

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Indonesian Politics After the Widodo-Prabowo Rapprochement

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The *rapprochement* between Widodo and Prabowo has ended the rhetorical contestation and apparent ideological polarisation in Indonesian politics, with the more conservative and right-wing Islamic political groups now marginalised.
- The government and the parliament are adopting a policy package seen by many to be a betrayal of Widodo's professed commitment to fight corruption and to protect labour rights and the environment. This is manifested most clearly in the Omnibus Bill now being presented to parliament.
- The Omnibus Bill, following on from other controversial bills held over from 2019, is provoking opposition from labour movements, civil society organisations and university students. Some elements of the media have also started taking a more oppositionist approach. There is therefore more potential for common purpose and collective action among oppositionist media elements, students and civil society organisations.
- With the dissolution of the Widodo-Prabowo contestation, some Widodo supporters are now focussing on the Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan as their new political foe. Baswedan is already described by some political figures as a possible 2024 presidential candidate, and has been attracting increasing criticism from Widodo supporters.
- These trends are currently being dampened by the pandemic crisis but can be expected to resume thereafter.

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## INTRODUCTION

The *rapprochement* between President Joko Widodo and his 2019 Presidential contender Prabowo Subianto led to the co-option of Prabowo into the Indonesian Cabinet, and of Gerindra, Prabowo's party, into the ruling coalition. This development has shattered a key illusion of Indonesian politics, namely that a serious ideological polarisation was taking place, connected to a rise in the use of Islamic 'identity politics'.<sup>1</sup>

With Prabowo's entry into the Widodo government, his party distanced itself from its former Islamic "allies", such as the various groups associated with the Islamist "212" stream.<sup>2</sup> Prabowo has even been attacked by 212 elements for being insufficiently anti-China.<sup>3</sup> Conservative Islamist political groups remain a minority unable to effect an actual polarisation of mainstream political life.

With the end of this rhetorical contestation and sense of polarisation, the 'penny has dropped' that there is no counter-force to Widodo's government or its policies. Widodo has, and has always had, a relatively free hand to drive his strategic socioeconomic agenda<sup>4</sup>—one that is very narrowly based on GDP growth.<sup>5</sup> This constitutes the overall framework for the new atmospherics.

After the *rapprochement*, the Parliament reached a virtually unanimous decision, with Presidential support, to pass revisions to the Corruption Eradication Commission Law (KPK). This in effect weakened the Commission's effectiveness. Additionally the regime clearly felt more confident in abandoning Widodo's populist image with new policies perceived by many as being against the interests of the common people. This is most clearly manifested in the Omnibus Bill, some of whose provisions dismantling social protections for workers are discussed below. This, in turn, has provoked the stepping forward of mainstream media, in particular *Tempo* magazine, and of civil society, including labour and students, to provide the missing counter force.

## TEMPO AS OPPOSITION MEDIA

*TEMPO* magazine and newspaper – which is relatively free from business conglomerate ownership – has always published articles critical of different governments. However, *TEMPO* has never been a political campaigning publication. But recently, it has launched a strong campaign with brutal caricature cartoons of the President on its front covers. The most notorious, which provoked Widodo supporters to report *TEMPO* to the Press Council,<sup>6</sup> depicted Widodo as a lying Pinocchio, with a nose getting longer and longer.<sup>7</sup> They focussed on his 2014 campaign promise to strengthen the KPK, not weaken it. They also carried another biting cartoon of Prabowo and Widodo riding a bicycle together. There were several others in the same vein.

*TEMPO* also published articles detailing the dominance of the DPR by MPs who had a direct business background, introducing an explicit class self-interest element into the discussion, further breaking accepted norms.<sup>8</sup> The *TEMPO* campaign contributed to the atmosphere that encouraged the large-scale student demonstrations in September, 2019. *TEMPO* magazine's final edition of the year featured its usual "Figure of the Year" front cover story by declaring the winner to be "Mass Protest Action" (Mass Aksi) in reference

to the September actions.<sup>9</sup> In fact, *TEMPO* editorialises that only mass protests can guarantee the necessary check and balances in the current situation.

*TEMPO* has remained in campaign mode into 2020. The key issue in September 2019 had been the weakening of the KPK, and *TEMPO* editorialised it in mid-January under the heading “Conspiring to Weaken the KPK” protesting against the “systematic and structured undermining of the KPK by the government of Joko Widodo and the DPR”.

