

Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

R. Mathieson: In 2014 Jokowi was the outside and the anti-establishment candidate, and that really helped carry him over the line. This time around, Jokowi has to campaign on his record, he is now part of the establishment.

Haslinda Amin: Former general Prabowo Subianto, we enter the race in Indonesia, which would be a rerun of the 2014 race won by Joko Widodo. Prabowo has boosted his ammunition to win this time around.

Vedi Hadiz: To be crude about it, if you're thinking that either Prabowo or Jokowi is interested in a sort of fundamental reorganization in the direction of a liberal democracy, or in the direction of social justice, or even a pure market economy, then wake up from that dream.

Ali Moore: Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne. In Ear to Asia we talk with Asia researchers to unpack the issues behind the news headlines, in a region that is rapidly changing the world. In his 2014 meeting with the then newly elected president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, US president Barack Obama proclaimed that as one of the world's largest democracies, and also as one of the world's largest Islamic populations, Indonesia has played an extraordinary role in promoting pluralism and respect for religious diversity. Joko Widodo, or Jokowi, as he's called by many, was the first to win Indonesia's highest office, and not come from the country's military or political elite.

Jokowi himself joined Obama in proclaiming, 'a cause for democratic celebration in our country. And it shows that Islam and democracy can go forward.' Just two years later, in 2016, two hundred thousand Indonesian Muslims could be seen protesting in the streets of Jakarta, clamoring for the capital city's governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly referred to as Ahok, to be prosecuted for blasphemy against Islam. The next year, Ahok, who notably is Christian and of Chinese ethnic background, was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, which has the world's largest Muslim population, is now entering an extended season of political polls, with important elections slated for mid-2018 and early 2019. So in a rising tide of Islamic populism, can democracy and pluralism coexist in Indonesia? Will freedom of speech have to be curtailed, as some argue, in order for minorities to be protected? And what influence will the country's entrenched oligarchic class, a legacy of decades of Soeharto's nationalist New Order rule, likely exert at the polls?

In this episode of Ear to Asia, Indonesia politics specialists Prof Vedi Hadiz and Dr Dave McRae, untangle the many strands of Indonesian political life, and give us a glimpse into how the tension between democracy and pluralism in Indonesia may play out. Professor Vedi Hadiz and Dr Dave McRae, welcome to Ear to Asia.

Vedi Hadiz: Thank you.

Dave McRae: Thanks.

Ali Moore: I mentioned the words of former president Obama in 2014 in the introduction. But if you go back even further to 2010, Obama was hailing Indonesia as an example of how a developing nation can embrace democracy and diversity. If we fast forward to 2018, and just ahead of this slew of elections, Dave, the picture is not nearly so clear, is it?

Dave McRae: No. I think, in fact, Indonesia has never been the absolute liberal democracy that the effusive praise of foreign politicians like Obama, or various Australian prime ministers, have made it out to be. And nor has it been as, I guess, poor as prevailing public opinion outside the country would hold it to be, still dominated by the military and with very influential hard-line Islamic constituency there. It's been somewhere in the middle. You've had a fundamental transformation of its political system after the end of authoritarian rule.

But because a lot of the political and business class carried over into the democratic era, as time's gone by, you've had real efforts to wind that back. I think, over time we've seen public opinion as a real check on regression in Indonesia's quality of democracy. But just in the last couple of years, obviously in Jakarta, we've seen this massive mobilization, essentially on the basis that a non-Muslim should not be governor in Jakarta. So the role of public opinion has become a lot more complicated since.

Ali Moore: So, Vedi, would you agree? It seems very much, it's a work in progress.

Vedi Hadiz: Well, the statements by Obama and various politicians in Australia and/or Indonesia, make for very nice soundbites. But the situation was always much more complex than that. And any analyst of Indonesia I think would have told you that. My own view is that Indonesia has progressed. It is no longer an authoritarian country, and it has an established democracy. But it is a democracy that is highly flawed. It is a democracy that is corrupt. It is run by money politics. And by and large, it is still controlled by interests that had been nurtured under the authoritarian New Order, who have now reinvented themselves as democrats.

Ali Moore: Is it also a democracy that's going backwards?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, I would concur with Dave that there was a period in which liberalization was occurring in some respects. In that, you had freedom to organize, whereas you didn't have that before. You had much more freedom of the press, which you didn't have before. Freedom of assembly, the right to strike, all of these things were advances to the situation under the Soeharto period. But I think it goes back actually quite a few years, a kind of development whereby many of the hard won, but still actually quite limited, advances of the early Reformasi period are being pushed back. And we see this primarily I think in the expression of hard-line Islamic conservative values being mainstreamed as well into politics.

