

Jokowi's authoritarian turn



Several insightful analyses of Joko Widodo's approach to the presidency have been advanced since he took office. For the most part, these have focused on his overriding preoccupation with domestic economic development, and his lack of a clear ideological orientation in the social and political arenas. [Jacqui Baker has described him](#) as a developmentalist president, who exhibits "impatience with legal complexity" and "illiberal tendencies" consistent with his petite bourgeois class origins. Eve Warburton develops this picture, noting his government's "[statist-nationalist ideological orientation](#)" which sees the maintenance of a strong state and stable political landscape essential for the achievement of economic goals, echoing Burhanuddin Muhtadi's assessment that "[Jokowi seems to think of non-economic sectors as secondary, or as mere instruments for improving the economy and people's welfare](#)".

These analyses suggest that where Jokowi has acted in an illiberal or anti-democratic manner, it is the product of narrow political sensitivities, short-term thinking and ad hoc decision making. But as Jokowi enters the final stretch of his first term, it is appropriate to reflect further on the implications this approach to the presidency has for Indonesian democracy. Jokowi's haphazard approach to dealing with political challenges, perhaps inspired by the prospect of a Jakarta-style sectarian

campaign in 2019, has created some very dangerous precedents for Indonesian democracy.

Efforts to consolidate his political position ahead of April's election have started to encroach upon fundamental democratic norms, and indeed, on core achievements of Indonesia's reform era. In 2018 we saw mounting evidence of the Jokowi government taking an authoritarian turn that contributes to the accelerated [deterioration of Indonesia's democratic status quo identified by Vedi Hadiz last year](#). A large part of this process is the consistent effort to obtain narrow, partisan benefit from the political instrumentalisation of key institutions of state.

Jokowi and the law

The politicisation of legal and law enforcement institutions is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. The complexity of legal regulations and the ubiquity of criminality—particularly corruption—within the state have long provided the opportunity for powerful patrons to control and manipulate their political subordinates with the implicit or explicit threat of prosecution. However, the government's efforts to use legal instruments in this manner has become far more open and systematic under Jokowi.

The warning signs of this shift were evident when Jokowi appointed the Nasdem politician Muhammad Prasetyo as attorney-general—a post traditionally reserved for a non-partisan appointee—in 2014. Almost immediately, the Attorney-General's Office moved to undermine the then-majority opposition coalition by arresting a number of opposition party members on corruption charges. Further weakening of the opposition coalition was achieved in 2015–16, as the Law and Human Rights Ministry used its control over the legal verification of party boards to manipulate factional splits within Golkar and PPP, [and eventually force them into the governing coalition](#).

Criminal investigations have been directed at organisers and benefactors of opposition campaigns. A flurry of [arrests of government critics occurred](#) on the eve of the 212 rally in Jakarta in late 2016; charges were quietly dropped once the crisis had passed. Cases were brought against several leading clerics in the 212 movement, most notably Front Pembela Islam (FPI) leader Rizieq Shihab, who was forced into exile into Saudi Arabia after being [charged with pornography offences](#). The media mogul, opposition financier and Indonesian Unity Party (Perindo) chairman Hary Tanoesoedibjo suddenly switched his allegiance to Jokowi in 2017 after police charged him with [trying to intimidate a public prosecutor over text message](#); Hary's case appears to have made no progress since then. Beyond the tactical use of prosecutions to tame opponents, Jokowi introduced new legal powers to proscribe civil society organisations. The presidential decree, or Perppu, on mass organisations issued in mid-2017 served to abrogate [“almost all meaningful legal protections of freedom of association”](#), adding another repressive instrument to the government's burgeoning toolkit.

The pro-Prabowo opposition coalition of 2014–15, which sought to roll back direct elections and monopolise sites of patronage within the legislature, [possessed a discernibly illiberal character and](#)

[anti-democratic objectives](#). Similarly, the anti-Ahok campaign was founded on a deeply intolerant, majoritarian agenda which threatened the religiously pluralist foundations of Indonesian democracy, with groups like Hizbut Tahrir openly demanding the democratic state be replaced with a theocratic one. Although the Jokowi government employed authoritarian strategies in responding to these political opponents, its approach could be credibly described as [“fighting illiberalism with illiberalism”](#).

