

POLITICS

Indonesia: Line of Succession - Former Army general Prabowo Subianto threatens to return the country to authoritarian rule

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“In Indonesia, a notoriously sinister and volatile figure is now set to take office. Prabowo Subianto, an ex-son-in-law of the long-time military dictator Suharto, a former Army general dishonourably discharged after allegedly overseeing the kidnap and torture of dissidents, and a politician who has exploited ethnic and religious tensions and is now threatening to return the country to authoritarian rule.”

This year, elections across the world are offering a stark reminder that voters can expect very little from liberal democracy, even under conditions of ‘free and fair’ competition. It’s easy to bemoan the rigged results in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Russia, or the advantages of incumbency for the BJP in India and the ANC in South Africa. But the spectacle of a Biden-Trump rematch in the US, plus the dismal expectations for a Starmer government in the UK, suggest that problems with contemporary electoral systems are not confined to repressive or clientelist regimes. In Indonesia, the third most populous - and largest majority-Muslim - democracy in the world, a notoriously sinister and volatile figure is now set to take office. Prabowo Subianto, elected on 14 February, is an ex-son-in-law of the long-time military dictator Suharto, a former Army general dishonourably discharged after allegedly overseeing the kidnap and torture of dissidents, and a politician who has exploited ethnic and religious tensions and is now threatening to return the country to authoritarian rule.

Prabowo ran in the previous two elections and lost both times to Joko Widodo (‘Jokowi’). Having been co-opted as Jokowi’s Defence Minister in 2019, he stood again in 2024 with the president’s son Gibran Rakabuming Raka as his running mate - a clear sign that his candidacy had been blessed by the incumbent. Jokowi’s tacit endorsement - as well as the bullying, bribery and bandwagoning of local officials to mobilize support - may help to explain why Prabowo’s 58% vote share on election day was nearly ten percentage points above pre-election polls. The scale of his victory obviated the need for a run-off against his two opponents, former Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan, who picked up 24%, and Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo, who won only 17%. Yet to fully grasp why Indonesians have anointed this grotesque figure, we must take a closer look at the country’s political system.

Compared to earlier iterations of democracy, the parameters of Indonesian politics have been set very narrowly since the return to competitive elections in 1999. During the early post-war struggle for independence, the beleaguered Republik was led by a succession of fractious multi-party governments. Following emancipation from Dutch rule, it saw a short-lived parliamentarist experiment, with four parties dominating the 1955 elections: Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (22%), Masyumi (21%), Nahdlatul Ulama (18%), and Partai Komunis Indonesia (16%). Each was a mass organization with its own regional and sociological strengths and onderbouw of civil society groups.

At this time the PKI was steadily building power among the electorate and within the state. Its labour federation, peasant union, women's and youth groups - along with its cadre of artists and intellectuals and its numerous party publications - made it a formidable presence in public life and political discourse: probably the largest legal, above-ground Communist Party outside the Soviet Union and the PRC.

But this highly inclusive and participatory system could not survive the Cold War era. Amidst the CIA-backed regional rebellions of 1957-59, President Soekarno proclaimed martial law and dissolved parliament, banning Masyumi in 1960. Following a military coup in late 1965, led by Army general Suharto and supported by the US, the PKI was obliterated in an anti-communist pogrom, with hundreds of thousands of activists and affiliates murdered, and millions more subjected to intimidation and incarceration. Over the next three decades, the military regime retained a thin veneer of pseudo-democratic legitimacy, with carefully stage-managed elections producing both a pliant parliament and a largely appointed supra-parliamentary body, which reliably 're-elected' Suharto and his chosen vice-president every five years. The PNI and the two small Catholic and Protestant parties were forced to merge into the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI), while NU and other Islamic parties were combined into the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP, or United Development Party). Meanwhile, the regime's electoral machine, Golkar (an abbreviation of Golongan Karya or 'Functionary Groups'), dominated the largely rubber-stamp parliament thanks to the guaranteed support of the military establishment, the bureaucracy and, with the rise of Indonesian capital over the 1980s and early-mid 1990s, the expanding business class.

It was only amidst the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, and Suharto's stubborn prioritization of his children's business empires and political fortunes, that open dissent and outright defections eventually destabilized the regime. In May 1998, Golkar leaders joined with cabinet ministers and senior Army figures to insist that Suharto give way to vice-president B.J. Habibie, the long-time Minister of Research and Technology and bitter rival of Suharto's daughter Tutut. The diverse business interests represented within the regime - construction companies and customs brokerages, logging and mining concessions, agribusiness and real-estate firms - could not withstand the continuing depreciation of the rupiah and the deepening economic downturn. Suharto and his family had to go.

Habibie restored competitive elections in 1999 and Indonesia's party system expanded, but within tightly circumscribed limits. Enduring anti-communism ruled out any resurrection of the PKI. Union organizers and student activists had little choice but to join the rebranded PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), which was led by Soekarno's daughter Megawati Soekarnoputri, and backed by enough retired Army officers and evangelical Protestant businessmen to offset any left-leaning tendencies. The 1999 election results set the tone for Indonesian democracy in the new millennium: 34% for the PDI-P, 22% for Golkar, and much of the remaining votes split among a welter of smaller parties representing various streams of Islamic education and associational life. This new system offered a highly conservative form of pluralism, with each party and its financiers enjoying state patronage and policy influence in a succession of broad-based coalition governments, which onlookers soon began to label 'party cartels'.

Against this backdrop, prospects for meaningful political or economic reform were largely confined to the presidency. After Megawati's brief and disappointing stint in office between 2001 and 2004, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired Army general with a marketable reputation as a 'professional soldier' and experienced cabinet minister, was elected, first in 2004 and again in 2009, promising to rise above the corruption and fractiousness of party politics. But his ten years in office proved to be a decade of missed opportunities for institutional reform and industrial deepening, amidst the bonanza of multiple commodity booms driven by rising demand from nearby China.

In 2014, Jokowi's presidential candidacy offered what appeared to be a more promising vision of change from the top down. A small-time businessman with a furniture-exporting company, Jokowi was praised for his problem-solving and coalition-building skills as the PDI-P mayor of the Central Javanese city of Solo, and for his well-publicized impromptu chats with local residents as Governor of Jakarta. His supposedly 'clean' business background, his record of campaigning and cooperating with ethnic-Chinese Christian deputies, his engagement with local NGOs, community groups and labour leaders, and his distance from Megawati - now chairwoman of the PDI-P - raised hopes that he would be an incorruptible, independent, inclusive and progressive president.

Under Jokowi's tenure, economic growth continued thanks to global demand for Indonesian minerals, palm oil and other exports, and the government engaged in a massive infrastructure spending spree that helped to boost the president's popularity. Jokowi also impressed some Indonesians by taking up the mantle of economic nationalism. He imposed a ban on the export of unprocessed minerals such as nickel, in which Indonesia holds a commanding share of the global market, spurring a wave of investment - most of it Chinese - in new mineral processing plants. In response to rising concerns about low-lying, flood-prone and continuously sinking Jakarta, Jokowi rolled out plans to relocate the national capital to a new planned city in a remote rural patch of East Kalimantan, in Indonesian Borneo. Such measures helped to sustain his popularity ratings, which remained above 80% throughout his two terms in office.

Yet expectations of progressive reform were sadly mistaken, as seen in the introduction of new laws placing restrictions on union organizing, the media and sexual freedoms. By the end of his decade in power, the labour movement, civic activists and human rights groups felt bitterly betrayed. Critics charged Jokowi with an increasingly authoritarian disposition and an intolerance for dissent. He retained as close advisers a number of retired Army generals such as A.M. Hendropriyono, the former head of Indonesia's National Intelligence Agency, who was implicated in a massacre of Islamist activists in 1989 and the assassination of human rights activist Munir Said Thalib in 2004.

But the biggest disappointment was yet to come. Following raucous street protests after his re-election in 2019, Jokowi brought his two-time opponent Prabowo into the Cabinet as Defence Minister, ignoring concerns about the latter's incendiary rhetoric and human rights record. In late 2023, rather than accepting Megawati's choice of former Central Java Governor as the PDI-P's presidential candidate, Jokowi struck a backroom deal with Prabowo and spent the final months of his presidency ensuring the victory of his anointed heir. So much for the promise of change.

