

Elections in Indonesia: Looking at the presidential duel

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Indonesia's incumbent president, Joko Widodo, won the country's general elections on 17 April 2019, beating his rival, Prabowo Subianto, who had a nefarious military past. A victory for democracy? It's not that simple...

The election result will only be officially announced in a month's time. For the presidential election, it already seems clear that Joko Widodo, known as "Jokowi", obtained about 55% of the vote, against 45% for Prabowo Subianto, who is unconvincingly contesting these figures and has denounced the regime's "organized fraud". However, the poll also concerned the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, provincial governorates and municipal councils - about 20,000 offices and 245,000 candidates. Appropriate figures for this huge Asian archipelago, 4,800 km long, separating the Indian Ocean from the Pacific and stretching to the outskirts of Australia.

Pressure from Islamic fundamentalists

It is therefore currently impossible to assess the "electoral map" of the country after April 17. To stick to the presidential election, the profile of the candidates seems to embody two clearly opposed options. Jokowi, 57, was not part of the traditional establishment until he was first elected in 2014; he has presented himself as a liberal and effective technocrat, advocating tolerance. Prabowo, 67, a former general and a multimillionaire, embodies the politico-military class which emerged from the dictatorship of Suharto, established in 1965-1966 by the largest anti-Communist massacre of the last century (the dictatorship was overthrown in 1998); he has led military units that have committed many crimes and has the support of the most intolerant Islamic-conservative circles. He is, undoubtedly, a nasty piece of work.

However, in the quest for popular votes, Prabowo made agreements with some unions on a "social" agenda, and sought to win over the peasantry, some of whose income has been chipped away by inflation. As for Jokowi, during his first term, he focused on the former head of the Indonesian secret service, as well as General Wiranto, who was placed in 2016 at the head of the ministry controlling the security services, when he had been charged with crimes against humanity by a UN-sponsored tribunal!

In addition, Jokowi has chosen as his vice president in this race a very conservative ulema (theologian), Ma'ruf Amin (76) who was one of the people responsible for a violent mass campaign, sectarian and racist, accusing Ahok, a Chinese Christian who is the former governor of the capital, Jakarta, of blasphemy. It is possible that Joko Widodo once again obtained electoral support from the lower classes, non-conservative Muslims and minorities. However, in reality, freedoms are still restricted in Indonesia under the pressure notably of rigid Islamist currents.

Nationalist accents

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and the vast majority of Muslims live in Asia.

However, the centres of political-theological authority are in the Middle East. With the decisive help of petrodollars, they seek to impose on local cultures their version of orthodoxy, like the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. Traditional Indonesian Islam is syncretic, incorporating local beliefs, and is tolerant at the religious level although not necessarily at the political level!

Islamist movements, for their part, carry out a constant offensive against minority religions, homosexuals, women, freedom of expression and behaviour. The situation varies from place to place, but, increasingly, the administrative powers yield to the demands of intolerant movements that want to remove from the public space all that is not "Muslim" (in their sectarian definition of the term).

Jokowi has proved unable to counter the growing power of the daily dictatorship of sectarian religious movements. On the economic level, he has given priority to the development of infrastructure in this gigantic archipelago - but for whose benefit? Is it really the local people who benefit most, or the larger companies that have greater access to markets and resources?

Jokowi and Prabowo agree on massively opening the country to palm oil plantations to the detriment of rural populations and at the cost of rapid deforestation. The social, environmental and health costs of this industrial culture are well known, to the extent that the subject has become a subject of controversy between Djakarta and the European Union: the electoral campaign was conducted under nationalistic accents against foreign interference. After Malaysia, the global expansion of palm oil is spreading through Indonesia (and parts of Africa).

Prabowo's victory in the presidential election would have been very bad news - but Jokowi's is not good news.

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P.S.

• Translation IVP:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6047>