In the lead up to the 2019 election, however, the government has turned these repressive strategies against opposition forces working within the boundaries of the democratic status quo. By turning the institutions of security and law enforcement against democratic opposition, the Jokowi administration has overseen a blurring of the lines between the interests of the state and those of the government. Moreover, these policies must be understood as part of a deliberate and increasingly systematic effort to impede and enfeeble the legitimate opposition essential to democratic regimes.

[Below: Listen to Tom Power and Usman Hamid discuss the "authoritarian turn" on New Mandala's new Indonesia podcast, audiopelago]

Protection for support

Through the middle of 2018, a number of high-profile, opposition-affiliated regional leaders announced their support for Jokowi. The widespread view in elite circles was that government actors had threatened these individuals with legal charges—typically relating to corruption—unless they realigned to the incumbent. Perhaps the most prominent of these defectors was Zainul Majdi (Tuan Guru Bajang; TGB), the Governor of West Nusa Tenggara and an influential cleric and Partai Demokrat member. TGB had led Prabowo’s campaign team in the province in 2014, supported the anti-Ahok protests, and been named as one of the 212 Movement’s preferred presidential nominees.

In late May, the KPK announced it might [investigate TGB’s suspected involvement in graft](#) relating to the sale of shares in mining giant Newmont’s Nusa Tenggara operation to the West Nusa Tenggara government. In early July, TGB announced his support for Jokowi’s re-election, much to the chagrin of the 212 Movement and other opposition leaders, several of whom accused him of looking for legal protection. TGB’s successor as NTB governor, PKS politician Zulkieflimansyah—whose name had also been mentioned in connection with the Newmont case—was soon displaying a photo of himself with Jokowi on his WhatsApp profile and intimated to party colleagues his preference for the incumbent president.

In North Maluku, incumbent PKS governor Abdul Ghani Kasuba left his party after insisting on running with PDI-P in the 2018 *pilkada*. In Papua, too, Governor Lukas Enembe—who has been implicated in multiple corruption scandals during his tenure—also announced his support for Jokowi

after winning re-election as a Partai Demokrat cadre. In July, Home Affairs Minister Tjahjo Kumolo claimed that West Sumatra governor, PKS' Irwan Prayitno—another member of Prabowo's 2014 success team—had realigned in a similar fashion.

Efforts at what critics call “criminalisation” of opposition politicians were most frequently attributed to the Attorney-General's Department, which handles a far larger number of corruption investigations and prosecutions than the KPK. The department's activities are almost entirely opaque: unlike the KPK, it does not publish information about its ongoing investigations, and has the authority to open and drop cases at its own discretion. One PDI-P functionary I spoke to described the Attorney General's office as a “political weapon” which “is now routinely used by the government to control opposition politicians, and by Nasdem to coerce subnational executives into joining [it].”

A large number of regional heads did indeed join Nasdem in 2017–18. For instance, during a brief trip by Nasdem chairman Surya Paloh to Southeast Sulawesi in March, [three local regents shifted allegiance to his party](#). Jokowi's campaign now claims to have the support of [31 out of 34 governors, and 359 out of 514](#) mayors and district heads. The electoral implications of this swing in subnational elite support remain to be seen, but the mobilisational capacity of subnational executives is [well-documented](#), and the results of previous elections suggest a degree of correlation between the affiliations of governors and mayors, and the local vote shares of presidential candidates.

The KPK also appears increasingly compromised under Jokowi. The prosecution of Setya Novanto in late 2017 for his role in the electronic identity card (e-KTP) scandal was lauded as a triumph for the agency, but the KPK was also accused of succumbing to political interference after the names of several high-ranking PDIP politicians previously implicated in the case [were removed from Setya's indictment](#). As of October 2018, no high-profile PDI-P politicians have been named suspects by the KPK since the current group of commissioners was appointed in December 2015. This is unlikely to be coincidental: the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) chief Budi Gunawan, who is believed to exert substantial influence among KPK agents recruited from the police force, is a close ally of PDI-P chairperson Megawati Soekarnoputri.

Harassing grassroots opposition

The use of corruption cases for political leverage is not the only way in which the state apparatus is being wielded by the Jokowi government for partisan advantage in the lead-up to the elections. Over the course of 2018, the police have stepped up efforts to repress the #2019GantiPresiden (#2019ChangePresidents; 2019GP) movement. Through the first half of 2018, 2019GP metamorphosed from a viral Twitter hashtag posted by PKS politician Mardani Ali Sera, into a political vehicle with a strong social media presence, its own branded clothing and merchandise, and a formal organisational structure. While 2019GP lacks the overtly Islamist character of the 212

Movement, the groups draw support from similar constituencies, and share an underlying *raison detre* of agitation against an incumbent rather than support for a specific challenger. Indeed, the 2019GP movement's simplistic message—which boils down to “anyone but Jokowi”—positioned it as a vehicle which could swing behind any eventual opposition candidate. This flexibility, which reflected [uncertainty among opposition leaders over Prabowo's desire to stand](#), was apparent even four days before presidential nominations closed when the 2019GP organiser and PKS politician Mardani Ali Sera told me that “Anies Baswedan is the man to beat Jokowi”.

Through the middle of 2018, 2019GP organisers received frequent reports that police were confiscating merchandise from sellers and intimidating people displaying the hashtag. In June through September, scheduled 2019GP events in Serang, Bandung, Pekanbaru, Surabaya, Pontianak, Bangka Belitung, Palembang, Aceh and other parts of the country were prohibited or broken up by the police, often with the assistance of pro-government “counter-protesters”. Following the police disbandment of the Surabaya event, Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security Luhut Pandjaitan argued that 2019GP activities [should indeed be banned](#), so as to avert social discord and clashes between pro-government and opposition demonstrators. The Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia/PSI), which seeks to present itself as a new force for progressive, democratic politics, also supported the movement's suppression on the grounds it was [“directing hatred at the president”](#).

Multiple legal justifications have been mounted in support of the crackdown. In March, the police announced that they were investigating the singer-turned-activist Neno Warisman on the suspicion that her creation of a WhatsApp group using the #2019GantiPresiden hashtag [may contravene the Electronic Transactions Law \(UU ITE\), or even constitute grounds for treason charges](#). Another element of the government's assault on 2019GP has been to assign [anti-system, extremist and caliphal motivations to the movement's organisers](#). Social media messages even circulated claiming one of the suicide bombers responsible for the devastating attack in Surabaya in May had been a 2019GP supporter. ([This has been debunked](#)).

The government's systematic efforts to suppress and delegitimise 2019GP activities represent a new challenge to Indonesia's democratic status quo. The repression of 2019GP is qualitatively different from the [coercive tactics](#) used against Prabowo's party coalition in 2015–16, or [the 2017 ban on Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia](#). Whereas Prabowo's coalition had attempted to roll back elements of Indonesian democracy, and Hizbut Tahrir is open in expressing its caliphal ambitions, 2019GP has not espoused anti-system goals, but rather agitated for *electoral* defeat of Jokowi. Indeed, 2019GP leaders have gone to great pains to establish their movement as a [constitutional](#) expression of democratic opposition. The legitimacy of the group's activities has been endorsed the [General Elections Commission](#), the [Electoral Oversight Agency](#) (Bawaslu), and even some pluralist [NGOs](#) and [public figures](#), while the government's efforts to paint 2019GP as a threat to social harmony and national unity have proven entirely unconvincing. The crackdown on 2019GP represents the first time since the fall of Suharto that a government has used the state security apparatus for the open, large-scale repression of a democratic opposition movement.

Mobilising the military

Concerns have grown during Jokowi's presidency about [the re-emergence of a “dual function” philosophy within the military](#), including through the consolidation of its territorial command structure and the renewed involvement of the army in government-led social and economic programs. In 2018, having strengthened his personal influence within the armed forces through the installation of a personal ally as TNI chief, Jokowi went even further in encouraging the re-politicisation of the TNI.

