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A protester walks near a fire during a students' protest outside the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta in September 2019.



## Caught between political cartels and public interest

BURHANUDDIN MUHTADI

**J**UST weeks before Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was sworn in for his second term as president, he was greeted with dwindling approval ratings due to massive student protests, forest fire crises in Kalimantan and Sumatra, and a violent communal conflict in Papua. Unlike the euphoria surrounding his first victory in 2014, Jokowi's second term starts in a much more sombre mood.

The public disillusionment, especially among students, stems from

Jokowi's handling of a controversial corruption bill, along with the agreement between his administration and the parliament (DPR) on revising the criminal code, besides other issues. These incidents have tarnished Jokowi's election victory and undermined his second-term agenda. There is now an imminent threat to democratic consolidation and the anti-corruption agenda as oligarchic political elites regain control of the levers of Indonesia's power. Jokowi's second term will also likely see further erosion of democratic values due

to increasing global competition to boost economic growth as economic recession looms.

Still, Jokowi's success in the election is a victory for the stability and sustainability of development programs in Indonesia. From an economic standpoint, it is not difficult to predict the direction that Indonesia will take in the next five years. Based on his campaign promises, victory speeches and his State of the Nation address delivered in August 2019, the economy will remain his main priority. The focus is mainly on the fields of

infrastructure development, human resource development, opening up further investment sectors and the perennial issue of bureaucratic reform.

Missing from Jokowi's speeches after his electoral victory was a focus on the agenda of human rights and eradicating corruption. Jokowi's attention to anti-corruption is limited to eradicating extortion, which can be interpreted within the context of his ambition to push ahead with massive deregulation. He also considers extortion to be a bureaucratic exaction that causes high costs for the economy and prevents foreign investment from entering the country.

At this point, there is almost no significant difference between the main agendas of Jokowi's first and second term. The game-changing factor is the constitutional term limit. Because Jokowi will not be able to run as a presidential candidate again, many predict that his performance will be less unconstrained by the electoral burden in his last term.

But observers may misinterpret Jokowi's statement about executing his government's agenda. In a speech he delivered at the 2019 National Development Planning Conference to formulate the government's 2020 economic agenda, Jokowi stated that 'in the next five years, I won't have any burden, I can't run again. So anything that will bring the most benefit for this country, I would do it without any hesitation...'. A narrow interpretation of the statement is that, when it comes to economic reform, he will govern without being hampered by concern about re-election.

Those who made overly optimistic assessments of what Jokowi's second term might look like—particularly on how he would govern unconstrained when it comes to political and human rights reform—misunderstand

Jokowi's character. Because his 'without burden' statement was made in the context of economic reform, one can only predict that Jokowi will be more courageous in carrying out unpopular economic policies to fulfil the commitment to the economic reforms that he promised.

For example, the Jokowi administration has submitted the government's plan to raise the Healthcare and Social Security Agency's (BPJS Kesehatan) contributions to 100 per cent due to the agency's severe financial deficit. Jokowi is strongly committed to repealing hundreds of regulations that suppress investment appetite. He is also prepared to revise Labour Law 13 of 2003, which has been considered too taxing for investors because of the excessive severance pay, burdensome minimum wage level, layoff provisions and prohibition on outsourcing permitted by the legislation.

Since his first term, Jokowi has shown greater interest in economic development than in democratic reform. There are a number of reasons why he might give the economy priority over human rights and anti-corruption issues.

First, by emphasising economic issues, Jokowi encounters less

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opposition and conflict with parliament and opposition parties. Improving infrastructure, creating jobs, developing a digital economy and accelerating economic growth are common goals that other political parties are more likely to support.

Recent surveys highlight the priority that Indonesians give to economic issues as compared to corruption and civil liberties. A 2018 study conducted a nation-wide survey of provincial politicians, who were asked to nominate the top three policy priorities of the government. Their responses were compared with a May 2017 public opinion survey that asked the same questions.

When the most common priorities for both citizens and legislators were compared, economic management and growth issues topped the list. Although both surveys indicated that economic growth was the highest priority, more than half of the politicians identified it as the top priority, whereas only a quarter of the public respondents did so. It is important to note that the survey included economics-related issues such as poverty and unemployment as separate categories to economic management and growth.