How to characterize Prabowo himself? In most Western media coverage, there is a near-pathological tendency to portray him as a marginalized figure whose political resurrection reflects the 'populist' appeal of his brash and personalist style. But Prabowo's ascent to the presidency can only be understood through a properly historicized analysis. He was born in 1951 into the ranks of the priyayi, the Javanese aristocracy which staffed the Dutch colonial state and survived the transition to independence, as well as subsequent decades of economic, social, and political change, with many of its privileges intact. His grandfather was a Dutch-educated colonial civil servant who joined the Republican government during the Revolusi and founded the country's central bank. Prabowo's father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, received his PhD in Economics from the University of Rotterdam and went on to hold key economic portfolios in successive cabinets in the 1950s. But as a leading member of the conservative *Partai Sosialis Indonesia* (PSI), Sumitro played a role in the anti-Soekarno rebellions later that decade, whose defeat forced him and his family into exile for much of Prabowo's adolescence.

With the establishment of a conservative military regime under Suharto in the mid-1960s, however, Sumitro returned to Indonesia to serve as Minister of Trade (1968-73), playing a key role in the reopening of the Indonesian economy to foreign loans, investment and trade. Prabowo entered the

Indonesian Military Academy in 1970 and graduated four years later. His family background and formative years bear the traces of Dutch colonial rule, aristocratic privilege and the success of conservative anti-communism and economic liberalism in weathering both the transition to independence and the eventual lurch to military dictatorship.

Prabowo's Army career spanned much of the Suharto era and the heyday of military rule, with his marriage to one of Suharto's daughters in 1983 ensuring his rise to senior leadership roles. Much of his career was spent in Special Forces (*Kopassus*), with long stints in Indonesian-occupied East Timor and alleged involvement in large-scale violence against civilians, including the deployment of irregular militias to terrorize the local population. He faced similar allegations when he led *Kopassus* operations in West Papua, where local resistance to forced incorporation into Indonesia in the late 1960s was met with harsh military repression throughout the Suharto era and beyond.

The mid-1990s saw Prabowo promoted to key Army positions in Jakarta, first as Commander of *Kopassus* and then as Commander of *Kostrad*, the Army Strategic Reserve - the position held by Suharto when he seized power in late 1965. By the spring of 1998, when the ageing dictator was facing an unprecedented economic crisis and calls for his resignation, Prabowo controlled the single largest garrison in Jakarta, while close friends held the key *Kopassus* and Greater Jakarta Region commands. It was in this context that Prabowo arranged for the illegal detention of leading student activists and orchestrated large-scale rioting in Jakarta, evidently envisaging a martial law scenario in which he could consolidate power.

But with the accelerating flight of capital and ethnic-Chinese businessmen from the country and defections from within the regime, an alternative re-stabilization plan was put in place in late May 1998. Suharto resigned, Habibie assumed the presidency, and Armed Forces Commander Wiranto regained effective control over the military establishment. Prabowo and his allies were summarily removed from their commands, and within months he was discharged from the Armed Forces. It took him no less than twenty-five years to make a full comeback, using his sizeable fortune (acquired through interests in fossil fuels and palm oil), party machinery (including his own Greater Indonesia Movement, *Gerakan Indonesia Raya* or Gerindra), and social-media presence to mount a successful presidential campaign, which promised continuity with his predecessor on key policy fronts.

For many younger Indonesian voters, this backstory may have seemed utterly irrelevant in the run-up to the election, and Prabowo's larger-than-life personality may have inspired confidence in his ability to exert presidential authority more effectively than his opponents. Over the years Prabowo has built a reputation as an effective political operator. He heads his own party, and he managed to win both a cabinet seat and a tacit endorsement from Jokowi while appropriating some of his popularity. In a depressingly stable system of oligarchical democracy, where the political field is narrowed by the requirement of nomination by one of the major parties, along with the practical necessities of campaign financing, Prabowo's election is hardly a 'populist' aberration. It is, rather, an ugly reflection of what democracy has come to mean in Indonesia today. Prabowo and his family played a central role in the country's post-independence history, and he is emblematic of the ultra-conservative forces which continue to haunt its present and its future.

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