Instead of letting through candidate leaders with integrity, President Jokowi and the DPR selected problematic characters. To add insult to injury, the government and parliament conspired to cull back the KPK's authority through a revision of the law.<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that *TEMPO*'s editorial was aimed at both the President and the parliament as a whole. The other publications that operated in a similar mode have been the two English language publications, the *JAKARTA POST* and *JAKARTA GLOBE*.

*TEMPO*'s stance came at a time when the Coronavirus dominated public discourse, and was therefore somewhat muted to assist in keeping the social situation calm. In the magazine's 9 March edition the front page featured the headline: SPUTTERING CORONA,<sup>11</sup> with a caricature of President Widodo and Health Minister Terawan wearing a shared medical mask. The tag-line read: “The manner in which the government is handling the epidemic is causing the public to panic. Coordination between the President and the Minister of Health is in a mess.” That same week, the *JAKARTA POST* published a blistering editorial titled: “Mr President, You need professional help”. The editorial began: “The Indonesian government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak has been appallingly amateurish, from the moment it started spreading in China in January to when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared on Wednesday in Geneva that COVID-19 was a global pandemic.” In a critique that concentrated on Widodo's communication strategy, the editorial ended: “crisis management of this scale is too big to be left to a bunch of amateurs.”<sup>12</sup>

The next issue had a caricature of Widodo leaning against a big picture of a virus cell, with the headline: “CORONA SHAMBLES” and the tag-line: “The COVID-19 is entering a critical stage. Widodo's mitigation strategy can make things worse.”<sup>13</sup> The March 21 edition turned its focus away from an immediate criticism of the government and towards the need for medical equipment.

## **THE OMNIBUS BILL: A NEW ‘ANTI-POPULIST’ AGENDA**

In 2013 and 2014, Widodo's style and policies were often described as ‘populist’ based on his visits to where common people gathered and to be seen mixing with them (a practice known as *blusukan*) and focused also on the universal health care policy he implemented in Solo while he was mayor of that city. Towards the end of that term, however, it emerged that new legislation was being prepared which, once made known, would be viewed by many of the most organised parts of civil society to be against the interest of the common people, namely *anti rakyat kecil* (the common people). Widodo's ‘populist’ image was being turned on its head.

The Bill which has provoked the most opposition since the end of 2019 is the Omnibus Bill, a massive piece of legislation revising numerous laws to eliminate what are seen to be provisions that are a disincentive to investment. Key provisions of the law make it much easier for employers to fire workers, with expanded reasons available and with the abolition of the right of appeal for dismissed workers. Severance pay and other provisions are either removed or weakened. Limitations on the use of labour hire are being loosened. Rights for some paid leave are being eliminated. Minimum wage practices in some sectors at the regional level may be ignored through a decision by a local district head.<sup>14</sup> There have been very frequent demonstrations by labour unions as well as the organising of a range of lobbying events.<sup>15</sup> The unions, however, while united in their opposition, have not been united in their strategy, with the militancy of their stance differing in accordance to the extent that they are linked to one or the other of the ruling parties or factions. The revived Majelis Persatuan Buruh Indonesia (MPBI – Indonesian United Labour Assembly), comprising the major pro-Jokowi and pro-Prabowo unions, are operating as one front, relying mostly on lobbying and on symbolic protests. The Gerakan Buruh Bersama Rakyat (GEBRAK – Labour Movement with The People), an alliance of unions most of whose roots can be traced organisationally or ideologically to the 1990s anti-Suharto movement, have taken more serious and militant mobilising actions. GEBRAK includes the large Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia (KASBI – Indonesian Congress of Trade Union Alliances) confederation as well as Konfederasi Persatuan Buruh Indonesia (KPBI – Indonesian United Workers Confederation), among others. Another federation, the Federasi Serikat Buruh Demokratik Kerakyatan (F-Sedar – Popular Democratic Trade Union Federation) – has integrated opposition to the Omnibus laws into its demands during ongoing strikes.

The momentum for the various campaigns has stalled as mass gatherings have been cancelled to stop the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>16</sup> It is also clear that Indonesia's economy is being hit hard by the slowdown, just as it is also likely that the whole package of policies aimed at boosting economic growth will need to be re-examined after the crisis passes.

The Omnibus Law covers a wide range of areas, not just labour. It is for example, widely criticised by environmental groups for making it easier for new projects to start without environmental impact assessments.

In response to the Omnibus Law, the civil society coalition Against the Omnibus Law has been formed. This broad alliance consists of the Nusantara Traditional Community Alliance (AMAN), the environmental group Auriga, the Institute for Human Rights Studies and Advocacy (ELSAM), Greenpeace, the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law (ICEL), Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW), the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR), the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras), the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation (LBH Jakarta), the Legal Aid Institute for the Press (LBH Pers), the Association for Elections and Democracy (Perludem), the Nusantara Traditional Community Defense Association (PPMAN), the Centre for Legal and Policy Studies (PSHK), the Sajogyo Institute, the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), the Civil Society Alliance for Democracy (Yappika) and the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI).<sup>17</sup>

The increased activity by both labour unions even if they use different strategies, and civil society organisations, adds another element to the opposition spectrum. The civil society groups in these alliances have long been critical of the government as have some trade

unions, but the Omnibus Law has managed to attract universal opposition. However, many of the criticisms of the Omnibus Law are echoed both in magazines like *TEMPO* as well as within the student movement, which has also been taking up issues related to popular welfare. The September 2019 demonstrations were symbolically represented by gatherings that took place in Jogjakarta organised by a coalition of student groups called “Gejayan Memanggil”. Gejayan Memanggil organised another demonstration, this time against the Omnibus Law and other laws that are still to be debated and that are held over from 2019, in Jogjakarta on March 9. Between one and two thousand students demonstrated.

There exists the potential for critical liberal elements of the media, such as *TEMPO*, civil society organisations and students to come together as an opposition front that, if not united in action, then at least one that is able to echo each other’s criticism of the laws. However, the momentum that had developed since September 2019 will be affected by the inability for organisations to meet and mobilise for action, because of the pandemic related restrictions on gatherings.<sup>18</sup>

### WHO IS THE ENEMY?

During the period of rhetorical polarisation, lines of demarcation within mainstream electoral politics were clear: Jokowi vs Prabowo. Among supporters of Widodo, including academic commentators, this demarcation was also depicted as one between pluralistic, secular politics on the one side and Islamic-oriented identity politics on the other.<sup>19</sup> Since the *rapprochement*, public discourse on this kind of polarisation has disappeared from the mainstream arena. The dissolution of the Prabowo-Islamist alignments has also robbed supporters of Widodo of a ‘natural enemy’. At the same time, Widodo’s new anti-populist agenda, built around dismantling various social protections, symbolised by the Omnibus Law, makes it difficult for his supporters to defend him along old populist lines.

During the first two months of the year, in the absence of the old opponents, some pro-Widodo supporters shifted their attack onto the governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan. Baswedan had also started to be discussed as a possible presidential candidate for 2024. In fact, he has been the only figure to be seriously mentioned as a possible candidate. This was first done almost immediately after the elections when the Chairperson of the Nasdem party, and owner of Metro TV, met Baswedan and stated publicly that he thought Baswedan would be a good candidate. Since then pollsters have been adding the question about preferred presidential candidate, with Baswedan consequently coming up on top of the list.

Widespread flooding in Jakarta became one major issue around which attacks centred, blaming him for mismanagement.<sup>20</sup> There have also been a string of more minor issues for which he was attacked.

As the coronavirus crisis develops, there also appears to be a lack of synchronicity in the attacks. While President Widodo appeared to downplay the need for drastic measures, Baswedan appeared to be calling for them, especially in Jakarta.<sup>21</sup> The differences in the early period between the national government’s approach and that of Baswedan – and that of other governors – were perceived as being about of transparency, with President Widodo stating that he would not publicise all data out of fear of causing panic. At the same time, Baswedan came under criticism for reducing public transport services, apparently

calculating a drop in demand as people stayed home. The result was crowded bus terminals and queues to get onto crowded buses. President Widodo instructed Baswedan to change the policy. He also intervened to change the personnel of Baswedan's crisis team for Jakarta.<sup>22</sup>

The need among Widodo supporters to target a new opponent seems also to have become muted, no doubt under pressure for an effective handling of the current health crisis. Clearly, the manifest differences between the President and the Governor cannot all be due to this new competitive dynamic. Their different approaches to the crisis also play a part.

