

Indonesia: Jokowi broke the 'Reformasi coalition'

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Repression and harassment have played a part in the political marginalisation of reformist civil society. But that marginalisation is also deeply linked to structural shifts—from the rise of populism and money politics, to the increasing state control over how civil society can raise and spend money.

One of the legacies Joko Widodo leaves Indonesia is a dramatically changed relationship between government and civil society. For the first decade and a half of the post-Suharto period, pro-democracy civil society groups and government constituted a rough-and-ready “Reformasi coalition” in which a constant push-and-pull between these two sides—sometimes cooperative, often conflictual—slowly moved forward a process of democratic reform and safeguarded reform achievements from counter-reformist elites.

Jokowi's presidency has seen [the breakdown of that relationship](#). Civil society organisations (CSOs) have lost contact with interlocutors within government, and have few policy achievements to point to (and many losses) in the past decade. Mass protests haven't ended, and there has been no wide-ranging crackdown on civil society per se. But as Jokowi prepares to hand over power to a successor who is viewed with great wariness by pro-democratic civil society, the progressive components of the erstwhile Reformasi coalition are more politically marginal than at any time since the regime change of 1998.

How and why did a president whose early political career [benefited much from the support of civil society](#) oversee a precipitous decline in its political influence and role in policymaking?

This question framed our exploration of the state of civil society, protest and social movements contained in a paper we [presented at the ANU Indonesia Update in September](#), and which will appear in a forthcoming edited volume featuring papers from the conference. Beyond detailing the chilling effects of repression and harassment on Indonesians' ability to engage in contentious politics, we explore the deeper causes of the Widodo government's neglect and intimidation of civil society, which we believe are rooted in both Jokowi's leadership style and in broader changes to the makeup of Indonesia's political elite and the economic bases of CSO activity.

A critical factor in undermining civil society's influence has been the changing character of political leadership that Jokowi brought to the presidential palace in 2014. Former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's experiences as a leading political figure during the fall of the New Order had led him to internalise a wariness of the potential impact of contentious politics, and as president he often pre-empted demands for reform by civil society-led protest movements.

Jokowi, by contrast, was a political nobody in 1998, busy running his business in Central Java, and had little reason to either respect or fear mass mobilisation. He instead had a populist political outlook in which opinion polls were the principal indicator of which (and whose) views mattered.

Polls generally vindicated his single-minded focus on the economic issues that affected ordinary voters: as one senior member of his government told us in an interview, he was “not at all worried about middle-class critics”. Safe in the knowledge that he continued to enjoy broad support among the mass of the population, Jokowi felt he could ignore civil society’s opposition to his government’s erosion of the key reforms won by the old Reformasi coalition.

This populist leadership style arrived in the presidential palace amid broader structural changes in how power was contested and wielded in Indonesia. The [entrenchment of grassroots money politics](#) has meant that the political elite is increasingly made up of wealthy individuals who see their political futures being more closely linked to the (often illegal) accumulation of patronage resources than to the delivery of policy outputs. Most elected officials have few incentives to cooperate with civil society actors on policy—especially when it comes to matters of good governance and transparency.

Long-term structural changes within civil society itself have also played their part. Indonesia’s broad pro-democracy movement had in the past been scaffolded by a network of NGOs who drew upon support from foreign donors. Over the last decade or so, [partly preceding but also coinciding with](#) the Jokowi period, this support declined significantly, as Indonesia’s economic improvement saw it deprioritised in Western aid programs, and as donors, many of whom embraced the “success story” narrative of Indonesian democratisation, moved away from funding watchdog and democratic governance programs and towards offering technical support guided by the Indonesian government’s own policy priorities—and, lately, its sensitivity to foreign support for advocacy on “sensitive” issues.

Under Jokowi, the management of foreign funding flows to Indonesian NGOs has arguably become even more restrictive than that practiced during the New Order period. Under the provisions of the 2013 Mass Organisations Law, many local NGO grantees of foreign donors present their planned activities to a Monitoring Team for Foreign Organisations (Tim Pengawasan Organisasi Asing, or TPOA) that includes representatives of relevant ministries and intelligence agencies. The latter, according to several people who have participated in TPOA meetings, typically single out organisations and individuals they accuse of being too “critical” of the government, and we understand that the government has vetoed funding for at least several organisations.

Unable to draw upon a large domestic donor base, and bound by strict rules on how domestic private donations can be used, many NGOs have increasingly turned to government funding sources, especially in the regions. As a result they often end up “just working to carry out government programs”, resembling “tukang” (craftspeople, technicians) for the government, as one Jakarta-based NGO told us. The often polarised ideological climate of the Widodo years aided this trend of increasing civil society alignment with the state, with [some elements of national civil society](#) essentially being coopted into the Jokowi administration’s political agenda as they came to see Islamism as a more urgent threat to Indonesia than corruption or state repression.

The obsolescence of the Reformasi coalition doesn’t bode well for the ability of civil society to fight further democratic backsliding under Prabowo. But despite the deep concerns expressed by many of the activists we interviewed, they were trying to remain optimistic. The mass protests of 2019–2020 and 2024 against the Widodo government demonstrate that an oppositional culture continues to infuse pockets, if not broad swathes, of Indonesian society. Many civil society actors carry with them a view of Prabowo as an historic enemy of their movement, and of human rights in general—and with that, a feeling that resistance will be a duty.

Edward Aspinall

Fauziah Mayangsari

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