Unsurprisingly, few among the elites identified corruption as a high-priority issue. The number of public respondents who give corruption precedence is also unexpectedly low. Civil liberty issues such as overcoming discrimination and improving women's rights received less attention from both groups of respondents, particularly those from lower-middle-class backgrounds.

But this does not mean that economic issues are free from controversy. If Jokowi pushes ahead with economic reform and launches unpopular policies—such as increasing



A 'simple and concrete' understanding of democracy: Joko Widodo greets supporters at a campaign rally in Solo, Indonesia, in April 2019.

fuel prices or revising the Manpower Act—he will have the benefit of being able to ignore the demonstrations and protests because he cannot seek re-election. But this political dynamic may not be the same for his supporting coalition. Although Jokowi cannot run again in 2024, his coalition parties still need to compete in the next election, creating different political incentives.

Jokowi could have added a new political party to his parliamentary coalition in anticipation of defections if he launched controversial policies. Although his coalition parties hold more than 60 per cent of parliamentary seats, if one or two parties defect, Jokowi's plan to execute his economic agenda would be in danger. And although his coalition looks secure on paper, the supporting parties are not controlled directly by Jokowi, but by the party oligarchs.

The second reason for Jokowi's focus on the economy is personal

character, which helps to explain why he tends to ignore appeals for democratic reforms in favour of economic development and growth. Marcus Mietzner's portrayal of Jokowi as a technocratic populist explains why he gives priority to economic development issues. According to Mietzner, Jokowi's political outlook is a combination of non-ideological technocratic pragmatism and social empathy for the poor.

When it comes to democracy, Jokowi does not have a sophisticated vocabulary: he is not someone who likes philosophical or conceptual abstractions about democracy and freedom. His understanding of democracy is simple and concrete. During the 2014 presidential election television debate, Jokowi interpreted democracy simply as 'listening to the people and taking concrete action'. For Jokowi, democracy is meaningful as long as people can enjoy development and social welfare.

Jokowi tends to view non-economic issues as secondary, or merely as instruments to advance economic development. If his economic ambitions collide with the anti-corruption agenda, he tends to prioritise the former. Jusuf Kalla, his former vice-president, also commented that democracy is only a 'tool' to achieve the goals of people's welfare. This view is problematic

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because people's welfare can be achieved without democracy, as in the cases of China and Vietnam, where political stability and economic growth are pursued at the cost of individual freedoms.

The implications of this narrow understanding of the Indonesian political system could be dire, as democracy and civil rights may be forfeited in the name of political stability and economic development.

This also means that democracy and anti-corruption agendas must be framed within an economic context. The most concrete example is Jokowi's directives in 2015 to the Cabinet Secretariat to circulate a letter to law-enforcement officials instructing them that the policies of regional heads would not be held hostage to threats of criminal conviction and corruption accusations. Regional heads had been reluctant to disburse local-government funds for fear of being pursued by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), even though the economic slowdown needs to be overcome by an increase in government spending.

Jokowi's reluctance to pursue democratic reform also stems in part from his inability to run for election again in 2024. In his first term Jokowi still had electoral incentives to demonstrate his concern for the trusted law-enforcement institution, the KPK. The issue of human rights might still receive some attention because there were segments of voters who cared about this issue in the 2019 election. But the electoral incentive disappeared upon his second inauguration. With the democratic reform agenda taking a backseat, there is potential for Jokowi's second term to be more conservative when it comes to maintaining political stability and tolerating dissent.

This is exactly what happened

in the weeks leading up to Jokowi's second inauguration. After his election victory, Jokowi and his immediate circle moved to prepare a blueprint for the economic agenda of his second term. There is little monitoring of the discussion of the Draft Law Bills, both proposed by the government and the parliament. Also, the DPR's custom is to speed up the completion of legislation at the end of a term of office, regardless of how strong the controversy in civil society is.

The entrenched oligarchic forces that have defined Indonesian politics since the New Order era have certainly exploited Jokowi's indifference towards democratic reform and anti-corruption efforts. These oligarchic groups not only have total control over the political parties but are also part of an elite economic class which controls the material resources that steer the course of Indonesian politics. Inside and outside the country's corridors of power they joined forces in passing the KPK Law Revision that undermined the anti-corruption agenda. They also tried to pass various revisions to the law in favour of their narrow interests at the expense of the public interest.

