

PERSPECTIVE

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President Joko Widodo's New Cabinet: Some Implications for Indonesian Politics

*Max Lane**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While the composition of President Widodo's Cabinet indicates continuity in economic policy, recent developments suggest that the new Cabinet's has political implications.
- The rapprochement between Prabowo Subianto and Megawati Sukarnoputri and Joko Widodo, and Prabowo's appointment as Minister of Defence have deflated the perception that the political elite had become ideologically polarised.
- Ideological contestation is more likely to come from outside the mainstream electoral parties: from radical political Islam on the one hand and on the other, from civil society activists, as manifested in recent student demonstrations.
- Despite a general consensus on policy issues that underpins the recent rapprochement within the elite, the dynastic and factional rivalries among them portend cracks in the governing coalition. There are already signs of factions positioning themselves in anticipation of the 2024 elections.

** Max Lane is Visiting Senior Fellow with the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and Visiting Lecturer at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Gajah Mada University.*

INTRODUCTION

The newly appointed Cabinet by President Joko Widodo has both economic and political implications for Indonesia.¹

Its make-up underscores the continuity in President Widodo's strategic economic perspectives, and exhibit mere escalations in the imagery associated with those perspectives.²

The political implications, however, are more complicated.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The most significant aspect of the new Cabinet was the appointment of Joko Widodo's presidential rival, Prabowo Subianto, as Minister for Defence as well as the appointment of a second minister from Prabowo's party, Gerindra.³

During 2019, the Indonesian political terrain was revealed through the election and its immediate aftermath, and then the protests in reaction to a perceived weakening of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), protests which also revealed broader concerns in society, especially amongst the young.

The election campaign, as described elsewhere,⁴ fought between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto was essentially a contestation at the level of rhetoric. It was more than theatre as there can be little doubt that both candidates were serious about winning; however, its rhetorical nature did give it a serious theatrical aspect. The contestation was rhetorical in that there were not any serious policy differences between the parties supporting Prabowo Subianto and those supporting Joko Widodo. There are parties in both candidates' coalitions which had previously been aligned with the coalitions which they were now "opposing". GOLKAR in 2014 had been with Prabowo; PAN, now with Prabowo, had actually been in the previous Widodo government. Studies of the various parties' voting record in parliament during the first Widodo presidency show that there were no major policy contestations, certainly not on any substantial issues in any fields.⁵

The major television debates were mainly boring, with rhetorical flourishes and trick point-scoring questions characterising the exchanges rather than there being a contrast in policy directions. This is only to be expected as there have been no serious differences on economic policy strategy or on the role of the state during the last five years.

Despite this absence of real differences, the campaign could, if we only look at surface phenomena, give the impression of intensifying and tense polarisation. This impression did give rise to some observers, in and outside Indonesia, predicting ongoing binary tensions within mainstream Indonesian politics, and even the resumption of ideological contestation.⁶

The first was the tactical decision by Prabowo's camp to court what might be called a sectarian hard-line Islamic vote, revealed as potentially significant during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign. Prabowo consistently aligned himself with the Islamist

coalition referred to as “212” , even ending his campaign with what was essentially a massive Islamist rally. However, in all of Prabowo’s national television appearances, in particular during the Presidential debates, Prabowo remained stubbornly secular.

This tactical decision to align with the 212 Islamists helped create a narrative of a pluralist Pancasila versus Islamist binary contestation represented by Widodo versus Prabowo respectively. Narrated in this manner since 2013, and exacerbated by the Prabowo-212 alignment, this binaryism fuelled an intense psywar in social media, between the *kampret* (bats = Prabowo supporters) and the *cebong* (tadpoles = Widodo supporters). This psywar raged on social media all through the election campaign and even into the immediate aftermath. Many commentators are also now emphasising that this social media war was also partly waged by battalions of paid “buzzers”.

This rhetorical contestation continued even after the voting was counted, but only for a short period before it was decisively ended. Prabowo’s coalition protested the validity of the election results, alleging massive fraud. The repeated statements that the election was fraudulent created an atmosphere that resulted in angry protests, and eventually clashes between Prabowo supporters and the police, in which there were casualties. There were also many arrests. Even though Prabowo released video appeals for his supporters not to protest but to await the results of court proceedings, it appeared – again on the surface – that the polarisation was worsening. Most of the angriest protesters supporting Prabowo came from the Islamist “212” sector.

