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## **Prabowo's Victory and Competing Visions of Democracy in Indonesia: Post-Election Reflections**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*The February 2024 elections brought to the fore the competing visions of democracy that exist within Indonesia, underscoring the rural-urban socio-economic divide and the stark differences in how democracy is perceived across various segments of the population.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Two months after the 14 February elections, questions still linger about the state of democracy in Indonesia. Many were concerned about its future, citing Prabowo Subianto's Soeharto-era track record and the possibility of election fraud. Yet, pronouncements that Indonesian democracy is dead are premature; we argue that perceptions of democracy differ across the diverse population of the country.

The practice of democracy in Indonesia over the past 10 years reveals competing visions of the concept. This is evident in the election outcome, which reflects how liberal visions of democracy contended with another vision of democracy that offers a system of government and a leadership style that is probably recognised as more effective in [delivering policy outcomes](#) for the average Indonesian.

To discuss these differing visions, however, we must first talk about the man who thoroughly understood the landscape of “democracies” and influenced it: Indonesia’s seventh president, Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”).

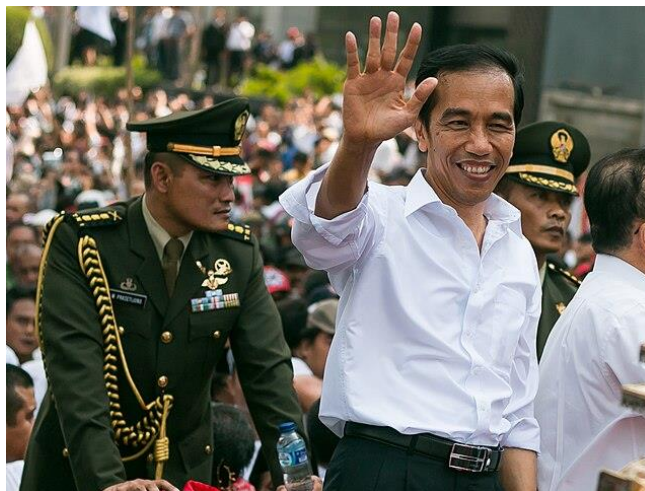
## Joko Widodo: A Man of Conviction, Not Contradictions?

President Jokowi has unquestionably reshaped Indonesian politics. He rose from humble origins, yet his prominence now surpasses that of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), his political home for the past two decades.

International observers regarded the president as "[a new hope](#)" in 2014, hailing Jokowi's narrow victory over Prabowo as the [survival of Indonesian democracy](#). Ten years later, Jokowi has allied with his erstwhile opponent from the 2014 and 2019 elections, the purported military strongman Prabowo, with his son Gibran bolstering the latter's presidential ticket.

Jokowi's political prowess, evident in his ability to [co-opt](#) former political opponents, resulted in an all-powerful coalition in the House of Representatives. During his second term, the pro-government coalition held approximately 82% of the seats – the [highest](#) percentage in the post-Soeharto era. Consequently, many of the president's agendas have been virtually unopposed: the Omnibus Bill on Job Creation, the revision of the Village Law, and the State Civil Service Law, among others.

Here, Jokowi's insight into the majority Javanese society and his Javanese leadership mindset helped him achieve his policy outcomes. Many had questioned and doubted his ability to lead in the past. However, the president has proven them wrong.



Indonesia's seventh president, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, was inaugurated on 20 October 2014, and retained the position for two terms. His brand of Javanese leadership has no doubt influenced the landscape of Indonesian "democracies" in the country, which a Prabowo presidency would need to consider in future policy making. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

He is now the [Bapak](#) of Indonesia, fostering the qualities of a caretaker (*pengasuh*) who embraces even his former opponents. Jokowi knew he needed to avoid showing signs of [weakness](#) by working to unite different segments of society and create a leadership that all could accept. Aside from political parties, the president co-opted activist groups (*relawan*), establishing a clientelist system with diverse allies. Consequently, Indonesian politics has been virtually [opposition-less](#) for the past 10 years.

From the victories of Jokowi, we can now see two competing visions of democracy in Indonesia: one that is familial and Javanese in nature and the other that is liberal.

