



## Ear to Asia podcast

**Title:** Indonesia's evolving post-pandemic political landscape

**Description:** Despite being well into his final term as Indonesia's president, Joko Widodo continues his coalition building, and retains the backing of political and business elites. And, while critics point to poor pandemic management and eroding democracy under his watch, Jokowi remains very popular with ordinary Indonesians. So why is Jokowi still actively amassing political capital, and how does his actual agenda compare to the social and political reform he's promised voters? Indonesia watchers Prof Tim Lindsey and Dr Ian Wilson examine Indonesia's current political landscape with host Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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**Voiceover:**

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**Ali Moore:**

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

**Ian Wilson:**

You know there's certainly elements within the administration who are quite happy to push for a rolling back of direct electoral democracy. It would be a difficult argument to make without large levels of social conflict and political conflict, but certainly this is a real political challenge going forward for Indonesia.

**Tim Lindsey:**

The government is increasingly confident in its capacity to withstand widespread protests, and I think it's chilling on civil society. And its crack down on social media probably increases that confidence. It is Indonesia. The situation is always fluid as elite groups negotiate amongst themselves, but there are real possibilities that the deterioration of liberal democracy may well accelerate in the lead up to the 2024 election.

**Ali Moore:**

In this episode, an evolving political landscape in post-pandemic Indonesia. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Indonesia's president, Joko Widodo, is now in his eighth year in power and retains enviable popular support despite apparent missteps in his administration's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and a pandemic-fueled hit to the economy. Meanwhile, Jokowi has kept a tight hold on the political reins, winning the backing of over 80% of parties in Indonesia's House of Representatives; the fruit of the president's continued coalition-building even well into his second term. There's talk of an unprecedented and currently unconstitutional third term for Jokowi, yet critics point to an erosion of democratic institutions, growing muzzling of opposition voices, and even ambitions for a political dynasty.

So what is Jokowi really accomplishing with all this political capital? And how does his actual agenda compare to the broader social and political reform he's promised voters all along? Who are the winners and losers in a post-pandemic Indonesia? And who gets a say in an atmosphere in which people seem increasingly afraid to speak up?

Joining us for an update on the political winds in Indonesia are Asia law expert, Professor Tim Lindsey of Melbourne Law School, and politics and security researcher, Dr. Ian Wilson of Murdoch University. Welcome back, Tim, and welcome back, Ian.

Tim Lindsey:

Thanks Ali. Good to be here.

Ian Wilson:

Hi, Ali. Good to be back.

Ali Moore:

We spoke with both of you some 18 months ago here on Ear to Asia about how the Indonesian government was coping with the pandemic, but that was before the spread of the Delta variant which has had a devastating impact. Ian, where are we up to now as we near the two year mark of this pandemic?

Ian Wilson:

As you said, the Delta variant has had a terrible impact on Indonesian society with widespread infection and death rates, the overwhelming of the public health system, and really exposed many of these broader structural problems in terms of public service delivery in Indonesia. If we're looking at the impact on the national government, I think in many respects, certainly to observers, is exposed really its incapacity to decisively act in this kind of moment of crisis. I believe now, obviously it's a huge logistical task to vaccinate such a large and geographically dispersed country, but nonetheless, the government's really sort of dithered throughout the entire pandemic; in many respects approaching the pandemic as a kind of irritation, certainly at the initial period, to its broader agenda for infrastructure development. Really, that's sort of been characteristic of its response throughout; that it's been a kind of patchy, piecemeal and often really contradictory approach with very little sustained coordination at the national level.

And very much it's been a case of more proactive mitigation and social assistance going on at different levels of government. So, not at the national level, but there's been some relatively competent responses at the provincial level and also down at lower levels of government. But certainly, the national government's response has been fragmented and quite self-interested, and that's of course been to the detriment of the Indonesian population and very high mortality rates that Indonesians have suffered through the Delta variant. In many respects, I think just reflective of the fact that the public health system hasn't been able to cope and people have had to rely on other methods which have failed them in this time.

Ali Moore:

Tim, do you agree with Ian's assessment there, particularly in relation to the national government?

Tim Lindsey:

Absolutely. There've been two sort of themes running through the government's response to the pandemic. The first has been to prioritise the economy and keep business going at all costs. That's been consistent throughout, and it has led to the government being very reluctant to impose restrictions; doing it always only when it's become a state of crisis.