We didn't have that before. They used to be at the fringes, now they're more mainstream. And now you also see people who still casts themselves as democrats, yet making appeals to the same sort of political symbols that the New Order had appealed to, to underpin its authoritarian rule. So, yes, definitely a regression.

Ali Moore: Dave, when did we start to see this? When did these chips in the democratic fabric, if you like, make themselves known? Do you go back to the 2014 presidential poll, or do you go back even further?

Dave McRae: I think it goes back a lot further than that. Essentially the major structural changes to Indonesia's political system had finished by around 2004, the time that Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was first elected as president, and then was in power for a decade. It was really around the start of his second term, 2009, 2010, that I think scholars started to talk about stagnation, regression. And now, as Vedi, myself, and another colleague Rachel Diprose, have brought together a series of articles looking back from the present day vantage point, we see a turn to a more illiberal polity, starting around 2009, 2010, where it started to get very difficult to make progress in areas where reform hadn't happened in those first years of democracy. And in fact, those [inaudible 00:08:09] years foreshadowed, you had increasing efforts to wind back those reforms, and to have non-democratic or illiberal viewpoints mainstreamed within the polity.

Ali Moore: I guess, for the outside world, it was those presidential polls though, in 2014, that really brought it to the fore. Vedi, tell us a little bit about that. Prabowo Subianto, he fought a very hard campaign. In fact, Jokowi only won by something like 6%.

Vedi Hadiz: Yeah. Well, it was an interesting contest. Prabowo was, in spite of his claims of being a political outsider, really the consummate insider. He was no less than the son-in-law of President Soeharto. And he was a senior general within the Indonesian military. He ran for president 2014, vice-president, 2009. My opinion is that in 1998 he was already eyeing the presidency. So he's got a long history of being a New Order insider. His competitor, Jokowi, Joko Widodo, the president now, looked like the total opposite. He didn't come out of the established New Order networks. He was a provincial politician

and businessman. It seemed like there was this clear choice between the two. In many ways there was. I think, if Prabowo had won, his political project would have been to try to centralize oligarchic rule a lot more, to make it resemble the organization of power that you had during the New Order.

Now with Jokowi, this is a fellow who is actually the main symbol of the decentralized ... corruption-ridden still, money-politics driven democracy, which still allowed for people who were in the relative outside to come in. So for somebody like Jokowi, maintaining the system the way it is, decentralized, diffused, and all that, is actually in his interest. So we had that competition between somebody who wanted to actually revert back to some of the features of the old New Order, and somebody who really symbolized an interest in keeping the status quo as it is now.

Keep in mind though that even Jokowi is not somebody who just dropped from the sky. Even when he was mayor of Solo, before he became governor of Jakarta ... which was where he launched his national political standing, he was already very good at making deals with elite interests in oligarchic forces, and so on. And without those sorts of things, it would have been impossible for him to be where he is now.

Ali Moore: Good in making deals, but still of course, he won that poll. But then you fast forward a little, and you have the case of the Jakarta governor Ahok, who, of course, took over from Jokowi when he became president. And when he went for reelection, as we said in the introduction, he entered that poll with a 76% approval rating, and he lost dramatically. Dave, what happened there, and what forces were at work? And Ahok was a friend of Jokowi.

Dave McRae: Yeah. I guess a pattern we've seen emerge over the course of the Jokowi government, is that when the political cost of a person or a policy becomes too high to Jokowi, he simply jettison them. I think, ultimately that is what happened in the case of Ahok. Just before the election campaign ramped up, he was giving a speech to a group of civil servants in the Thousand Islands, just north of Jakarta. Where basically he said, don't worry if you don't vote for me, because you've been deceived by people using this Koranic verse Al-Maidah 51, and you feel you go to hell if you vote for me. That's fine. The programs I'm running here will still continue. A doctored version of that video was circulated, where the words 'used' were omitted.

So it became, 'if' you've been deceived by this Koranic verse. And that, I think, gave the opportunity for the opponents of Ahok to really mobilize a very large popular mobilization against him. Bringing together fears about having a non-Muslim as governor, fears about having a Chinese Indonesian as governor, given the prejudice there. And it also gave the opportunity to a really wide range of political interests that were opposed to the government, or wanted a greater role in it, to either sit on their

hands and do nothing, to head off this protest movement, or to fully support it. And it got to the point, once Ahok was then prosecuted for blasphemy, that, I think, he became a political liability, rather than an asset to the government, so they allowed that prosecution to proceed.