## Competing Visions of Democracy

For a country as large as Indonesia, a socio-economic divide among its population is almost unavoidable. The [disparity](#) between rural and urban areas has far-reaching consequences, including how each group perceives democracy.

Antlov and Cederroth rightly argued in [Leadership on Java](#) that the keyword in the notion of democracy and human rights as conceived in the Pancasila – or specifically for the Javanese in this context – is not equality but kinship (*kekeluargaan*); the country should function like a family, complete with hierarchies and moral obligations. On the one hand, the figurehead must be able to provide; on the other hand, the members of the family must be able to reciprocate such a deed – *hutang budi*, as the people would understand it.

In this familial understanding of politics, it is preferable not to have a disruptive opposition, and, similar to a family, the polity of Indonesia must be united. Thus, the winning party must be able to “welcome back” the others, just as Jokowi had done to build his grand coalition. Accordingly, Prabowo seems to have welcomed the [Nasdem party and the National Awakening Party \(PKB\)](#) into his winning coalition, with the United Development Party (PPP) rumoured to be next in line for co-optation. The resulting parliamentary supermajority that he is likely to achieve would only allow for a “soft” opposition, comprising the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and possibly PDI-P, as things stand.

Hence, the elections are seen as a mere game to play between “family” members every five years; once the game ends, everyone is expected to get back together to uphold harmony. It is now evident that Jokowi’s aim is to transform the Indonesian polity into a *negara kekeluargaan yang mempraktikkan demokrasi* or a familial state that practices democracy. In this conception of democracy, the emphasis is not on liberal democratic practices; rather, democracy is a hybrid that also encompasses Javanese familial values.

The rural population understands this type of democracy well. Although the 2024 presidential election demonstrated that some perceive democratic practices as allowing for demonstrations or harsh criticism of the government, the people in the villages instead preferred “[performance politics](#)” – democracy as measured by its ability to produce tangible results. Related to this, a [survey](#) even revealed that the rural population is more satisfied with the Widodo administration than the urban population is.

For this reason, policies like the distribution of welfare assistance (*Bansos*) are [popular](#) among the rural population. The [free lunch](#) programme promised by Prabowo resonated with the rural masses, resulting in his candidacy’s relative popularity and electability among rural inhabitants, as reflected in Indikator’s [exit poll](#).

Thus, the question posed by this group of voters is not whether democracy will flourish but “*what does democracy bring to my life?*” That Jokowi has successfully satisfied this segment of the population is unquestioned, as reflected in a survey done by the Polling Institute, showing that 60.4% of Indonesians are [pleased](#) with the current state of democracy.

Some of the urban population no doubt interpret democracy in much the same way as those in the West, emphasising individual [equality](#) and freedom. As mentioned earlier, the Jokowi administration has successfully co-opted significant segments of this population, the activists, by offering them [positions](#) in ministries and state-owned enterprises.

As a result, many of these *relawan* chose to ignore the state's illiberal policies. Even back in 2019, there was hardly a whimper of opposition when Jokowi implemented controversial policies, such as applying [repressive measures](#) against political opponents and raising the [Bansos allocation](#) as the election approached. Some of the "progressives" have only recently become vocal about these issues, following the [split](#) between Jokowi and the PDI-P as the 2024 election approached.

### **A Possible Future Democratic Undercurrent**

Jokowi recognised the existence of two Indonesias – rural and urban. Aside from the socio-economic differences between these two segments of the population, their perceptions of democracy also differ. The wily political operator that he is, Jokowi knew how to penetrate each voter segment, in the process ensuring the continuation of his policies under a Prabowo presidency.

Nonetheless, democracy is far from dead in Indonesia. The issue is not whether democracy survives but how the people perceive democracy in this vast archipelagic country.

There are many possibilities that are not readily apparent when we analyse a situation. Critical inquiry into the evolution of Indonesia's domestic politics is not a static notion; it is one that first needs to be grounded in empirical realities rather than idealised notions, yet remains open to novel ideas that could yield better national outcomes.

As things stand, Indonesia's democracy is still struggling to find its equilibrium; it remains a contested arena, with many, including Jokowi and Prabowo, searching for a better political format that serves the 2025–2045 National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN) and likely to shape and bend democracy to accord with that policy objective.

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