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## **Can Indonesia's Big Cabinet Deliver on Prabowo's Promises?**

*By Richard Borsuk*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, inaugurated on October 20, has appointed a huge cabinet, the country's biggest since one named by Sukarno in 1966. Political observers wonder whether it will help him efficiently achieve his ambitious goals, such as 8 per cent annual economic growth and free nutritious food for young children, or prove unwieldy and create more bureaucracy.*

### **COMMENTARY**

An old idiom asserts that "many hands make light work". In Indonesia, where newly inaugurated President Prabowo Subianto has appointed a huge cabinet – a total of 109 pairs of hands – academics and others are wondering if too many hands will make heavy work heavier.

Of that total in the cabinet, 48 are ministers (of which seven are coordinating ministers), 56 are deputy ministers, and five are heads of bodies (such as a new National Nutrition Agency) that carry ministerial status. So, in effect, there are now 53 ministers, compared with 34 under his predecessor, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo.

This new cabinet isn't Indonesia's largest ever. The biggest, with 132, was appointed by founding President Sukarno in February 1966, at a time of great political upheaval and economic shambles in Indonesia. That cabinet, which included a finance minister and a national budget minister, lasted only one month. Sukarno fled the palace during a meeting and later had power wrested away from him by Gen Suharto, who formally became president in 1968.

Prabowo needs good hands on deck to try to fulfil a raft of promises and goals for his five-year term: providing nutritious food to more than 80 million young children and

pregnant women, building three million new homes annually, getting the economy to grow 8 per cent a year (instead of the 5 per cent pace where it's been basically stuck for a decade), and achieving food and energy self-sufficiency, to name some of the bigger ones.

To that partial list, one more challenge can be added: getting such a large cabinet, which includes people from different political parties, to work efficiently and smoothly together without clashing or issuing contradictory regulations. They need to work together, or it will be very hard to accomplish the president's highly ambitious targets.

### **Daunting Bureaucracy**

Many political observers think it is unwieldy to field such a large team and that new bureaucracies might be created on top or alongside existing ones. As it is, Indonesia already has a giant and daunting bureaucracy. (A World Bank report said the civil service expanded by 25 per cent from 3.6 million in 2006 to more than 4.5 million in 2018.)

The cabinet is "far too big" and with it Prabowo has "created a problem for himself", commented Yanuar Nugroho, a senior fellow at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute who was an aide to President Joko Widodo during his first term (2014-2019). He estimates it could take six months to a year before the cabinet is fully functioning.

Prabowo, who will face huge challenges finding funds for his planned programmes, has said that a big country like Indonesia needs a big cabinet, and the one he has named represents all of Indonesia. *Benar News* on October 22 quoted a Prabowo spokesman as saying, "This is not a bloated cabinet; rather, it is one that is much more focused".

The size reflects how Prabowo wanted to get in representatives of all the parties that supported him. His team includes 17 ministers who had been in the last Jokowi cabinet. Critics say that's in part a thank-you to Jokowi for his pivotal help in getting Prabowo elected.

### **Eliminated Ceiling on Cabinet Numbers**

Education, a key area for Indonesia's future, is an example of where multiple ministers have been appointed. In Jokowi's second five-year term, there was one minister whose portfolio was education and culture, research and technology. In the Prabowo cabinet, three ministers are covering those areas: one for primary and secondary schools, one for higher education, science and technology, and a third as minister of culture. They all come under the coordinating minister for human development and cultural affairs.

Until recently, it wouldn't have been possible for Prabowo to name such a big cabinet. There was a 2008 law placing a ceiling on the number of cabinet ministers at 34. But that law was quickly amended by parliament in September, and now there is no ceiling for any president.

*The Jakarta Post* reported the then-administrative and bureaucratic reform minister in

Jokowi's cabinet as saying that the government believed the bill allowing an unlimited number of cabinet ministers "will support our collective effort to fix Indonesia's governance system".

### **Warning on Corruption**

In Indonesia, "governance" problems include corruption, a perennial issue. In Jokowi's 10 years as president, six ministers were sentenced to jail on corruption charges.

Prabowo has warned his ministers to be clean. In his inaugural speech, he said, "We must confront the reality that there are still far too many leaks, abuses, and instances of corruption in our country".

Another reality is that with the bulk of parties forming part of the big cabinet, it doesn't appear there will be significant checks on a strong executive, which Prabowo is expected to be. "Ministers may become more preoccupied with safeguarding their political alliances and positions than with implementing daring, essential reforms," says Virdika Rizky Utama, a lecturer at President University in Jakarta. "This results in a form of governance stagnation, in which critical issues such as poverty reduction, public health, and educational reforms are neglected in favour of maintaining political balance within the cabinet".

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