The other theme has been a complete lack of transparency in relation to data relating to COVID infections. Indonesia denied that the virus was even present for months, even when it knew it was, and admitted later that it had been covering that fact up. That lack of transparency flows through into the data that's available now, and it's really impossible to know with any certainty how serious the pandemic is at present. I think

it's probably fair to say that it's nowhere near now as bad as it was in mid-July when Indonesia became the global epicentre with around 1800 deaths a day, when Indonesia outstripped India and Brazil. That second wave seems to be passing now, and it seems pretty clear by virtue of the fact that the hospitals aren't crowded as they were a few months ago, that the worst moment has passed. But because testing is so low and so patchy nationally; there really is no nationwide testing scheme that works; it's really not possible to know what the figures are.

I think they're managing about 170,000 daily, which is a bit more than Australia does, but remember Indonesia's population is 10 times the size of Australia. So, that rate is absolutely minuscule. Likewise, contact tracing is very poor. We just don't really know. Many people work on the basis that the real infection levels may be 10 times what the government is acknowledging, and it's pretty clear that civil society organisations who work in this area, like LaporCovid and so forth, can demonstrate quite clearly that data coming out of the provinces is simply... And the provinces have their own problems with data collection, but even that material is often not reflected in the national figures. They just don't add up.

Likewise, LaporCovid has identified, for example, just 3000 people who've died at home in isolation, which is not in the official figures. Health worker data is also inaccurate. In July alone, 445 healthcare workers died, mostly in Java. So look, it's very hard to know what's really going on, but it's doubtless worse than the official figure suggests. Nonetheless, there is a feeling across Indonesia that the worst of the second wave has passed and life is returning very rapidly to normal; tourist travel, social gatherings recommencing, malls are open, shopping centres are open, pubs and restaurants are open. In Jakarta, for example, large-scale restrictions are replaced with small-scale restrictions. Large-scale restrictions are only really ever applied in about four provinces, but now they're generally replaced with small-scale restrictions that are not really very restrictive at all. So, the concern now, I think, is that with life returning to normal, domestic travel resuming across Indonesia, many fear there might be a third wave coming. There has to be a reasonable likelihood of that, given the unreliability of the figures, but time will tell.

Ali Moore:

So, Ian, against that backdrop and looking at... Perhaps the second wave is passing worries about the third wave, but things like the lack of transparency... How do Indonesians feel how their government's performed during the past 18 months to two years? What's public opinion around the COVID response?

Ian Wilson:

One of the kind of interesting things over the course of the pandemic has been this relatively sustained popularity of Jokowi as president. Of course, as we've seen in other parts of the world, incoherent or lacking responses from national governments has often translated pretty promptly into falling popularity for national leaders. But in Jokowi's case, while there has been a downturn in his popularity, it's remained relatively sustained. I think that points to sort of an interesting kind of dynamic where the president is, despite being, of course the executive head of national government, is in a lot of people's minds somewhat disassociated from how government actually performs. Jokowi's been quite adept at sort of playing this particular game of being in command of the government, but not really fully taking the hit for the failings of the national government, particularly in the context of a major crisis such as COVID-19.

There's been, I think... And this is sort of anecdotally, speaking to friends and colleagues in Indonesia, a lot of focus on people's attention, again, on the more immediate interactions with government, which of course aren't at the national level, but their immediate daily interactions with local governments. And again, here, I think there's been mixed performances depending where you are in the country; some very good responses to the pandemic and subsequently perceptions of local government as useful, as responding relatively well.

But yet again, at this national level, I think there seems to be a kind of a disjuncture between what they're actually responsible for doing in a context like this and perceptions of the president per se. That doesn't, of course, necessarily reflect the perceptions of other figures within the national administration, who I think are quite unpopular, but that Jokowi himself is a bit of a Mr. Teflon has managed to remain popular throughout all of this. I think that's been a strategy that he's adopted to sort of speak about government as

if he's somehow detached from it rather than, of course, being ultimately responsible as the president of the country.

Ali Moore:

Tim, how do you explain the fact that Joko Widodo has an approval rating, or it was reported in September, of 68.5%, which I think many a world leader would be more than happy with? Given the picture that you paint of how the government has handled COVID, how do you match that with that sort of approval rating? Do you agree with Ian about the disconnect?

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah, Jokowi's job approval rating's at 68.5%, which is absolutely incredible in the Indonesian context, not just because his government has so messed up its response to COVID; spectacularly so, I think, by world standards; but also because his immediate predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who also had two terms as president, at the start of his eighth year in office was only 46.2%. So, it would've been quite extraordinary in ordinary times for a president to have such a rating going into his eighth year or in office, but to be doing so in the middle of this very poor handling by his government of one of the worst crises to hit the country in decades is quite amazing.