And since, they've made a lot of moves to embrace a more publicly Islamic image. So it's not like everyone abandoned Ahok. You said he had that 76% approval rating. The other survey figure that people are now digging into is, how many people said before the poll that they didn't think a non-Muslim should be governor? But in the final analysis, even though he'd been prosecuted for blasphemy, Ahok still garnered just over 40% of the votes. So this was something that polarized Jakarta, rather than turn the entirety of the population against him.

Ali Moore: Had we ever seen before in Indonesia, this use of religious and ethnic appeals, to so comprehensively delegitimize a candidate? Was it the first time?

Dave McRae: I can say, the interesting thing is, these sorts of campaigns have been used in elections before. The Prabowo camp ran a smear campaign against Jokowi in 2014, claiming he wasn't really a Muslim, that his father was a Chinese Indonesian. Ahok himself was Jokowi's running mate, and just before that statement to the group of civil servants, had faced a racist attack, and an attack on religious grounds. But it really hadn't had the same resonance. This was the first time that you saw this massive popular reaction.

Vedi Hadiz: And also that the mobilization took place at the scale that it did, and also that it was systematic and targeted very, very carefully. I think that's the difference between the previous occasions that these sorts of things had occurred. Basically, what Ahok did was, he shot himself in the foot. He gave a pretext for people to develop a narrative against him that was very powerful. And there were many levels of that narrative. One was, of course, he's Chinese, and he's a Christian. And in the historical memory of Indonesia Chinese Christians were privileged by the Dutch colonialists.

So there is the sense that they had it good during the colonial era, and therefore those privileges, what they built on, to have the better level of material prosperity that the minority Chinese still enjoy in Indonesia. So there's that sort of animosity there.

Ali Moore: But do you think it was as much about race as it was about religion?

Vedi Hadiz: I think those two things actually connect with each other.

Ali Moore: Dave, do you agree with this multi-layered view? The race, the religious, and the socioeconomic. And if I can just ask you also about the race, this issue with China. Because China is also Indonesia's biggest trading partner. A lot of the Indonesian

oligarchs make their fortune dealing with China. A lot actually have Chinese heritage. I would have thought that playing the race card is exceptionally difficult in a place like Indonesia.

Dave McRae: Yeah. You don't see most of the respected or mainstream politicians speaking about race, speaking about the Chinese directly. That isn't respectable. But what they do have is people who play more of an attack dog role, who will say those things directly. They can avoid stepping in, and contradicting racist statements that are made. And it's also because of this long-standing imagining of race, in Indonesia it's easy to allude to it, without being quite as vulgar as making statements directly against Chinese Indonesians.

One clear example was the eventual winner of that Jakarta gubernatorial poll, Anies Baswedan ... who was previously rector of a pluralist Islamic university in Jakarta, in his inauguration speech said, it's time for pribumi, the sons of the soil, to be masters of their own house. And for any Indonesian listener, that is a clear allusion to the situation that Vedi referred to earlier, where in colonial times Chinese Indonesians had this privileged place. So that's a way for him to keep race front and center, without being 100% explicit about it.

Ali Moore: And the layering, so you have the race, you have the religious, and the socioeconomic. How important is that?

Dave McRae: I think basically what you saw in this opposition movement to Ahok, it became so large because it did bring all these strands together. I'm not sure we understand exactly how they fit together. And I'm sure this is something that political operatives in Indonesia are puzzling over too. As many of them think of, how come we deploy this same mix in some of the future polls that will happen? But it was certainly a circumstance where his statement in the Thousand Islands became a lightning rod for those anxieties and prejudices. And gave groups like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, who felt that Jokowi had only gone to them in a crisis ... these are the two largest Islamic organizations in the country, the chance to withhold explicit criticism of the movement against Ahok, until they could negotiate better access to the regime.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Indonesian politics researchers Prof Vedi Hadiz and Dr Dave McRae. As Indonesia prepares for important elections, we're talking about whether pluralism can survive the democratic process in Indonesia, in an age of increasing Islamic populism. Vedi, if I can ask about Jokowi's response to all of this, particularly in an election year, and heading into a presidential election year. How worried is he about Islamic populism?

