within the government. Because basically everyone is vulnerable to corruption charges. It's not whether someone's corrupt, it's whether they're chosen as a target. And that is a powerful weapon for the President to wield. The other one is that in the background, you have this growing tension between Jokowi and Prabowo. Jokowi, who is a master strategist but limited by two terms and can't be President. And he hoped to maintain his influence under Prabowo by parachuting his son Gibran Rakabuming into the vice presidency. But it's becoming increasingly clear that there can't be two suns in the sky. And I think the political elite are riveted by how this background, this subtle background struggle between the former president and the current president will play out. It leads to a lot of instability in the political algorithm, because everything is read in terms of the battle between the two sultans, if you want to put it in a sort of historical analogy. It's not an uncommon struggle in Indonesia. It's also very concerning, I think, for the elites, because you have to remember that Prabowo is 77 and he's not well, he's not a well person. And if he was to die for whatever reason, then Jokowi's son Gibran would

constitutionally step into the presidency. He's a former catering company head. He's accused of being a nepo baby, and by his critics, he's parachuted into his father's old job as mayor of the city of Solo and then into the VP job. He is not respected by the elite. It would be expected that he would be a puppet of his father. So that creates this huge tension, a huge structural flaw in the political arrangements now.

Sami Shah:

Tim, you mentioned this earlier, so let's now get into it a little bit. Jokowi's big initiative was a relocation of the capital from Jakarta to Nusantara in Kalimantan. How has Prabowo handled the ongoing capital relocation project? It seems to be pretty absent from his recent speeches.

Tim Lindsey:

Yes, indeed. I think Nusantara is proving to be the big mess that many observers predicted it would be when Jokowi decided it would be his major signature project. There are big problems. It was meant to be funded through public private partnerships, but investors are very wary. I think there's a widespread cynicism about whether it will ever come to fruition, the way Jokowi intended. So no major foreign investors or sovereign wealth funds have gone near it, not Chinese or Arab investors who've been courted. Jokowi did force some Indonesian oligarchs to put money in in return for licenses and concessions within Indonesia as a quid pro quo deal, but nowhere near enough. Now, Prabowo has heavily cut the budget for Nusantara despite making public commitments to it continuing. He's cut the budget along with the other projects to fund the nutritious meals program. And it's really hard to see how those cuts can ever be made good again, given the slump in growth and the diversion of funds from the budget to Danantara and the meals. And really, the underlying problem about this is there's an obvious pointlessness about the whole Nusantara project. Jakarta is the business and political center of Indonesia. Nusantara is not a solution to Jakarta's dysfunction. Greater Jakarta is about 30 million people. It's one of the most polluted cities in the world. And it is now the fastest sinking city in the world, with some parts going under at about 25cm a year, creating a Canberra in the forests of Borneo for politicians who don't want to be there by taking land from local Indigenous and other communities, even if it was funded and it ever happened. Even if a million or so people moved there, which I doubt, none of that will do anything to resolve Jakarta's huge problems. The sinking, the pollution, the overpopulation, the infrastructure and Nusantara will do nothing to improve life for the 28 or 29 million people who would remain there anyway. And I think this sort of pointlessness is the underlying flaw in the whole project. I think what we're seeing now is Prabowo both by necessity, the budget necessity and probably by his own personal views moving away steadily from the Nusantara project.

Sami Shah:

Ian, how is the new administration handling the US now under Donald Trump? And what's been the Trump effect, if you will, on Indonesia?

Ian Wilson:

Yeah. I think this has made a couple of things perhaps easier for Prabowo in that he's pivoted despite, you know, Indonesia's sort of historical non-alignment approach to foreign policy that it has pivoted quite strongly towards China and to a lesser extent Russia. And we've seen Indonesia join BRICS as an alternative bloc. Trump's tariff initially Indonesia was with 32%, then negotiated to 19%. But I think you know, nonetheless, and this is, of course, isn't exclusive to Indonesia, that the inherent instability of the Trump administration has seen Indonesia look to other partners who look far more reliable, and China in particular. And, of course, there's been a heavy reliance on Chinese investment across the country and often without the same kind of sets of obligations that the US might be seen to have been imposing. So I think, you know, in short, you know, the Trump administration in terms of Prabowo and in theory, they get along fine. But I think the instability there has seen in Prabowo pivot quite strongly towards China and Russia. And in some respects, you know, I think politically may feel more at home there in terms of more broadly authoritarian systems. He's often spoken very glowingly of China's success and also very close to

Russia and to President Putin. So I think that has been seen, whilst non-alignment is still the official status quo in Indonesia, I do think that we've seen a pivot in that way.

Tim Lindsey:

The way in which Indonesia handled the tariff negotiations with Trump says a bit about the way Prabowo's administration operates because Indonesia jumped in quite early into those negotiations, and it made a lot of concessions to win what it thought were favorable terms. And so it actually announced the deal before the tariffs took effect on the 1st of August. They were revealed on the 1st of August. So Indonesia made a whole lot of concessions to the US as part of those negotiations, which it called it a huge win, but it ended up with the same rate as almost all the other states in the region, including ones that didn't negotiate and made no concessions at all. So now it finds itself with the same tariff as other states in the region, but with some really big concessions. Abolishing tariffs for almost all US imports and lifting non-tariff barriers on goods and services, including cell phones, vehicles, critical minerals, and allowing data flow of Indonesian data into the US, which is very controversial and concerning, as well as, you know, committing to all sorts of pictures of big, big budget purchases in agriculture, energy and aircraft. So what that I think shows you is, I mean, I think that was a mishandled negotiation that has gone very badly in the end for Indonesia. And a lot of critics say that shows the sort of lack of experience in the administration and its tendency to rush at things, and make some poor technocratic decisions. Now, with the departure of Sri Mulyani, again, the same sort of message is coming out that this is an inexperienced and unwieldy administration with this vast cabinet, but not making good technocratic decisions.

Sami Shah:

Tim, can we then drill down into whether the newly enlarged BRICS will deliver dividends to Indonesia enough to offset these reduced exports to the US?

Tim Lindsey:

Well, I don't think joining BRICS has got anything to do with economic or trade deals, really. Prabowo was making arrangements like that in any case, as Ian said, China is an easier partner for Prabowo to deal with. And he made China his first visit as president, finalized about \$10 billion in bilateral trade deals, including lithium batteries, solar panels and so on. Jokowi was an inward focused president. Prabowo is different. He likes to be described as a foreign policy president, but actually it's more that he wants to be seen as a global figure strutting the global stage, that's really, I think, what BRICS is about. It's part of the whole thing of Prabowo turning up, trying to negotiate a settlement of the Ukraine-Russia War without success. That was when he was Minister of Defence under Jokowi, or more recently, turning up with the Chinese victory parade in Beijing. That's what he likes to do. It's not really about trade deals that will happen anyway. And Prabowo will keep trying to get investment from China because it's very difficult to get it from anywhere else at the moment, even though that is very unpopular in Indonesia because it involves huge debt commitments and because Chinese infrastructure projects are notorious in Indonesia for really poor conditions for employees. And it feeds into the sort of deep seated, racist views of China in Indonesia. So that's really the big issue rather than the details of trade deals.

Sami Shah:

For all we've discussed up to now, then how popular is Prabowo among ordinary Indonesians? You said his popularity has dropped significantly in percentage numbers, but has public sentiment shifted really that much since the start of his presidency? Are these polls just what polls are? A momentary shift in mood? Ian.

Ian Wilson:

Yeah. Look, I'm in the sort of skeptical camp when it comes to reading too much into polls. They, as you know, as politicians say themselves, they do shift very quickly and they don't necessarily capture the complexities of people's experience or views. I think, you know, the really interesting tension point and the recent upheavals show that is, is a kind of a big demographic divide between a very young population, Indonesia has a huge youth population who are sophisticated they're networked they live online, they're

global in outlook in many respects. And then a president who is increasingly showing that his political vision and his political ideas really come from a past Indonesia. And I think as time goes on, you know, that tension and that I guess disjuncture of a kind will become more pronounced. We've already seen it in the demonstrations. And in some respects, the narrative and response by the government, which, you know, immediately recalls elements of the New Order. But you have a young population who didn't experience that and see the world differently, and I think that's going to be the real challenge, certainly from the government's point of view. How do they manage legitimacy when you have a very young Indonesia, a young population who are experiencing, you know, all these cost of living pressures, things like a university degree are no longer a guarantee of a comfortable middle class or upper middle class life anymore. All of these things have sort of collapsed. And while this current government isn't entirely responsible for that, they are going to have to manage that you know, both in concrete terms, but also in terms of legitimacy. So my sense and it's, it's a sense more than something that I've sort of tried to objectively measure is that, you know, his popularity is dipping quite significantly, and particularly in the places where he really needs to keep it, which is in with younger populations. Part of the pitch when he ran his election campaign and had Gibran as his deputy, and of course, there was the elite machinations of Gibran being a proxy for his father. But part of the pitch was also 'well, look I've got a young person as part of my administration and we're going to really speak to Indonesia's youth. And that that's been a complete disaster so far, and including in how they've responded to the protests, which wasn't where there was an opportunity actually to have a substantive engagement and a listening to people's concerns, but instead a real dismissive, in some cases quite aggressive, dismissal of this as, as, you know, treasonous and verging on terrorism and all these other kinds of securitization that, that Tim mentioned previously and all this is going to do is create a bigger and bigger popularity problem for and legitimacy problem for the president going forward. And making it even harder for them to sell the big signature projects which you know, aren't delivering in the ways that he'd promised.