I think the disconnect part of it is to do with what was once described as the Jokowi Effect. Jokowi's real skill, extraordinary skill, at handling his image; managing social media, carefully monitoring the way he appears to the public, and his adept use, early in his political career, of "blusukans" or drop-ins. That sort of skill is still quite apparent in the way he manages his public image and presents himself. That's part of it.

Another part is, and I think this is increasingly significant, is that the political climate has become more and more repressive and this government is becoming notable for the success of its attacks on civil society, which is muting criticism and creating a situation where critics of the government are afraid to talk. So the sort of criticisms you might have expected of Jokowi and his government's handling are not being made publicly in the way they were, for example, under Yudhoyono. As the general election in 2024, at which time both the legislature and the presidency will be up for grabs... That may seem distant in 2024, but really it's, from an Indonesian political perspective, getting very close and the political elites are already moving to position themselves for that event. Now, that means criticism from civil society groups, NGOs, universities, newspapers, social media, the organisations where criticism of government is usually expressed in Indonesia, is a threat to those elites. So we have seen the deployment of the draconian law on information and electronic transactions, the ITE law, which contains defamation and hate speech provisions in this law. The government officials, public officials, have weaponized those provisions and have used them to silence critics or to create this chilling effect whereby critics of the government fear they might well be targeted under this law.

There have been quite a number of prosecutions, but perhaps more effective than the prosecutions are the number of civil society critics of government who have been hauled in by the police for questioning, detained briefly, and then eventually released. That is in many ways just as effective as going to trial. So, we've also had incidents of civil society members having material remotely inserted on their mobile phones or in their social media accounts, which gets them into trouble with the government and justifies their arrest, then being taken out of circulation for a period of time. That's become more and more widespread. So civil society activists who might once have been very outspoken against the government are now being very, very cautious about what they say, where they say it and how they say.

Just to give you an anecdotal account of this, early in Jokowi's term, when you go to Jakarta, you might meet with civil society activists and talk to them about politics, and you might find yourself in a cafe and they would talk openly and quite critically about government policy and politics and what was going on. The last time I went there, the start of the pandemic, people were choosing quieter locations and they were being very cautious about who was around them, and they were very careful about what they said and who might be listening. So, there has been a really tangible shift in that open debate and criticism of government that was pretty standard in Indonesia over the last 20 years. Just in this term of Jokowi's government, that chilling effect has become very apparent. I think that is one of the factors playing into Jokowi's ability to maintain his popularity at such high levels.

Ian Wilson:

There's probably a side discussion as to what extent issues around human rights are in fact really important to a lot of Indonesians. I think they certainly are to many activists and many scholars, but I'm not sure that it's necessarily the number one issue in the minds of a lot of Indonesians. But nonetheless, Jokowi has been able to establish himself as almost a sort of a symbolic figure and is analysed and assessed by many people in those terms. I noticed a news story the other day that, to me, sort of embodied some of that, where in South Timor, in the east of the country, the local village had crowdsourced money to build a seven-metre tall statue of Jokowi, which they then hauled; in a collective effort, they literally pulled it by rope up a hill to put it up in recognition of the president.

When people asked them, "Well, why?" I mean, this is a really poor part of the country. In fact, it's one of the poorest parts of the country. It hasn't seen any significant material development, certainly over the course of Jokowi's presidency. The response was that it was in recognition of the fact that he'd worn their local traditional dress when he'd given the 17th of August Independence Day address. So, it's almost a tragic kind of situation where people have such a low bar of expectation for the president that they're willing to pool their limited resources, people living primarily below the poverty line, in recognition and praise of their leader simply for the purely symbolic act of recognising their regional dress. I think that helps to explain, to a certain extent, the kind of expectations that underpin Jokowi's popularity, which are sort of, in many respects, divorced from the core material outcomes of government, and that much of the unhappiness is directed, and he's happy to allow this to happen, is directed elsewhere, but not at him per se. He's able to weather these kind of storms and to continue with his particular agenda, but not to bear any of the political consequences of it directly.

Ali Moore:

And what about some of the other voices in the political landscape? I mean, if I ask first about young Indonesians. I mean, they're very, very big and a growing demographic force. Do they have a voice?