In June, Jokowi announced a [major and immediate increase in funding](#) to the TNI's village-level commands, *Bintara Pembina Desa/Babinsa*. In July, he delivered a speech to Babinsa officers in Makassar during which he [instructed soldiers at the village level to put a stop to the spread of “hoaxes”](#) such as those associating him with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). In August, Jokowi made another speech in which [he instructed police and military officers](#) to promote his government's programmatic achievements at the community level:

In relation to government programs, the work that we have carried out—I ask all officers to go and promote this to the community. Pass on these [accomplishments] whenever the moment is right to do so.

One of the major achievements of the Yudhoyono years was the acceptance by TNI elites that [“the military was an executive tool of the administration”](#) rather than an autonomous political force in its own right. Yet Jokowi seems prepared to use this tool in service to partisan goals, in the context of a general election campaign. Not since the fall of the New Order have the military and police been deployed in a systematic manner to deliver political advantage to the incumbent government. Should these trends take hold in 2019, it will mark another step in the severe unbalancing of the playing field between government and opposition—a feature associated not with democracy, but rather [with electoral authoritarianism and regime hybridity](#).

One reason for Jokowi's instrumental use of law enforcement and security institutions may be his lack of faith in the reliability and effectiveness of political parties, social organisations and “volunteer” groups. His interactions with parties, political elites and civil society organisations have frequently been fraught; on the other hand, he has learnt that the tools of the state are far more easily deployed and far more effective in overcoming political challenges.

The lesser of two evils?

Writing shortly after Jokowi's inauguration, Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner described the 2014 election as [“the most important in the history of post-Soeharto democracy”](#). They continued:

Neither the 1999 contest between Megawati and Abdurrahman Wahid nor the 2004 and 2009 races between Megawati and Yudhoyono were about the fundamental direction of the country. In contrast, the choice between Jokowi and Prabowo presented Indonesian voters with the option of maintaining the existing democratic polity or sending it on a path of populist experimentation and neo-authoritarian regression.

It is difficult to frame the 2019 contest in the same stark terms. To be sure, Prabowo gave every indication in 2014 that he intended to deliberately and determinedly wind back Indonesian democracy; by comparison, Jokowi's concessions to authoritarianism have been incremental and haphazard—as Eve Warburton says of Jokowi's presidency more broadly, they have been [“defined by ad hocery”](#). Yet he now seems to have settled on a formula for overcoming political challenges, which largely revolves around the application of the most reliable and effective instruments available to the president—the institutions of the state. Most concerning for the quality of democracy in Indonesia, Jokowi and his government have come to treat law enforcement and security services as tools for the repression of opposition, whether it be illiberal and anti-system, or democratic and constitutional.

Of course, the more these strategies are normalised, the more readily available they will be to a Prabowo-style president who harbours ideological hostility towards democracy. Already, Prabowo supporters respond to allegations about their leader's authoritarian objectives by pointing to the democratic regression overseen by Jokowi. In the words of one Gerindra politician I spoke to recently:

Some say Prabowo is authoritarian. What about this government? Hasn't democracy retreated during Jokowi's term? Isn't it the current president who has criminalised opposition, outlawed mass organisations...[and] used the state apparatus against his critics? Who is authoritarian?

Indonesian democracy [has proven resilient over 20 years](#). As next year's elections approach, that resilience will again be tested. It is worth reflecting on what has changed since the previous election cycle. As in 2014, the 2019 election will be a two-horse race. As in 2014, we will have on one side a candidate who styles himself as strongly nationalistic; anti-leftist; pro-military; and open to further encroachment of conservative Islamic agendas into the national political arena. His record on the preservation of human rights, his regard for core democratic principles, his commitment to transparent and accountable government, and his support for a meaningful anti-corruption agenda are all highly dubious. He will be contesting the presidential election with the support of a grand coalition of parties, a strong grip on the media, and an assembly of political elites whose own democratic and reformist credentials should inspire little confidence from the Indonesian electorate.

And on the other side of the presidential ballot paper, we will have Prabowo Subianto.

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