Vedi Hadiz: I think he has reason to worry, that some of the things that were deployed against Ahok could be deployed against him. But frankly, I don't think he's as easy a target as Ahok is. I mean, Ahok was a Chinese Christian. Jokowi may not have a lot of religious credentials, but he comes from a particular kind of tradition that is well established in Indonesia, and that is a sort of Javanese syncretic tradition, which a lot of people can identify with. So they can say that he's not a proper Muslim. They can make allusions to his background, maybe he had a Chinese ancestor, or whatever. But it won't work as well as against Ahok.

Ali Moore: But at the same time, he has less institutional support than previous presidents. He's not a former general. He's not the head of his own party.

Vedi Hadiz: I think the way that he's mainly dealt with this is two-pronged. One, he has tried to ingratiate himself, especially to the Nahdlatul Ulama. Because they tend to be more accommodating of syncretic traditions, and are less sort of purifying in their brand of Islam. So by getting support from the Nahdlatul Ulama, the expectation is that, if the Nahdlatul Ulama can actually influence its constituency, large numbers of Muslims would still go for him, because of the exhortations of NU leaders. The second part of the response has been to strengthen appeals to nationalist symbols. So to basically imply that Islamic expressions of politics can be anti-nationalist, because they are sectarian. So he's really upped the anti, in terms of getting people to adhere to the idea of the unitary Indonesian state, the state ideology of Pancasila.

And he has done this in a way, as to diminish the legitimacy of the Islamic oriented criticism that's been deployed against him. So in a way he's used nationalist symbols as a way to diminish the impact of the Islamic symbolism. Now, the other thing that he has going for him is this actually, the camp that is around him has more money than the camp around Prabowo. And this is partly because a lot of the Chinese tycoons would be uncomfortable with the rhetoric that is coming out from parts of the other camp. So just by having a lot more of a material base to fund his campaign hands-on, he has an advantage. But then again, the other camp then go, see, we're the poor Muslims. And these guys, who have the money, they're trying to run rough shod over us.

Ali Moore: I'll come back to the influence of the oligarchs in a minute. David, can I ask you about that? Because it seems that the response from Jokowi in many ways simply reinforces this growing conservatism, that is also coming from the Islamic side.

Dave McRae: Yeah. What we haven't seen either in 2014, or in this lead-in to 2019, is any attempt from Jokowi to refute these attacks on first principles, if indeed that would be possible. When he was criticized as insufficiently Muslim in 2014, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in the period between the end of the campaign and election date, to underline those credentials. Where he's been attacked as a communist, leading into this campaign,

he hasn't said, it's ridiculous to say that people are communists. He said, it's ridiculous to say that I'm a communist, because I was born only just before the mass killings of people accused as communists in 1965, '66. So he's more sought to insulate himself from those attacks, rather than take them on head on. And certainly that allows those attacks to gain greater credence. But it's not necessarily as simple as that.

Part of Jokowi's appeal at the beginning was still that, although the effect may be status quo, he promised a new style of politics. He had a very loosely organized campaign that allowed a lot of civil society figures and academics to have a say in the sorts of things that he was saying during the campaign, even if a good number of those haven't happened over the course of his government. So he still needs to make a calculation, that he needs to still present an image that will retain that constituency, while insulating himself against those attacks on Islamic or nationalist grounds. I think it's a good point that he has made about the position of Chinese tycoons.

We can broaden that out to the population at large. That exit polling after that 2014 election, where you did have those attacks on Islamic and racial grounds, showed that Muslims by and large, were split between the Jokowi and Prabowo camps. Whereas non-Muslims were much more likely to vote for Jokowi. And that is the risk in these sorts of hard-line Islamic attacks against him. It's a head-to-head race. That if you drive enough of those non-Muslims into his camp, he'll win regardless.

Ali Moore: But is the end result overall a less liberal Indonesia with less personal freedoms? I think of the LGBTI community as just one example. But is that illustrative of what's happening in broader society?

Dave McRae: These things are not automatic. A lot depends on what issues come to public prominence, and what's stance the government takes on them. And Jokowi has not proved a president who has shown a strong personal attachment to liberal values. He's not someone who's been willing to take political risks in defense of those minority constituencies. Even though he's been nominated by a party that actually has probably the best track record among Indonesian political parties of representing minorities. So because he's been so pragmatic, yes, it does have that effect that these attacks have grown in frequency and amplitude, and you don't really have a strong voice in the government really standing against them.

Vedi Hadiz: I think, in a nutshell, the combination of appeals to conservative Islamic morality, and appeals to hyper-nationalist political symbolism, results in a much more highly politically illiberal political situation.

Ali Moore: But the question then becomes, what does that mean at the ballot box? Because, of course, we've had examples in Jakarta, but Indonesia is an archipelago of more than 17

thousand islands. It's also a very young population. The median age is under 30. What happens when everyone goes to vote? Do we have any sense of how these changes are going to manifest themselves?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, one year is a long time in Indonesian politics.

Ali Moore: It's a long time in Australian politics, I might say.

Vedi Hadiz: One year before he lost the Jakarta election, Ahok was considered to be almost unassailable. So we still have a long way to go. I think that we might try to see some clues from the regional elections that are happening this year, whether in key areas, or areas vulnerable to racial and religious provocation, these sorts of strategies are being deployed. If we see that this sort of thing is occurring systematically, at a significant level, and if they're successful, then we might think that next year a lot of this will take place again.

Ali Moore: Dave, what do you think? I mean how do you think this will manifest itself at the ballot box? And particularly if you're looking at a more illiberal society, how young voters are going to view that.

Dave McRae: I agree with what Vedi said, we'll start to getting clues to this in these elections for mayors and governors across Indonesia in June. On the other hand, I do think Jokowi is in a strong position. He's a popular incumbent. The political system is set up in a way that it's very hard for there to be more than one challenger to him. And the person that people would have assumed would be that challenger, Prabowo Subianto, is prevaricating about whether he'll run, which has to be an indication that he is not confident that he can beat Jokowi. So something significant has to happen, I think, to derail Jokowi's bid for reelection. These attacks have to prove, perhaps more effective against Jokowi than we're imagining. Maybe he makes an unwise choice of running mate, or a political scandal derails his candidacy. But at the moment I really do think he's in a strong position.

Vedi Hadiz: And another thing that would be required is to maintain the momentum that was established in late 2016, 2017. I mean the Sukmawati issue ... this is one of Soekarno's daughters, made a reference that offended some Muslims a few weeks ago. And there was a small rally against her. For me this is an attempt to just test the waters, can we still mobilize people? And let's see if, within the next year, these sorts of little test cases occur again. Because that will also give us some clues, I think, as to whether they will be using these sorts of strategies again in 2019.

Ali Moore: And the oligarchs, where do they stand?

Vedi Hadiz: Now, in terms of the oligarchs, frankly, I think that what we're seeing in Indonesia. In the end ... and I'm not sure whether Dave agrees with me on this point, but for me it's a fundamental point. It is not a conflict in Indonesia between democracy and anti-democracy. It's not a conflict between liberalism and anti-liberalism. It is not a conflict between nationalism and Islam. Definitely not the latter. It is basically a conflict between different factions of the oligarchy. And these different factions of the oligarchy are mobilizing different kinds of cultural resource pools-

Ali Moore: So it doesn't matter who wins, the oligarchs still rule?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, to be crude about it, whether Prabowo wins or Jokowi wins, we're not gonna see a fundamental reorganization of economic and political power in Indonesia. We might see more authoritarianism under Prabowo. We might see more accommodation of Chinese business under Jokowi. These sorts of things can happen. But if you're thinking that either of them is interested in a fundamental reorganization of economic and political power, in the direction of a liberal democracy, or in the direction of social justice, or even a pure market economy, then I think you wake up from that dream.

Ali Moore: Dave, are you on board with this?

Dave McRae: I think the factor that you have to add to that mix though is elections. It hasn't been the case in Indonesia that the camp with the most money simply wins. These issues of reform, perhaps not literalism, still do have a resonance. And I guess this is still a check on the power of the oligarch within the political system, that appeals to themes that have resonance in the public are still important. Because you still need to win elections. And so regardless of where your powerful politico business figure sits, as Vedi has alluded to, the reality is, they're likely to be present in any camp that is running. You still need to run a viable campaign.

Vedi Hadiz: And this is why you have to have a political language that resonates with people, and can actually help them to make sense of their predicament, and provide them with a way of thinking, of responding. And this is what Islamic conservatism has done. Without the language of political liberalism, social democracy, and these sorts of traditions, Islamic conservatism has played that role. And for some people nationalism also can potentially play that role.

Ali Moore: I think the overwhelming point, as you made it, a year is a long time in politics, and there are so many known unknowns and unknown unknowns. If I can thank very much Vedi Hadiz and Dave McRae, for your insights. Thank you very much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Vedi Hadiz: Thank you.

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Dave McRae: Thanks.

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