Ian Wilson:

You know, they have spaces in which they can voice their opinion. They don't actually have a voice in the substantive running of government. Youth involvement in political parties, for example, is very minimal. Indonesian political parties are notorious for not really having broad youth-based constituencies at all. And so I think for many young Indonesians, there's a kind of gap between engaging in social media... Indonesian youth are incredibly adept at using social media to express all kinds of opinions in creative ways, but in terms of the actual mechanisms of government and direct involvement in government in any way, I think it's very minimal.

Tim Lindsey:

Let me just jump in there and say that the fact that Indonesian youth, which is this hugely important demographic particularly when it comes to elections, are so detached from political party activity and mainstream formal political activity, and the fact that they're resorting to social media as a key means of communication, that's one of the reasons why a government crack down on social media and trolling cyberspace in order to control critics is so effective in managing the government's reputation. The government's very careful, very clever in the way it targets these sort of popular memes and so forth as ways of getting its message home of what it will tolerate and what it won't. For example, taking it outside social media, it gets easily offended by things such as critical t-shirts and posters and wall murals, and has deployed police to bring in for questioning people who have printed t-shirts and put up murals on walls, critical of Jokowi. In other words, the government is aware of what youth culture is and the fact that it is politically significant, even if youth are detached from mainstream formal political activity.

Ali Moore:

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find articles by some of our regular Eat to Asia guests and by many others, plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at [melbourneasiareview.edu.au](http://melbourneasiareview.edu.au).

I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Indonesia political observers, Dr. Ian Wilson of Murdoch University and Professor Tim Lindsey of Melbourne Law School. We're getting an update on the larger political trends in a post-pandemic Indonesia.

Tim, we were talking about the voice of young people. Can I ask about the role of religious authorities and parties? Islamic-affiliated organisations are very present in political and social discourse. How are they asserting themselves in the current climate, and to what extent has Jokowi worked to include more moderate groups in his support base?

Tim Lindsey:

The position in relation to Islamic identity in Indonesia is complex. The starting point is always to remember that under Suharto, for three decades public expression of Islamic identity was not permitted. Now, once Suharto fell and those restrictions came off, you had a sort of snap back where you had Islamic political identity being mainstreamed in political debate. And of course, in a democratic system or at least a system where you have elections, that means religious identity very quickly became part of politicking in Indonesia. Now that has not, in fact, translated into significant power for Muslim or Islamically-identifying political parties in the electoral process. They still struggle to get more than about 20% of the vote overall.

The system is still dominated by so-called nationalist secular parties to a very great extent. So, this rise of Islamic identity accompanied the same time by a failure in electoral politics, broadly speaking, has pushed many Islamist activists out of the mainstream and into increasingly extreme and conservative bodies. They have set themselves up in opposition to president Jokowi, who's not seen as... He's a Muslim, of course, but he's not seen as an Islamist. That dynamic reached its peak around the time of the infamous blasphemy conviction of Jokowi's former deputy when he was governor of Jakarta, then governor himself, Ahok, a Christian Chinese, for comments he made while running for election as governor. The mass movement that was sparked by conservative Islamist groups around that time brought the biggest rallies onto the streets in Jakarta since the fall of Suharto and led, at one point, to a March on the presidential palace calling for the removal of Jokowi. So, from that moment on those groups; the groups seeking to implement conservative forms of Sharia in Indonesia; position themselves as enemies of Jokowi's administration. The elite, I think, closed ranks around Jokowi from that point onwards.

What we've seen since then is the government targeting conservative Islamist groups and picking them off one by one. First, it amended a law that gave it the power to ban social organisations without resort to the courts, and it closed down Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, which was a group with the aim of establishing a caliphate; a nonviolent movement in Indonesia, but with the caliphate its objective. Since then it's banned the notorious Islamic Defenders Front, which was associated closely with the mass rallies against the government. It has also, one by one, detained, arrested and charged a range of different religious leaders associated with those groups on a range of different charges and put many of them in jail.

So, this government has now positioned itself against those groups and is carrying out, with some effect, a policy of removing them, really, from the political chess board in Indonesia. Now, at the same time, it has overtly sought to strengthen what it calls moderate Islam; that is not conservative Islam and not liberal Islam, but a sort of amorphous group in the middle that fits with the pluralist identity that nationalist leaders in Indonesia have always, and I think probably correctly, asserted as a key to holding the nation together. They're tying these moderate mainstream groups in with their pluralist vision, which has got a lot of nationalist legacy points to it, to position Jokowi very strongly. And it's been highly effective, I think.