It was this perception of a worsening binary polarisation between Widodo and Prabowo, reflecting an assumed return to ideological competition between pluralist and sectarian outlooks which made the sudden series of reconciliatory moves between Prabowo and Megawati Sukarnoputri and Joko Widodo seem surprising. Prabowo first met Megawati at her residence to eat *nasi goreng* together. Later, after much media speculation, Prabowo and Widodo met in an empty – except for photographers – MRT carriage. Prabowo then met Widodo again in the Presidential palace. The photos of them together were all over the media, private and social. Speculation of a ‘reconciliation’ intensified during September until the Cabinet announcement.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Will the inclusion of Prabowo and Gerindra in the Cabinet mean that there will be a less effective opposition in the parliament? This concern has been heightened by initial statements from the Demokrat Party, that they will also support the Widodo government in parliament, even though they have received no Ministerial positions.⁷ However, as indicated earlier, there was no actual serious opposition in Parliament during the last 5 years.

The incorporation of Gerindra into the government, however, is *helping make this reality clearer to the public* – namely, that there is and has been no actual opposition. On social media and in various commentaries, we begin to see more references to the idea of there being a “united elite” (“persatuan elit”),⁸ either explicitly or implicitly counter-posing the “elit” to the “rakyat”⁹ (common people). In social media, pro-GOLPUT groups have started circulating memes echoing the theme: “Vote 1, Get Both.”

The sentiment that the political elite was uniting was based on the fact that, with the Demokrat spokespersons stating they would support Widodo, only the Islamist PKS and the more-or-less Islamist-led, PAN, now comprised the parliamentary “opposition”. Looking at the Cabinet composition as a whole, the perception can also be that of a united elite. All of the political parties that supported Widodo and won seats in Parliament were given ministries.¹⁰ The military was embraced with retired Army Generals being appointed to four Ministries, and one, Moeldoko, as Presidential Chief of Staff and with a Police General appointed to one ministry.¹¹ The business world is also represented with figures from the natural resources sector, the most senior of whom is Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, who remains Coordinating Minister for Natural Resources and Investment.¹² A younger generation of entrepreneurs have been invited into the Cabinet, most notably Erick Thohir, a media and investment entrepreneur, and Nadiem Makarim, the Indonesian founder of Gojek. The appointment of lawyer and political figure Mahfud MD as Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Human Rights, apart from providing him with a consolation prize to his rumoured initially considered appointment as Vice-President,¹³ is also an incorporation of a representative of the senior levels of the non-Party post-New Order intelligentsia.

THE CORRUPTION ISSUE AND THE PARLIAMENT (DPR)

The sentiment that there was actually a united “elit” – elit already being a strongly derogatory term – rather than a divided one, emerged almost at the same time in another form. The House of Representatives (DPR) elected in 2014 was scheduled to have one last sitting before the new DPR was to be sworn at the very end of September. There were several Bills they had planned to pass, including one that would amend the existing law defining the role of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). The revisions to the KPK law meant that the KPK would need new permissions from a Supervisory Panel, appointed by the President before it could take action, such as implementing wire taps. This was seen to potentially weaken the KPK, which has relied a lot on wiretapping. There were several other revisions that were perceived in the same way.¹⁴ Additionally, the DPR had approved the appointment of a senior police officer as the new head of the KPK, despite him having controversy surrounding him.¹⁵

Given the fact that KPK had arrested 22 members of the DPR, and 232 members of local parliaments during the last 5 years, public sentiment was that a corrupt DPR was moving to protect itself.¹⁶ Key media outlets, especially the daily newspaper and weekly TEMPO, launched strong attacks on President Widodo who was on record in the past saying he would strengthen the KPK rather than weaken it. It published its criticisms in an issue whose front cover featured President Widodo growing a longer and longer Pinocchio’s nose.¹⁷

The DPR passed the Bill into Law on 17 September. This resulted in calls for President Widodo to issue a Presidential Regulation that would annul the offending revisions. The response from the DPR parties reinforced public perception of a united elite, as party after party came out against the President issuing such a regulation. This included the President’s own party, the PDIP.¹⁸ While TEMPO, and some other media, had attacked Widodo, public sentiment was still more focussed on the DPR than on Widodo himself. From as far back as 2013, Widodo had cultivated an image of being separate from the parties, and of his own base of support being among so-called volunteer organisations based in “civil society”. In an attempt to retain that image, Widodo organised meetings at the Presidential Palace with

civil society figures, including a meeting with a large group of senior (elderly) intellectuals, artists and community figures. They also urged him to issue the Presidential Regulation and not to weaken the KPK.¹⁹

However, Widodo made no indication that he would issue such a regulation and the public became more convinced that a united elite, through the DPR and with the acquiescence of the President, was simply protecting itself. This sentiment was expressed throughout social media, although the most active supporters of both Widodo and Prabowo were much quieter than usual.

While the incorporation of Prabowo and Gerindra into the Cabinet, and the general sense of the Cabinet signifying a united elite, cannot be considered *by itself*, as being the catalyst for the emergence of a wave of large and angry student demonstrations against the new KPK law, it was a key part of a general ongoing political trend that laid the basis for the student protests to show dissatisfaction with a range of government policies.²⁰

This ongoing trend was embodied in Widodo's general political strategy. From his time as Mayor of Solo, during his very brief term as Governor Jakarta and as a Presidential candidate in 2013 and 2014, he had built a profile as a grass-roots styled *non-party* politician. He rarely campaigned wearing PDIP attire but always created his own campaign uniform. In 2014, he cultivated his profile as being more associated with the "civil society" image of the "*relawan*" (non-party election volunteers) rather than with parties. However, this was a strategy not aimed at distancing himself from the parties but rather of making himself more acceptable to ALL parties: his ascendancy did not threaten domination by any party, even his own (alleged) party, PDIP or of any faction or clique. As many people often commented regarding Widodo's background, "Dia bukan siapa-siapa" ("he is a nobody", i.e., a person not connected to any money or power centre.) Even in 2012, when he showed he had no problems with nor tried to nuance or hide, his acceptance of an alliance with Gerindra and very public support from Prabowo, his orientation to being transactional towards all parties was very evident.

Having convinced people that he was not simply the PDIP's man, despite Megawati's 2014 public declaration that he was a "petugas partai", he has steadily moved to broaden his governing coalition, including incorporating Golkar and PAN in his last government, tearing them away from Prabowo's coalition. In 2019, he has succeeded in bringing in Prabowo's Gerindra itself.

It is the "bukan siapa-siapa" President who is most suited to representing a "united elite".

IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION

The new Cabinet confirms the theatrical nature of the contestation between Widodoism and Prabowoism since 2012. It is likely however that there will be more and new manifestations of ideological contestation in Indonesian politics – but from outside the mainstream, from the margins. At the moment there are two, but very different, sources of such contestation.

The first is generated by the ideological challenge from various militant strains of political Islam, associated with a demand for the supremacy of Islamic law and a leadership role for

clerics through to the demand for an Islamic state or even a Caliphate. These groups include the 212 Coalition, the Hisbut Tahir and also, at least elements with the PKS, if not the PKS as an organisation. Streams of political Islam with these perspectives have existed in Indonesia since before Independence.

A contestation between these groups and the government has been underway for some time, but will clearly escalate. During September, the PDIP started to circulate statements in social media making it clear that the Widodo government's formal ban on the HTI was indicative of the direction the government would head in. In terms of Cabinet appointments, the new Minister of Religion, an army general, has already stated that the President has asked him to prioritise dealing with "radicalism". The new Minister for Home Affairs, Police General Tito Karnavian, has also made similar statements. He was also former commander of Densus 88, the police unit tasked to hunt down *jihadist* groups.

As an ideological contestation, it is less clear how this will evolve. Suppression or harassment of these political streams is likely to be made in the name of preserving Pancasila pluralism. However, what social content beyond 'pluralism' will be espoused by the new Cabinet's ideology is not yet clear.

The second source of ideological contestation is that which manifested itself in the student demonstrations on the last week of September, but which has also been espoused by the groups supporting GOLPUT and the creation of a new political alternative. Although it is not yet possible to determine as regards the student mobilisations in many cities, it is clear that in several cities, groups central to the organising of the protests were the progressive and critical civil society groups and trade unions that had previously advocated GOLPUT.²¹

While the immediate provocation for the demonstrations was the DPR's passing of the bill weakening the KPK, the student mobilisations carried out more-or-less uniformly around the country also put forward other demands. These demands encompassed opposition to laws that would intrude into people's private sex lives and that would increase the powers of arrest of people who criticised the governments. They also called for the passing of a law against domestic and sexual violence, on which the DPR was hesitating. They called for an end to the criminalisation of political activists and the release of those currently in gaol. They also opposed new Labour Laws that threatened decreases in redundancy payments and which would consolidate the government's 2012 policy of ending annual reviews of the minimum wage. They called for the demilitarisation of Papua. Together these demands represent the kernel of a very different political approach to that of the current government or any party in the DPR.²²

A second round of demonstration occurred on October 28. While these were much smaller, they showed that key student and trade union organisations (though not the biggest unions) were committed to building support for these demands during this Widodo Presidency.

DYNASTIC AND FACTIONAL RIVALRIES

While there has been no opposition in the Indonesian parliament on any substantial policy issues, the Indonesian elite continues to exhibit dynastic and factional loyalties. They are united in terms of general economic and political perspectives, but dynastic and factional

rivalries still play a serious role. These will still be important in terms of each faction positioning itself for the Presidential race in 2024 when Widodo will no longer be able to stand. The Prabowo PDIP rapprochement, combined with the election as President of the House of Representatives of Megawati Sukarnoputri's daughter, Puan Maharini, has already sparked speculation of some kind of PDIP-Gerindra 2024 presidential positioning.

Some see recent manoeuvres by the Nasdem party and its President Surya Paloh effectively taking some distance from Widodo and the PDIP, though by no means severing links, as a reaction to this apparent positioning by Gerindra-PDIP. He has met with Anies Baswedan, who defeated the PDIP-backed candidate for Jakarta Governor in 2012 and praised him as a good future Presidential candidate. More recently, he has held a high-profile meeting with the PKS. Surya Paloh has even openly broached being part of an opposition in Parliament, although this is all still at the level of manoeuvre.²³

Cracks in the current coalition caused as a result of factional positioning in relation to 2024 cannot be ruled out despite the general consensus on strategic policy direction. Nor can it be ruled out that such cracks will again lead to another round of rhetorical contestation whose character may depend on tactical alliances, including with politicised religious groupings.

¹ For full Cabinet list see here *Jakarta Post* <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/10/23/breaking-jokowis-new-cabinet-announced-here-is-the-lineup.html> See also the assessment: Made Supriatma, "President Joko Widodo's Cabinet: What it Tells us About his 2nd Term?" at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/10612-president-joko-widodos-cabinet-what-it-tells-us-about-his-2nd-term-by-made-supriatma>.

² Widodo's two key ministers with macro economic oversight from the previous Cabinet, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan (Resources and Investment) and Sri Mulyani (Finance) have been retained, which emphasises the continuity in economic policy. For a commentary on the politics of the economic policy approach see James Guild, "Jokowinomics gambles with Indonesia's democratisation" at <https://www.newmandala.org/jokowinomics-gambles-with-indonesias-democratisation/>

³ Edhy Prabowo, Minister for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

⁴ Max Lane, "The 2019 Indonesian Elections: An Overview", in *ISEAS Perspective*, ISSUE: 2019 No. 49 at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_49.pdf

⁵ Mada Sukmajati, "Ideologies of Joko Widodo and Indonesian Political Parties," in Max Lane (ed) *Continuity and Change After Indonesia's Reforms: Contributions to a Continuing Assessment*, ISEAS, 2019.

⁶ See for example, Edward Aspinall, "Indonesia's election and the return of ideological competition," in *New Mandala*, 2 APRIL, 2019 at <https://www.newmandala.org/indonesias-election-and-the-return-of-ideological-competition/>. Even in 2017, when there were signs of a potential polarisation around the issue of political liberalisation, there was a "... lack of a strong public statement defending either political or social liberalisation from the President himself, or any of the political parties supporting the President, means that such an ideologically abstract defence remains limited to civil rights NGOs, intellectuals and activists." See Max Lane, "A New Ideological Contestation Emerging in Indonesia?", in *ISEAS PERSPECTIVE*, ISSUE: 2017 No. 77. However, political, rather than economic factors appeared to have intensified this trend.

⁷ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20191010125740-32-438360/demokrat-dukung-jokowi-tanpa-syarat-jatah-menteri>

⁸ See <http://ksp.go.id/persatuan-dan-rekonsiliasi-substanstif/index.html> also: <https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/265600-maruf-sebut-pimpinan-mpr-buka-jalan-rekatkan-persatuan-elit>

⁹ The idea that the “elit” was uniting against the “rakyat” was common on social media among activist groups throughout October. It is also reflected in the adoption of the term “oligarki” by activist groups as a summary word for this united elite. See for example <https://kolom.tempo.co/read/1247248/melawan-kembalinya-oligarki/full&view=ok>: there are many such examples of this ‘oligarki versus rakyat’ sentiment.

¹⁰ See Jakarta Post lists at footnote 1. Later Widodo also appointed a number of Deputy Ministers including a failed candidate of the Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI) and a figure from a Pro-Widodo volunteers organisation

¹¹ See here for profiles <https://www.merdeka.com/politik/ini-para-jenderal-tni-dan-polri-yang-jadi-menteri-jokowi.html>

¹² For some background to the business and resource policy aspects of cabinet ministers see https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/indonesia-cabinet-jokowi-widodo-oligarchs-environment/?fbclid=IwAR0sjBZwPIM0CcxlyeHxyWfCAZmgZ_bvemYrJtojZALAUZqRXDkJSpOTs

¹³ See <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8076-indonesias-presidential-nominees-a-quick-take-by-eve-warburton>

¹⁴ See <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/10409-students-protest-against-the-weakening-of-corruption-eradication-commission-kpk-by-max-lane>

¹⁵ Re Irjen Firli Bahuri see <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4061618/ini-profil-5-pimpinan-baru-kpk-periode-2019-2023>

¹⁶ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4500126/icw-22-anggota-dpr-tersangka-korupsi-sepanjang-2014-2019>

¹⁷ See <https://en.tempo.co/read/1248604/clarification-on-tempo-magazines-jokowi-illustration-cover> For the cover and for Tempo’s clarification. This cover generated enormous media coverage, as well as in social media.

¹⁸ <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20191008154318-4-105299/resmi-fraksi-pdip-tolak-jokowi-terbitkan-perppu-kpk>

¹⁹ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4725029/pertemuan-yang-luluhkan-jokowi-untuk-pertimbangkan-perppu-uu-kpk>

²⁰ This dissatisfaction was manifested in a set of demands protesting [several laws intruding into people’s private lives, including issues of sexuality; the recent arrest and charging of political activists; new laws on both land issues and labour which were considered to exploit workers and farmers; the lack of action to bring forest fires under control; and repression in Papua](#). There were also demands for the postponed Bill against Domestic Violence to be passed. For the main demands of the student protests see Max Lane,

[“https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/indonesian-politics-beginnings-youth-rebellion](https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/indonesian-politics-beginnings-youth-rebellion).

²¹ For information on this spectrum of groups, see Max Lane, “Trade Unions’ Initiative To Create Alternative Political Force in Indonesia,” ISEAS Perspective, ISSUE: 2018 No. 44.

²² See <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/indonesian-politics-beginnings-youth-rebellion>

²³ See <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190724143356-32-415087/surya-paloh-bicara-potensi-anies-jadi-capres-2024>; <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1267228/surya-paloh-bertemu-pks-jokowi-mungkin-dengan-saya-ndak-kangen> These meetings have added to public speculation of poor relations between Surya Paloh and Megawati Sukarnoputri, which both parties deny. <https://pemilu.tempo.co/read/1228501/nasdem-tepis-isu-hubungan-surya-paloh-megawati-retak>

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