



Prabowo's Presidency: What it Means for Indonesia's Future and the Indo-Pacific

By: ERIN Katrina Titiheruw | Mar 24th 2024



Figure 1: Mr. Prabowo during the campaign / IMAGE/ BBC

Abstract:

The article discusses the political landscape in Indonesia leading up to the projected presidency of former general Prabowo Subianto, despite his controversial past related to alleged human rights abuses. The preliminary election results suggest a landslide victory for Prabowo and his running mate, Gibran, pending official confirmation. Factors

contributing to Prabowo's rise include his committed support base, a shift in public perception facilitated by outgoing President Jokowi, and the consolidation of political power over the years. Foreign policy implications under a Prabowo-Gibran administration are anticipated to maintain continuity with Jokowi's pragmatic approach, focusing on economic diplomacy and ASEAN activism while navigating tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Despite optimism, challenges remain, including potential conflicts and the need for enhanced national security measures.

Introduction

On February 14, 2024, former general Prabowo Subianto, whose career became mired in controversy related to alleged human rights abuses, seemed ready to ascend the presidency in Indonesia. Although the official results will not be confirmed until March 20, the preliminary election results have indicated that Prabowo is projected to win the race in a landslide. Unofficial vote counts from respected polling agencies have surmised that the results point to Prabowo-Gibran's victory, even before the national electoral authorities, the KPU, have finalized the vote counts in March. With little to no irregularities, Prabowo, along with incumbent President Jokowi's son, Gibran, as his running mate, is projected to win 60% of the total vote.¹

The results of the election come hardly as a shock to many analysts who have been predicting Prabowo's likely victory from an increase in favorability observed from late January to early February. This is seen from predictions nearing the voting day projecting a landslide majority for Prabowo-Gibran. In the initial days of the campaign season, the neck-to-

neck polling predicted an election run-off between Prabowo and the two other rival candidates, former Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo from the ruling party, incumbent President Jokowi's party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), and former Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan being backed by various parties. However, on election day, the quick count showed that Prabowo-Gibran won big in Central and East Java (even beating Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo on his home turf), two provinces that are known to be indicators of an electoral victory (Lau et al. 2024).² In Central Java, Prabowo obtained 53% of the vote, with a whopping 66% of the vote in East Java, which were provinces won by Jokowi in the 2019 election against Prabowo. Additionally, Prabowo also garnered the majority of the vote in other provinces, such as North Bali and North Sumatra. The Quick Count results released by the Indonesian Survey Institute [Lembaga Survei Indonesia] from Prabowo managed to outdo even Jokowi's victory in 2019, winning the majority of the vote in 35 out of 38 provinces (Krisiandi & Wiryono, 2024).³ Immediately after the initial tally has been accounted for, suspicions and accusations of fraud and voter tampering are growing in an "atmosphere that is overall not conducive to democracy" (Wilson as cited in Ewe, 2024).

Several factors can be identified to explain Prabowo's rise to the presidency, such as his committed core of supporters forming 45% of the total vote in his previous defeats, outgoing President Jokowi's role in the rehabilitation of his more "calmer, and inclusive" image, and the mobilization of the state apparatus and support of a sitting President with a 75% popularity rate (Jaffrey & Warburton, 2024)⁴.

The Rise of Prabowo

Prabowo gained prominence as a military commander during former President Suharto's regime, in which he was accused of alleged human rights abuses, such as his primary role in the abduction and disappearances of student activists in the 1998 demonstrations under the order of then-President Suharto (National Security Archive, 2018). He was also implicated in the abduction and alleged torture of student activists during Suharto's rule. After Suharto stepped down in 1998, he became a businessman before running for the presidency in 2014 and 2019, losing out to incumbent President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo in both elections. Despite his hostile attacks on his rival Jokowi during both election seasons, Jokowi offered an opportunity to neutralize his former opponent by joining Jokowi's administration as Defense Minister throughout his second term in office. This also offered him the opportunity to rehabilitate his image from a fiery ultra-nationalist wielding Islamist identity politics to a "mature statesman".

⁵ While Jokowi's first election in 2014 was heralded as a "triumph of democracy" (Beech, 2014), Jokowi's second administration oversaw by what analysts and activists have decried as 'democratic decline' through the weakening of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the arrests of activists, as well as attempts to delay the election or to extend his tenure to a third term in office, which were eventually blocked by party leader Megawati Soekarnoputri of his party, the ruling PDIP party (Baker, 2023). ⁶

Prabowo's rise to the top seat was not inevitable, but the consolidation of political parties over 20 years post-reformasi has resulted in what

Professor Max Lane of ISEAS Yusof Ishak has referred to as the “homogenization of the political culture” of the country, giving way to a power struggle of personal rivalries and ambitions, facilitating the entrenchment of political dynasty-building. ⁷In late 2023, mere months away from election day, a controversial ruling by the constitutional court, chaired by the President’s son-in-law, enabled a legal loophole that eliminated legal barriers for realizing his post-presidency influence. When this cleared the way for Jokowi’s son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, to move forward as his running mate, this paved the way for Prabowo to boost his electability ratings to over 40%, buoyed by the support from a sitting president with a 75-80% favorability rating. ⁸ Despite student protests, academic critiques, and a trending documentary released days before the election alleging Jokowi’s election rigging and role in perpetuating the country’s democratic decline,⁹ Prabowo-Gibran’s favorability rating seemed to never waver in spite of discourse on allegations of electoral fraud (Ewe, 2024).

Foreign Policy Implications

During his second term, President Joko Widodo's foreign policy underwent a noticeable shift. This was marked by Indonesia's heightened engagement within ASEAN, particularly regarding the Myanmar issue, its ASEAN chairmanship, involvement in the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and hosting the G20 Summit. This evolution prompts inquiries into Indonesia's foreign policy direction as it navigates the need for swift responses to urgent global matters alongside the delicate balance of national interests and aspirations for regional influence. The intensifying competition among major powers

presents formidable obstacles to Indonesia's security and interests, notably highlighted by the tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, where any military confrontation could endanger Southeast Asia's stability. Moreover, the technological and economic rivalry between the United States and China, encompassing issues such as the trade dispute and competition in burgeoning sectors like electric vehicles and critical minerals, introduces additional intricacies for Southeast Asian countries. This rivalry may entice them to align with particular powers, potentially compromising their long-term strategic independence. Foreign policy in Indonesia has been mostly relegated to the discretion of the President and the Ministry of Foreign Relations. President Jokowi's first administration showed little interest in pursuing an active foreign policy strategy while pivoting to increased 'activism' in undertaking the ASEAN chairmanship and taking a risk in hosting the G20 summit in the midst of the rising tensions amidst the Russia-Ukraine conflict. There is an increased necessity for Indonesia to steer a robust foreign policy strategy. Thus, between the escalating tensions of rival states and global conflict that show no signs of abatement, the new leadership is expected to be more responsive in maximizing its national interests and building the foundation to become an influential middle power.

Some argue that Prabowo-Gibran's campaign rode on the coattails of Jokowi's popularity, touting continuity of their policies (Suryana, 2024).¹⁰ Questions have been raised on how this applies to foreign policy.

Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma of CSIS Indonesia's Department of International Relations, noted that "foreign policy has historically and up to the present day not been a flashpoint issue in elections, unlike in South

Korea,” (CIPR’s Podcast with M.W. Kharisma, March 13, 2024) describes the development of foreign policy to be inward-looking, under the domain of the bureaucracy, more specifically, the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Due to the relative lack of salience with the public, one can give the benefit of the doubt as to the continuation of Jokowi sustaining the “free and active” paradigm long part of Indonesian foreign policy. Some analysts, such as Ben Bland, writing in his op-ed for *Foreign Affairs*, are anticipating that Prabowo would most likely follow Jokowi’s footsteps in maintaining a “pragmatic approach” towards China by embracing Beijing’s funding for Indonesia’s infrastructure development as well as courting investments for sectors such as e-commerce, minerals processing, and the manufacturing of EV batteries (2024). He predicts that Prabowo would be much more active in taking on a global role compared to outgoing President Jokowi’s known discomfort at attending global summits such as the UN General Assembly. During Suharto’s regime, Prabowo studied at Fort Benning, developing links with the US military. Despite stronger links to the West as a result of his overseas education, Prabowo’s fiery nationalist rhetoric makes no exceptions, most likely to bristle if China’s belligerency threatens Indonesia’s maritime sovereignty in the “exclusive economic zone”, while implying that Europe and countries of the West were no longer worthy to be partners with claims that the balance of global power had shifted to Asia (Bland, 2024).¹¹

Kharisma highlights two central themes of Indonesian foreign policy under the Jokowi administration, which are economic diplomacy (as evident from spearheading the appeal to the WTO to allow the government’s ban on nickel ore export)¹² and ‘activism’ in ASEAN towards the conflict in

Myanmar. He notes that it is likely that Prabowo would continue Jokowi's industrial policies to develop Indonesia's nickel mining industry through down streaming, particularly due to the fact that throughout the campaign season, Prabowo himself has never expressed any objection to Jokowi's policies. Additionally, Kharisma makes the observation that Prabowo's background in business ventures in his post-military career is a positive indicator of the potential to continue Jokowi's outlook on foreign policy: as an outlet to bring concrete investment deals and to open new markets for Indonesian exports (CIPR's Podcast with M.W. Kharisma, March 13, 2024). However, this is a significant departure from his nationalist rhetoric in his 2014 and 2019 electoral campaigns, where he proclaimed suspicion of Jokowi's gusto on bringing in foreign investment. On the other hand, Indonesia's increasingly active role in ASEAN forums could be more attributed to the goals and agenda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by Retno Marsudi in the outgoing administration (most political analysts have predicted that she would be replaced in the next administration¹³) as Kharisma opines that Jokowi was more focused on building a forum for emerging economies by pushing for further economic integration in the region.¹⁴

The Prabowo-Gibran administration's approach to strengthening national security amidst escalating tensions between China and Taiwan and conflicts in the South China Sea appears to be cautiously optimistic. Prabowo expresses optimism about neighbouring powers acting responsibly, particularly China, the US, and the Philippines, believing that market interests will mitigate conflict tendencies. However, there's a recognition that

interdependence doesn't necessarily guarantee immunity from conflict, especially considering the ongoing war in Ukraine. While Prabowo continues to bolster the armed forces with asset acquisitions, it remains unclear whether this is solely for maritime and air security or if it involves investments in Kalimantan, closer to the South China Sea. There's a need for enhanced preparedness for potential conflicts in the South China Sea, although efforts are aimed at avoiding public alarm. Prabowo's stance on recognizing the possibility of war in the South China Sea or Taiwan, including the nuclear aspect, remains undisclosed (CIPR's Podcast with M.W. Kharisma, March 13, 2024).

Author's Bio:

ERIN Katrina Titisheruw is Consortium's Intern for Spring 2024, and she is a student at the Department of International Relations and Peace Studies, at Asia Pacific University, Beppu, Japan.

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