Ali Moore:

When we look at that support, and we mentioned at the very outset that one of the interesting things to an outsider is how Jokowi... He can't face another election because he can't constitutionally serve another term, at least as things stand, and we'll look at that in a minute. But yet he is continuing to build this coalition of support, and as we said, he's very, very comfortably in control of the House of Representatives. Ian, how strong is that support and why does Jokowi work on it?

Ian Wilson:

When you're looking at Indonesian politics at that level, there are some dynamics that are quite fundamentally different to what we would have in a country like Australia. Presidents in particular have sought to build broad-based coalitions that include, in a formal sense, coalition partners from other political parties. But coalitions in Indonesia, political coalitions, usually treat non-party actors as equal partners to political parties. So you've seen Jokowi reach out and incorporate some of the larger mainstream Islamic organisations as key coalition partners. On one level, this is about strengthening their political power. But, in another sense, it's about a broader formation of a particular sociopolitical order. In doing that, there's always been in... Bit of a simplification, but if you look as a basic mechanism through Indonesian political history, governments will adopt a two-pronged approach. They'll seek to incorporate potentially disruptive elements, or they'll seek to eliminate potentially disruptive elements.

As Tim was just saying, in terms of the government's response to religious groups and Islamist organisations in particular, there's been, on the one hand, an effort to incorporate some of those organisations into the broader coalition that includes, of course, the current vice president, Ma'ruf Amin, who is a conservative Islamic scholar. That was a very self-conscious effort to sort of co-opt that kind of constituency insofar as he's representative of that. And also the current minister for religion who... His background is from the Nahdlatul Ulama, and in fact, the head of its one of its paramilitary organisations. So sort of a militant moderate, but at the same time using a very harsh stick to attack other groups that may be seen as disruptive of the broader configurations of power within the coalitions.

So reelection is one element, but on one level that's sort of relatively minor one compared to the broader process of establishing broad networks between different self-interested groups, different sets of socioeconomic interests, so that they broadly collaborate and broadly incorporate one another and collaborate to marginalise, if not criminalise, those who may be seen as disruptive of their broader endeavours. I mean, a key feature of Jokowi's presidency has been his focus on infrastructure. On one level it's clear that Indonesia needs the development of particular kinds of infrastructure, but who's involved and how has been, I think, a key feature of his presidency. You've seen some of the sort of rolling backs of democracy in a broad sense such as the weakening of the anti-corruption, the KPK, anti-corruption commission, really can't be separated, I think, from this broader coalition of interests linked to infrastructure, which of course infrastructure is one of the areas that's most rife for corruption in terms of... There's been the issuing of massive contracts without tendering processes, there's ongoing conflicts of interest between ministers and senior government officials and companies that are involved in that are receiving contracts, and this broader weakening of any sort of external transparency and control.

So when it comes back to coalition building, it's not just sort of a political project aimed at the next election. There's some other issues to discuss there. But in the immediate term, it's about consolidating particular networks of socioeconomic interests to collaborate together and to marginalise those social groups or social forces that could disrupt this.

Ali Moore:

I take your point, Ian, that it's bigger than the next election. But let's look at that very specific issue of the next election, and I guess the building of the coalition with an eye, potentially, to changing the constitution. Tim, would you see that as a possibility?

Tim Lindsey:

I think that until election campaigning starts, Indonesian politicians don't stand for any constituency and they don't have any policy platform. In fact, they don't usually during elections either; have policy platforms. What they do stand for is one or another elite power grouping. Jokowi started as the clean-skin outsider; at least that's how he presented himself, but he is very much now one of Indonesia's elite. He's absolutely embedded in there as a key player in that elite. Those around him, which is now a very large part of the political elite in Indonesia, as is reflected in the coalition he's developed which is around about 80% of the legislature, 80% of the political parties in effect, would like to maintain their position and hold onto their existing power and advantages. Of course, that would be much easier if Jokowi stayed in for a third

term. He has set up a distribution and configuration of power across the various elite groups that the majority of them are pretty happy with.

He's bought in his strongest opposition in the last election. Prabowo Subianto, and his vice presidential candidate Sandiaga Uno, are both within government now. If he did have a third term, that would be not particularly disruptive to the elite and would be very comfortable, I think. So there is a sense among many in the elite that it would be easy, it would be convenient for them, if Jokowi had a third term.

Unfortunately, the constitution doesn't allow that. The constitution was amended radically after the fall of Suharto who'd been 32 years. Before that, they'd had Sukarno as a president for life. So, one of the main reforms of the post-Suharto era was to limit presidential terms to two. Now, there have been proposals that have been floated for some years now that the constitution should be amended to change that. This has been raised again recently to give Jokowi a third term, or maybe even more terms.