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah. Look, I, I really strongly agree with what Ian said and the difference between this, the highly sophisticated campaign by which Prabowo and Gibran won that election, where they both were represented as enemy figures on huge electronic billboards, and Prabowo cultivated the cute dancing grandpa image. And Gibran, the cool millennial sort of look, is such a contrast to the administration which emerged, which you'd have to say is tone deaf that the split between youth and the government is yawning in a way that did not exist under Jokowi. So and, you know, come back he won his campaign on animes and memes. And if you look at the memes now, we've got protesters on Indonesian National Independence Day flying the One Piece, the Japanese anime One Piece, pirate flags below the national flag. This is a sort of, this flag symbol from the anime One Piece is being used by protesters now in the Philippines and Nepal as a way of pushing back against authoritarianism. That was called treason when the demonstrations and riots took place it was described by Prabowo as treason and terrorism. And these are the people who are doing this, are people who have precarious jobs, students, the technical college students whose unemployment rates are among the highest in the country. And then when they ask for legislators allowances to be cut back, the legislators called the protesters, quote, 'the dumbest people in the world' unquote. So, yeah, I think this is a really fundamental problem. And most likely, if it comes to a head again, Prabowo is going to by nature, revert back to the New Order repression approach. And I think that's the big fear.

Sami Shah:

So final question then to you both, Tim, starting with you, with all we've discussed, what do you think will be the key factors in determining whether Prabowo Subianto's presidency is even ultimately seen as a success?

Tim Lindsey:

Look, obviously the economy is going to be critical. He won't get 8%, but whether the holes are created in the budget for the big projects start dragging the economy further down is going to be a massive question because it will determine what the government can do in the future. It will determine what happens with

policies everywhere, but they can't keep cutting without provoking a crisis. I think how far the Army gets to penetrate civil life is an ongoing question that is also likely to go badly. I think what happens with projects like the Nutritious Meals program, the sovereign wealth fund, which is a slush fund in process and with the capital city of Nusantara, will all have impacts. But I think the rivalry between Prabowo and Jokowi is a big one. Prabowo is an old man in his dream job at last, and he's in a big hurry. And the hurry is so fast they're breaking things and Jokowi is taking advantage of that. But I think the really big question is the fate of civil society. And I use that really broadly to mean not just NGOs, but civil society, non-government public debate discourse, the young groups, their online life, which is the key life of the public in Indonesia, how civil society survives. This is the really big question because civil society produces the organisations, the NGOs, the CSOs and others that are really the policy powerhouse of Indonesia. They monitor, they critique, they develop ideas that government relies on. And if that it's already chilled and if that becomes inactive, then I think Indonesia has a really major problem.

Sami Shah:

Ian, anything to add?

Ian Wilson:

I broadly agree with everything Tim said there and would just maybe just further emphasize you know, this tension point with civil society, which as I mentioned before, I think there's a huge generational dimension to it with a very young Indonesia versus a sort of a much older or aging President and just conflicting worldviews and conflicting assumptions. And if Prabowo, you know, increasingly defaults to, you know, his crystallized political ideas and, and I guess his political reflexes, which are very much formed during the New Order, that's just going to generate more and more anomie and resentment within this younger population. You're seeing it now with the responses to the riots, where, you know, it was really a bit of a political litmus test. He had an opportunity to reach out and be much more reconciliatory and take on board, in some cases, some very, quite well articulated, suggestions for how to address people's concerns. But he didn't do that. And I think that really has set the tone going forward. So this is going to be difficult. But certainly if his administration, if they're concerned with remaining popular and not defaulting more and more to authoritarian measures, but for the Indonesian population themselves, particularly young Indonesians, I think it's going to be a real challenge in how they negotiate this government that is looking more and more out of touch with their genuine concerns and their genuine needs going forward.

Sami Shah:

Our guests have been Professor Tim Lindsay, Malcolm Smith Professor of Asian Law and Director of the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society at the Melbourne Law School, and Dr Ian Wilson, political sociologist and senior lecturer at the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Murdoch University. Thank you both.

Tim Lindsey:

Thanks, Sami.

Ian Wilson:

Thanks, Sami.

Sami Shah:

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