This was the backdrop to demonstrations in Jakarta and various Indonesian cities several weeks before Jokowi's inauguration—the biggest protests since the fall of Suharto. This

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The huge student movements have surprised Jokowi and the political elites

blindsided Jokowi, who only then realised the degree of controversy surrounding the articles in the bills soon to be enacted. Among them was the article that appears in the revision of the Criminal Code on insulting the president that threatens freedom of opinion, and the treason article that suppresses civil society's freedom of expression.

The draft Land Law is also controversial, with the proposed conviction of displaced victims of eviction on the grounds that those who resist eviction in the public interest are seen to be interfering with development. This article facilitates infrastructure development that has been hampered by land acquisition constraints. The Penal Act is no less controversial, making remission for those convicted of corruption easier.

The revision of the KPK law, containing articles on weakening the KPK and eradicating corruption, was swiftly passed in the DPR. However, the DPR and the government postponed ratification of the Bill on the Elimination of Sexual Violence that protects women. Interestingly, all parties tended to agree in passing the aforementioned problematic laws. There appears to be no ideological difference between coalition and opposition parties in this case.

This phenomenon highlighted what has been termed by political scientists Dan Slater and Dodi Ambardi as political cartelism in Indonesian politics. Political competition and ideological differences cease the moment election season is over, and party elites instead turn to collusion.

This re-awakened the student movement that had been dormant since the 1997–1998 reform movement. Students and civil society movements felt a serious threat to the reform agenda that they had fought

for, particularly freedom of expression and measures against corruption.

The huge student movements have surprised Jokowi and the political elites. The students' narrative is actually separate from common concerns, rejecting the weakening of the KPK and threats to civil liberties—lower priority issues from the public's perspective. But the students managed to attract general public attention by making the DPR their main target. In the eyes of the public, the DPR is a poor democratic institution—making it easy for students to attract public sympathy by attacking it, even though the issues that they protest may seem abstract.

The latest national survey, conducted in October 2019 by Lembaga Survei Indonesia found that 59.7 per cent of voters knew or followed news about the student protests. Among respondents, the majority supported the student agenda, rejecting the revision of the KPK law that was widely viewed as an effort by political elites to weaken the agency. They also supported the students' attitudes towards the several problematic bills previously mentioned.

Among the respondents who knew about the revision of the KPK law, 70.9 per cent believed it to be weakening the KPK, and only 18 per cent agreed with the elites' argument that the revision would strengthen the KPK. A huge 76.3 per cent of respondents agreed to ask Jokowi to issue a Perppu, a Presidential Decree as Substitute to the Law, to cancel the new KPK law.

It appears reasonable from a political perspective for Jokowi to postpone the problematic laws, but he has yet to issue a Perppu. There was strong resistance to the Perppu proposal from the political elite. Both the government coalition and the



Irwandi Yusuf, governor of Aceh province, with Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) officers after his arrest in June 2018. Many fear that proposed changes will weaken the agency.

opposition party have warned Jokowi that if he does issue a Perppu, it could lead to an impeachment process by citing disrespect towards the parliament as the highest law-making institution.

Jokowi's second term is likely to be marked by an increasingly intimate relationship between oligarchic powers and political cartels on issues that threaten reform and eradicate corruption. They are adept at utilising Jokowi's lack of interest in democracy and combating corruption.

The consolidation of oligarchic forces has become increasingly apparent with lobbying for the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) to amend the 1945 Constitution by reviving the Suharto-era Guidelines of State Policy (GBHN). If the amendment were to be passed, it might open a Pandora's box that would include amending the presidential election system which has been a

trademark of democratic reform. The MPR is now led by Bambang Soesatyo, who openly declared his support for presidential elections via the MPR as done under Suharto.

The consolidation of the oligarchs and political cartels that have defined Indonesian politics for decades presents a problem for Jokowi. The economic reform agenda he wants to carry out will not run smoothly without their political support. But if Jokowi tries to ignore the demands of the people, then widespread public resistance will disrupt political stability and his economic agenda too. The question will be whether Jokowi listens to the calls of the people or falls into the oligarchic trap. **EARQ**

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