This is quite complex, so just bear with me for a moment. To amend the constitution, a sort of super-legislative body called the MPR, which is made up of the national legislature, the DPR, and another regional representatives body, they have a joint sitting and that forms the MPR. The MPR needs a vote of two thirds in order to amend the constitution. At the moment, if Jokowi's coalition held solid... That's quite a big question for reasons I'll explain in a minute. But if his 80% of the legislature held solid and it sat with this regional representative's body, he would only be about 14 people, 14 members, short of the two thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. Now, how do you keep a coalition together in Indonesia where there's no party whip system and people routinely cross the floor in every vote? The answer is it's usually done through the trading of favours and money.

So, amending the constitution for a third term would be a very expensive exercise, literally speaking. It would have to be a very solid deal in place. There'd have to be a lot of payoffs and benefits for a lot of people, but probably the government could get the extra 14 people it would need in order to get that through. So a constitutional amendment is a real possibility. It's not impossible. The thing against it is that the last time they did it, it dramatically reinvented the Indonesian political system in a way not seen since the 1950s. It's a Pandora's box where every issue is potentially on the table, including the role of Islam in the state and so on. So, politicians are very nervous about another amendment process, which is why nothing's happened since 2002.

To do this, the government would need... The people who want the amendment would need to be absolutely certain they have a very tight control on the MPR and what's happening. So, nobody's going to do it unless the deals are all in place to have a rock solid and very controlled majority that would deliver what they want. But it's not quite as simple as that, because I think the MPR would demand concessions from the government.

Ali Moore:

And what would those concessions likely be?

Tim Lindsey:

Well, this is another idea that's also been floated around, which would probably require an amendment as well, which is to reinstate a thing called the broad guidelines of state policy. Now, this is basically a five-year plan that was used under Suharto and it set the policy for five years, and the president was then made responsible for implementing it. That meant, and this is the critical bit, that the president was therefore answerable to the MPR. He had to give an accountability presentation or speech to the MPR, and if they didn't like it, they could sack him. Now they never sacked Suharto, because he completely controlled the MPR, which is the problem with that system. But they did remove one president, Habibie, who they rejected his accountability speech and that ended his campaign for reelection.

So, it is potentially very significant. If the broad guidelines of state policy or something like it were reintroduced, then that would give the MPR control over the president. And because the MPR is controlled by the legislature, it would give the legislature huge control over the president. So, this has been proposed in Indonesia by, strangely enough, the chair of the MPR who is also the vice chair of the second biggest party in Indonesia. It's likely that if they press ahead with a call for a third term for the president, the MPR

would also call for the return of the broad guidelines, thus really giving the DPR effective authority over the president and maybe a power to dismiss him as well.

Now, that's a very scary proposition because Indonesia's two-term limit was accompanied by introduction of direct presidential elections, and these are key characteristics of Indonesian democracy. If you remove the two-term limit and then you give the MPR the power to remove the president, the MPR would logically next say, "Well, look, if we can remove the president, shouldn't we be the ones appointing him or her?" And that would take us-

Ali Moore:

So, a slippery slope.

Tim Lindsey:

Well, that would take us right back, basically, to the Suharto system. So, for the moment, all these things are possible and they've all been discussed and mooted. You would need the two biggest parties in Indonesia, Jokowi's party, Jokowi's a member of PDIP, and the second biggest party, Golkar, Suharto's old party, to support these ideas for it to happen. At the moment, Golkar is split by a power struggle over this issue of the power of the MPR. So, at the moment Golkar isn't in, so it couldn't happen, but if they resolve that and the elite decides that they really want Jokowi, then they could do it.

Ian Wilson:

Certainly within this administration, there have been plenty of voices who've questioned core democratic features of the Indonesian system. The current minister for home affairs, Tito, who was the previous chief of police, has been very vocal in saying how he thinks that electoral democracy, particularly at the local level... And that's arguably where there's the greatest level of direct representation of people's sort of aspirations. He's talked about it in completely negative terms as being wasteful for money, it's encouraging corruption, et cetera, and intimated towards testing out these ideas in the public domain; that it would be more efficient, using key issues around the public's dislike of corruption, that it would minimise corruption if you bypassed some of this direct democracy towards system of appointment of officials. It's interesting, I think, to note when you look at the plans for the new capital of Indonesia and the government's now pushing ahead with its idea of moving the national capital from Jakarta to a new yet-to-be-developed site in Kalimantan, that the initial sort of governance structures that are being worked out for this new capital would involve a directly-appointed official to govern it with no electoral process whatsoever.

