

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 012/2024 dated 7 February 2024

How Prabowo Subianto Is Closing In on the Indonesian Presidency

James Guild

SYNOPSIS

Prabowo Subianto is closing in on the Indonesian presidency through a combination of outspending his rivals, rehabilitating his public image and, most importantly, linking his political future to the legacy of outgoing president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo.

COMMENTARY

As Indonesia’s national election nears, Prabowo Subianto is closing in on a goal he has long sought: to become the president of the Republic of Indonesia. He needs to receive more than 50% of the national vote during the 14 February election; otherwise, he will have to compete with the runner-up in a run-off in June. Public surveys conducted throughout January show he is very close to achieving 50%, with the most recent poll placing him in the high 40s and trending towards a single round victory.

Whether the election goes to a run-off or not, at this point the most likely outcome is that Prabowo will be Indonesia’s next president. Prabowo’s strategy has revolved around moderating his image and rhetoric, outspending his rivals and – most importantly – tying himself to President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and his popular legacy.

The Narrative

Since the beginning of the election period, Prabowo has sought to project a softer and more [carefully managed public image](#). He has very successfully branded himself as the relatable grandfather figure – the term *gemoy*, which means cute or adorable, has flooded social media, as have videos of him dancing. His opponents have attempted to highlight his [human rights record](#), as well as his role in [controversial programmes](#)

like food estates and a since-cancelled deal to buy used Mirage fighter jets. But these attacks have had no impact on his poll numbers, which have continued to rise.

In part, this rise is because Prabowo has been successful in controlling the narrative. National polling from Indikator [in mid-January](#) found that 63% of respondents were aware of Prabowo's *gemoy* moniker. By comparison, only 17.5% were aware of the term *desak Anies*, which is a kind of dialogue presidential contender Anies Baswedan has been seeking to establish with younger voters. If Anies's goal is to capture the youth vote, it is not working. The same survey found that 72% of respondents under the age of 21 supported Prabowo.

Prabowo, with deeper financial resources, has been outspending his opponents on advertising. [Facebook data](#) on political advertisements shows that from 2 November 2023 through 30 January 2024, the top five Facebook accounts buying political ads in Indonesia spent a total of Rp 4 billion (US\$254,000). Of those ad buys, 65% came from Prabowo campaign accounts, or members of his coalition such as Agus Yudhoyono, while 35% came from the campaign of Ganjar Pranowo; Anies's campaign has had very little ad buy activity on Facebook. Even if Anies or Ganjar have effective lines of attack or good policy ideas, they have struggled to break through because of Prabowo's dominance of the narrative.

The Jokowi Factor

While Prabowo may be outspending his opponents, the most important factor in his rising poll numbers is indisputably Jokowi's increasingly open public support. This is a function of Jokowi's extremely high approval ratings and personal popularity. The Indonesian electorate is, by and large, happy with how the country has been run under Jokowi's leadership. The majority of voters are willing to vote for a candidate who is perceived as his successor and who will commit to continuing his policies. That candidate is Prabowo Subianto.



Though he has employed a variety of methods to boost his popularity, Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto's rising poll numbers can be greatly attributed to outgoing President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's increasingly open public support for him. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The issue of social assistance (*bantuan sosial* or *bansos*) encapsulates the electoral and policy dynamics at play here. Jokowi's endorsement of Prabowo is permissible under the law, as long as he does not use state resources or facilities as part of that support. However, the state has increased its distribution of social assistance in recent months and this development has been seen by many as a thinly veiled attempt to [increase support](#) for Prabowo.

Based on [available polling](#), however, the public does not see it that way. When Charta Politika asked respondents in January if they had ever seen the distribution of government social assistance linked to political campaigns, 81% said no. The increased budget for social assistance was approved by the legislature last year in part because it was expected that an impending drought would impair harvests and drive the price of rice up, which indeed [has happened](#) in many parts of Indonesia. While there is a discussion to be had about the extent to which social assistance is being politicised, and how more transparent mechanisms for distribution would be good, it is extremely politically challenging to attack increased social assistance which people both need and like, even if it is dispensed in an election year.

This use of social assistance has made it difficult for Anies and Ganjar to control the narrative more generally. The reason attacks on Jokowi, and by extension, Prabowo, have largely failed to land with the Indonesian electorate is that the policies they are advocating are popular and the challengers have struggled to articulate clear, compelling alternative visions.

Jokowi's approval rating has remained at around 80% throughout the election, and controversial issues, such as the Constitutional Court ruling on his son's eligibility to run as a vice presidential candidate or the politicisation of social assistance, have not undermined his popularity. Like it or not, from a pragmatic point of view, the majority of voters seem to find these developments acceptable as long as the government continues delivering on popular policies.

The Mandate

Ultimately, this election has been as much a referendum on Jokowi and his legacy as it has been about the three candidates vying for office. And Prabowo, if he wins, will now be locked into delivering the same kind of popular policies as his predecessor had. For now, Prabowo is portraying himself as the relatable elder statesman who is going to keep a steady hand on the wheel and drive the economy and the nation forward for the next few years in much the same way as Jokowi did.

Voters have responded positively to this idea, and as long as this unstated pact holds, we might expect smooth sailing ahead. But there will not be much room for improvising, and if economic growth stagnates or if the state's fiscal health takes a turn for the worse, Prabowo may find the electorate less forgiving than it has been so far. And as we have [seen in the Philippines](#) recently, there is always a danger that these kinds of mutually beneficial partnerships can quickly fall apart when the actors involved suddenly find their interests are no longer aligned.

James GUILD is an Adjunct Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg