



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Prabowo Subianto's Victory: Another Democratic Transition of Power in Indonesia

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Cover Photographs:

Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto and running mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka campaigning on November 28, 2023.

Source: [Gerindra Party Official Website](#)

Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto exhibiting their bond over lunch in Magelang Regency, Central Java, on January 29, 2024. Source: [Gerindra Party Official Website](#)

Prabowo Subianto, the Indonesian Defense Minister, and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, declaring victory after the 'quick count' tally, on February 14, 2024. Source: [Prabowo Subianto](#)

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Introduction

On February 14, in the world's largest 'single-day' election in the world's third-largest democracy and fourth-most populous country, Indonesian voters elected Prabowo Subianto as the next president. Currently serving as Defence Minister, Prabowo, a former general with a controversial past, gained an estimated 58.71 % of the vote, and will succeed the popular incumbent Joko Widodo 'Jokowi'¹. Indonesia's 'quick counts' have been performed by multiple organisations, and all indicate that Prabowo will secure the necessary votes to avoid a June run-off against his rivals.

The Election Commission (KPU) will announce the final results on March 20, 2024, but it appears highly unlikely that the official results will differ significantly. Prabowo, along with his running mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka, have won by a much wider margin than expected. Despite many analysts and predictions suggesting that there would not be a clear majority in the elections, Prabowo and Gibran have defied the odds and secured a resounding victory. Anies Baswedan – former Governor of Jakarta, secured around 25.25% of the popular vote, and Ganjar Pranowo, the candidate of Megawati's PDI-P, received around 16.04% of the votes cast. Pranowo and Baswedan only managed to secure a combined 41.29% of the vote.² The impressive margin of Prabowo's victory indicates that he is poised to become Indonesia's next leader, taking over from President Joko Widodo in October 2024, when the latter completes his second term.

In the 2024 elections, Indonesia's democracy came under heavy scrutiny. Jokowi, initially seen as a reformer, was criticised for allowing patronage-driven politics to resurface. This was evident when his eldest son, Gibran, ran as a running mate with Prabowo. In fact, the constitutional court of Indonesia cleared the path for Gibran to run as a vice-presidential candidate by ruling in October 2023 to allow candidates under the statutory age of 40, with experience

¹ Arlinta, Deonisia, Wisanggeni, Satrio Pangarso and Ramadhan, Fajar. "Kompas R&D "Quick Count" Results: Prabowo-Gibran Win One Round". Litbang Kompas. Accessed from, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/polhuk/2024/>

² Ibid.

as elected officials, to run in the presidential elections.³ This move was criticised as an attempt to build a political dynasty. The fact that Gibran's uncle (Jokowi's brother-in-law) was the Constitutional Court's Chief Justice during the period when the ruling was announced, raised concerns about state interference and a conflict of interest. During the first presidential debate on December 12, 2023, the issue of Jokowi's support for Prabowo and Gibran, as opposed to his own political party, the PDI-P's candidate Ganjar Pranowo, was highlighted throughout the 75-day campaign. Murky politics and state interference sullied the 2024 presidential race, with many observers and experts alleging the use of state instruments to help Prabowo-Gibran win the election⁴.

Interestingly, despite the mounting criticism against Jokowi for his support for the Prabowo-Gibran ticket and accusations regarding the use of the state apparatus, the pair remained the frontrunners in the campaign, and steadily gained support from Indonesian voters. Despite finger pointing about democratic backsliding, many Indonesians are more concerned with the continuation of Jokowi's economic policies, especially those that have helped in controlling inflation and providing welfare for all disadvantaged groups, which Prabowo has promised to continue.

Understanding the New President

Prabowo Subianto's victory comes after two previous failed attempts against incumbent Jokowi in 2014 and 2019. With clear links to the Suharto dictatorship (1967-98), not only as a lieutenant general of the Indonesian special forces, but also as his former son-in-law, Prabowo has a reputation for advancing populist ideologies and a preference for authoritarian rule. Prabowo is a former Kopassus special forces commander who was dismissed from the military due to human rights violations in Papua and East Timor, and has been linked to kidnappings of pro-democratic student activists in 1998.⁵ The United States and Australia banned his entry for nearly two decades for alleged abuses

³ Janti, Nur. "BREAKING: Constitutional Court Opens Door for Jokowi's Son To Run In Presidential Poll". Jakarta Post. (October 16, 2023) Accessed from, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/>

⁴ Lamb, Kate and Widiyanto, Stanley. "Indonesia Leader Accused Of Bias, Interference In Presidential Election". Reuters. (February 1, 2024). Accessed from, <https://www.reuters.com/world/>

⁵ "Millions of Indonesians choose new President in one of world's largest elections". The Hindu. (February 14, 2024). Accessed from, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/>

of human rights and this only changed when the United States invited Prabowo in October 2020 as Indonesia's Defence Minister.⁶

Commentators attribute Prabowo's victory after two previous failed attempts not only to Jokowi's support, but also to the rebranding of his image. In his previous campaigns, Prabowo asserted his macho military image as an ardent nationalist and was well known for his temper. This time, however, Prabowo embraced an image of an "even-tempered and easy-going politician"⁷ and a "cute grandfather"⁸ with a vulnerable side through social media. With nearly 56.4 percent of voters under the age of 40⁹, social media played a pivotal role in this election compared to the previous years. Understanding the reality of the young voters and the importance of social media to gain support, Prabowo rebranded himself and shed his strongman personality online. Instead of only posting nationalist speeches, Prabowo disseminated TikTok videos of himself dancing. The makeover was based on the fact that Prabowo's losses were at least partly because of his strongman image and arrogant behaviour that alienated many people. Prabowo recognised that he was targeting a generation that had no memory of the Suharto dictatorship, so he portrayed himself as a jocular grandfather who will prioritise economic issues like unemployment and the cost of living, which many young Indonesians are more concerned about.

Implications of Prabowo's victory

The continuation of Jokowi's policies, on both economic and foreign policy fronts, has been a major deciding factor in the outcome of the elections. Prabowo's campaign manifesto¹⁰ committed to continuing Jokowi's policies and transforming Indonesia into an advanced economy by 2045. Prabowo also plans to pursue a foreign policy similar to Jokowi's, guided by the principle of "non-membership of any geopolitical bloc" and having "good relationships with everybody"¹¹. Prabowo defines his approach as a 'good neighbour policy'

⁶ Suryadinata, Leo. "Why Was Prabowo Invited to the US?" ISEAS. (2020, October 23). Accessed from, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/why-was-prabowo-invited-to-the-us/>

⁷ "Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto Sheds Strongman Image As He Guns For Top Job By Being 'Jokowi's Man'". South China Morning Post. (2023, July 23). Accessed from, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/>

⁸ Tan, Yvette and Husada, Trisha. "Prabowo Subianto: Indonesia's 'Cuddly Grandpa' With A Bloody Past". BBC News. (2024, February 6). Accessed from, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68028295>

⁹ Elston, Thai-Binh. "Indonesia's Presidential Elections: Old Guard, New Guard, and TikTok". Foreign Policy Research Institute. (February 13, 2024). Accessed from, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/>

¹⁰ Prabowo-Gibran 2024 Manifesto can be accessed from, <https://mmc.tirto.id/documents/>

¹¹ Speech can be accessed here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpZdLC2tRRI>

that will cooperate with everyone, including the United States and China. While Prabowo aims to be good friends with everyone, his manifesto also recognised that the only way to ensure that Indonesia enjoys a powerful geopolitical presence is by a “well-managed defence and security system that can protect the nation and ensure its own security”.

Thus, while continuing Jokowi's policies, Prabowo plans to take a more assertive approach, especially with regard to defence and security issues. During the January 7 presidential debate that focused on foreign policy and national security, Prabowo emphasised the importance of building a strong maritime defence capacity to defend Indonesia in the North Natuna Sea.¹² While he did not outline any specific strategies for maintaining regional stability and security, he underscored the importance of strengthening the Indonesian Navy and Coast Guard's maritime defence capability. To improve Indonesia's defence capabilities, he will likely make greater effort to boost the defence sector, for which he might look towards the United States and other external partners.

The victory of Prabowo could have a significant impact on Indonesia's relationships amidst the growing rivalry between the US and China. There are many opinions regarding Prabowo's relative perception of these two powers. During his campaign, he has consistently stated that he intends to maintain a neutral stance and good relations with both the US and China. He has emphasised that he would prioritise Indonesia's national interests and would not choose between the two powers. His track record as a defence minister suggests that he leans towards strengthening defence ties with both Washington and China. While he has recently acquired 24 F-15EX fighter aircraft¹³ from the United States, he has also maintained a good relationship with China, and some observers criticise him for being “too soft on China”¹⁴ on security issues.

That said, Prabowo views China as a significant contributor to Indonesia's economy, and this factor will have a significant impact on his policies. China is a crucial source of funding for most of Indonesia's development projects, including infrastructure. For instance, during the bidding for Indonesia's high-

¹² Darmawan, Aristoyo Rizka. “Assessing Indonesia's potential presidents' South China Sea strategies”. East Asia Forum. (2024, February 13). Accessed from, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/>

¹³ Costa, Gusto Da. “Indonesia's Acquisition Of F-15EX Fighters To Enhance Regional Security”. Indo-Pacific Defence Forum. (2023, October 17). Accessed from, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/10/>

¹⁴ Zhang, Lim Min and Lim, Joyce. “What Will Prabowo's China Policy Look Like? Analysts Expect Pragmatism Over Nationalism”. Strait Times. (2024, February 16). Accessed from, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/>

speed railway or 'Whoosh', when Indonesia was looking for investors, China won the bid over Japan because Indonesia preferred China's business-focused approach.¹⁵ Prabowo's administration will need to make similar key decisions when it comes to funding Jokowi's ambitious plan to relocate Indonesia's capital to Ibu Kota Nusantara in East Kalimantan by 2045. Since the government can only provide 20 percent of the estimated US \$35 billion required for the project, Prabowo's administration will have to secure 80 percent of the funding from the private sector and foreign investments, most likely from China.¹⁶ Given the numerous infrastructure projects planned by Indonesia for the near future, Jokowi's approach to China will continue. China's economic importance to Indonesia will impact Prabowo's policies significantly, and his approach will be guided more by pragmatism than nationalism.

Conclusion

The victory of Prabowo is expected to provide a measure of continuity to Indonesia's policies. Although Jokowi's endorsement played a major role, other candidates failed to effectively challenge Prabowo, or to attract support from young voters despite being closer to their age than he was. Indonesian voters have shown their preference for Jokowi's signature policies by choosing the candidate who is most likely to maintain the economic progress made in the past decade. However, it remains to be seen what vision or strategy of his own Prabowo will pursue to deliver Indonesia's future prosperity.

The difference between Jokowi and Prabowo is less in terms of the latter's experience and understanding of complex issues, and more one of personality. Although Prabowo successfully rebranded his image for the election campaign, his temperament may add an element of unpredictability. Many analysts have claimed that Jokowi will remain in the shadows and play a significant role even after his term ends, but Prabowo's strongman impulses imply that he will seek to make his own mark on the nation's future.

While there is expectation that Indonesia will continue to make economic strides under Prabowo's leadership, his impact on the continuity of the

¹⁵ Malleck, Julia. "Why China Laid the Tracks for Indonesia's First High-Speed Rail". QUARTZ. (2023, October 2). Accessed from, <https://qz.com/indonesia-whoosh-high-speed-rail-china-belt-and-road-in-1850882868>

¹⁶ Jacob, Charmaine. "Indonesia is moving its capital from Jakarta to Nusantara. Here's why it won't be so easy". CNBC News. (2023, August 23). Accessed from, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/08/28/indonesia>

country's democratic transition, now in its third decade, will be no doubt also be watched closely.



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