So I think there's certainly elements within the administration are quite happy to push for a rolling back of direct electoral democracy. It would be a matter of how they manage potential public backlash, and it would be a significant one. It would be a difficult argument to make without large levels of social conflict and political conflict. But certainly it's not something that these groups of elites are hostile to at all. In fact, there's been a lot of chatter about this for quite some time, about rolling back direct electoral democracy, including even at the presidential level as well. I think this is a real political challenge going forward for Indonesia; to protect what remains of direct electoral democracy.

Tim Lindsey:

And I'd add to that, that is an elite power configuration at the moment that is quite willing to stare down massive protests. It stared down huge protests over the amendments to the KPK Law, the anti-corruption commission law that resulted, really, in the gutting of that anti-corruption commission because it was such a threat to the elite. There were huge protests in this street, right across Indonesia. People were killed, injured and so forth. The government refused to move on that.

So, it is increasingly confident in its capacity to withstand widespread protests, and I think its chilling on civil society. And its crack down on social media probably increases that confidence. So, it is Indonesia. The situation is always fluid as elite groups negotiate amongst themselves, but there are real possibilities that the deterioration of liberal democracy may well accelerate in the lead up to the 2024 election as elites try to get themselves in position.

Just to mention quickly one more. The proposal is on the table to increase the threshold for parties to sit in the legislature. This would mean that a political party would need to win 5% of the votes in order to be represented in the legislature, and that would mean that the number of parties represented would likely fall from nine to six after the next election, thus greatly strengthening the two biggest parties. So, there's so many other proposals and ideas floating around, almost none of which actually strengthen the liberal electoral democratic system.

Ali Moore:

Well, if you look at it from Jokowi's standpoint, you mentioned, Ian, the moving of the national capital to Kalimantan. It's his signature project, if you like, which still seems to be on the agenda. It would be fair to say, would it not, that his legacy has been seriously impacted by the pandemic? If it's about infrastructure, it's about economic growth, then the last two years has put that legacy, well, it's gone backwards.

Ian Wilson:

Most definitely. He's sort of put all his eggs in this idea of infrastructure development basket, and it hasn't played out how he liked. I mean, the pandemic has been an obvious break on that, but investing so much in this particular construction of development, a very specific idea of development focused on these big infrastructure projects, has also brought its own problems. There's been huge issues around the tendering processes to do with big infrastructure projects. There's been a lot of issues around the quality, because there's been such a political imperative to do things quickly that the quality of the infrastructure that's been built has been often very poor. I think the moving of the capital to Kalimantan is an interesting one because it's framed in terms of this sort of infrastructure focus, but the political ramifications of it are huge.

If you look at Indonesian political history, Jakarta has been the political stage where so many of the major changes in the country have played out through mass mobilizations of different groups, through the presence of so many competing interests, et cetera. What's being proposed, essentially, is a quarantined off-space of governance governed by unelected officials and physically isolated from all these different social and political groups. So, really, it's framed in largely apolitical terms, but I think the political implications for the dynamics of how democratic politics plays out in Indonesia will be massive. I think that's something that NGOs and civil society are very aware of; that they won't have access to power. They won't have the ability to get the ear of officials because they're sequestered off in a completely different geographical kind of space.

Ali Moore:

Ian, do you think that Jokowi is looking to build a political dynasty? He has, I mean, as the point that Tim was making, he came from outside the political establishment, but he's now facing criticism for supporting his son and his son-in-law's candidacy for major mayoral races.

Ian Wilson:

Most definitely. And I think for political elites, they're maybe not even self-conscious that this is what they do. Such is the nature of how political power operates in Indonesia; that it's natural that your immediate family, your immediate networks, share in the benefits of your power. And in this case it means, and is translated into, family members. It's translated into business associates all benefiting and gaining political power as an outcome of this.

So, it might not even be a self-conscious thing. It's so embedded in how politics operates at that level in Indonesia. It would almost be surprising if it wasn't the case that Jokowi's immediate family would also move into the political arena. Of course, in the case of his son who's now taken over the position that Jokowi started out in, as the mayor of Solo in Central Java, he had the backing of the political party and, in fact, the national leadership of the PDIP overruled the grassroots candidate. The trend that we're seeing throughout the country is that the national party elites are basically going against grassroots memberships and grassroots branches in their preferred candidates. So, I mean, that's just another dimension of how the sort of national elite politics is really undermining representative democracy at the more local provincial levels anyway.

Ali Moore:

There's so much to talk about, but sadly we are close to the end of our time with this podcast. So Tim, let me ask you, what do you think Jokowi would like his legacy to be? And sitting at this point, heading into the 2024 elections, what do you think will be his legacy?

Tim Lindsey:

There's no question what he wants his legacy to be because he tells us constantly. He sees himself as leaving behind a legacy of vastly improved infrastructure, particularly maritime, communications, and increased foreign investment in Indonesia to fund all that infrastructure development. He has been a business-oriented president who has put this emphasis on infrastructure as a way of strengthening business and, through that, the Indonesian economy. And of course that makes him very attractive to the oligarchs, the business leaders who control political parties, who effectively control the Indonesian political process. He is a president in that sense, working for them, which is one of the reasons why he's been able to cement this extraordinary political basis, almost from nothing, to become the longer-serving civilian president since Sukarno.

Just on that infrastructure issue, I think he's not going to achieve that infrastructure objective. First, because he's set his sights too high, and secondly because, of course, the damage to the economy as a result of the pandemic has made it impossible to achieve what he wanted to achieve.

Ali Moore:

Well, unless he gets another term.

Tim Lindsey:

Well that's right, and that of course is a strong motivation for him personally to want that third term, because it's the only way he'll be able to achieve the economic and infrastructure legacy that he claims to want to leave behind him. For example, moving the capital city from Jakarta to Kalimantan, apart from the fact that it will do absolutely nothing whatsoever to move the population from Jakarta with all the terrible problems, infrastructure problems, and flooding problems they've got. Leaving that to one side, it will cost around 50 billion dollars and there's just no way that that can be achieved within the timeframe that Jokowi originally anticipated; not even the first steps of it.

So yeah, that's all a good reason for him to want a third term. Another legacy of course, as Ian's pointed out, is the creation of a political dynasty. I think that's also going to be very difficult. His predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also tried very, very hard to do exactly the same thing and failed spectacularly to achieve it. Megawati Sukarnoputri, herself part of a dynasty; her father, the first president of Indonesia; is trying very hard for her daughter to take her place and I think, again, it's unlikely, she'll succeed in doing that. So, dynasty building, even with a third term, may be beyond Jokowi, but we will see.

Ali Moore:

So that's what he wants as his legacy. What do you think will be his legacy? Is it too early to say?

Tim Lindsey:

Oh, I think his clear legacy will be democratic regression, which has become entrenched under Jokowi. He made a lot of capital out of human rights promises, particularly in his first campaign, none of which have been ever implemented or followed up on. It is under him that the anti-corruption commission, which is often seen as a litmus test of Indonesia's democratic system, has been gutted by having its reformist commissioners replaced with others, an oversight commission to control it, its wire-tapping powers restricted, and so forth. If that commission was, as it's often said to be, an indicator of the health of Indonesian democracy, that is a very clear statement of what happened to liberal democracy, to human rights and anti-corruption efforts, under Jokowi. So I think that will be, whatever else happens, a clear legacy at the end of his rule. Indonesia is still often referred to as being in the Reformasi era, a term that

refers to the post-Suharto era, but it's clearly not. It's in a post-Reformasi democratic regression period now.

Ali Moore:

Of course, the election is not for a couple of years, but it certainly seems that the trends have been set. A huge thank you to both of you for your insights. I do want to ask both of you, where can listeners find more of you; more of your research and your work online? If they'd like to explore that further, Tim, where can they go?

Tim Lindsey:

The Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society, The University of Melbourne. Come and join us there.

Ali Moore:

Sounds good. Ian?

Ian Wilson:

I'm active on Twitter and often getting myself in trouble with comments on Indonesian politics there. So, @iwilson69.

Ali Moore:

And would you point people to somewhere else?

Ian Wilson:

You can Google me, and I've written a mix of pay-walled academic articles, but also other more publicly-accessible analysis of Indonesian politics. So if you look on Google or Google Scholar you can find some of my work there.

Ali Moore:

Excellent. The internet is an amazing place to research our guests further. Again, thank you both of you for your insights and for your time, and I really look forward to catching up with you, well, hopefully, a number of times between now and the next election in Indonesia. Ian Wilson and Tim Lindsey. Many thanks.

Tim Lindsey:

Thanks very thanks, Ali. See you soon.

Ian Wilson:

Thanks, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guests have been professor Tim Lindsey of Melbourne Law School, and Dr. Ian Wilson of Murdoch university. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep our up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And please help us by spreading the word on social media.

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