## CONCLUSION

The *rapprochement* between Widodo and Prabowo has ended the period of rhetorical contestation and its appearance of polarisation in the mainstream, resulting in the more fanatical religious identity-politics groups being moved to the margins as well. The government and the parliament – representing the elite as a whole – have been emboldened to abandon their populist approach and to adopt a broad policy package seen by many as a weakening of powers in the struggle against corruption and as a removing of protections of labour rights and of the environment. Some elements of the media have taken an increasingly oppositional approach, posing the possibility of more synchronicity in the actions of these media elements, students and civil society organisations.

The momentum in this direction is, for the time being, slowing, due to the pandemic. Whether such a momentum resumes after the crisis and if so in what form, is unclear at this moment. What is probable is that perceived failure to manage the crisis optimally may relaunch the momentum in favour of the oppositional forces.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eve Warburton, "Polarisation in Indonesia: what if perception is reality?" in *New Mandala*, 16 APR, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/how-polarised-is-indonesia/>; Ross Tapsell, "Indonesia's polarisation paradox", *Inside Story*, 28 March 2019, <https://insidestory.org.au/indonesias-polarisation-paradox/>; see also Max Lane, "The 2019 Indonesian Elections: An Overview", *ISEAS Perspective*, 14 June 2019, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_49.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_49.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> In 2012, during the lead-up to elections for the post of Governor of Jakarta, a conservative, fundamentalist coalition of Islamic political groups held mass campaign rallies against the candidature of Chinese Christian incumbent, Basuki Chahaya Purnama (Ahok). These rallies culminated on December 2, 2012 and the coalition became known as "212".

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200108085332-32-463349/gara-gara-natuna-pa-212-minta-jokowi-copot-menhan-prabowo>

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that he has had a free hand in relation to political tactics, such as coalition tactics.

<sup>5</sup> See Eve Warburton, "Jokowi and the New Developmentalism" in *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Volume 52, 2016 - Issue 3. This is probably the first analysis that describes very well the narrow agenda of the first Widodo administration (although there is a contradiction in describing such a narrow agenda as developmentalist rather than just "growth-ist").

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kompas.tv/article/54728/cover-majalah-tempo-dilaporkan-ke-dewan-pers>

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- <sup>7</sup> <https://majalah.tempo.co/edisi/2451/2019-09-14>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://grafis.tempo.co/read/1835/potensi-konflik-kepentingan-262-pengusaha-yang-jadi-anggota-dpr>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://majalah.tempo.co/read/laporan-khusus/159297/aksi-mahasiswa-terbesar-setelah-reformasi>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://en.tempo.co/read/1295501/conspiring-against-the-kpk>
- <sup>11</sup> Covers of the weekly *TEMPO* magazine can be found here. <https://majalah.tempo.co/gallery>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/03/13/covid-19-communication-president-jokowi-you-need-professional-help.html>
- <sup>13</sup> *Tempo*, 16-22 March, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/21/guide-to-omnibus-bill-on-job-creation-1028-pages-in-8-minutes.html>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/01/14/workers-students-continue-to-protest-omnibus-bill.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-economy-labor/indonesian-trade-unions-to-rally-as-government-files-new-labor-rules-to-parliament-idUSKBN1Z80KA>; <https://www.alinea.id/nasional/dihantui-ruu-cilaka-buruh-gelar-aksi-b1ZGy9q8I>; <https://indonesiainside.id/news/politik/2020/01/13/gara-gara-ruu-celaka-buruh-demo-dpr> There are many more examples.
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200323180905-20-486196/demo-tolak-omnibus-law-di-jatim-ditunda-karena-corona> This is just one of numerous cancellations of such protests.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200304131421-32-480418/koalisi-sipil-minta-jokowi-tarik-lagi-omnibus-law-ciptaker>; another coalition of 40 civil society organisations, including labour, students, and environmental, human rights and community groups, called Fraksi Rakyat Indonesia, produced the following critique of the Bill: KERTAS POSISI – FRAKSI RAKYAT INDONESIA (FRI) – OMNIBUS LAW RUU CILAKA: ATURAN BERWATAK KOLONIAL (Position Paper – Indonesian Peoples Fraction – The Catastrophic Omnibus Law: Colonial Mentality Regulations (typescript, n.d.).
- <sup>18</sup> At the same time, how well the government and the elite as a whole handle the virus crisis, or how they are perceived handle it should there be a very bad outcome, may add items to the opposition agenda.
- <sup>19</sup> Prabowo was open to criticism for both his alignment with hard-line Islamic sectarian and racist political groups as well as nationalistic populism, manifested in his demagoguery against foreign business interests.
- <sup>20</sup> Watch the MetroTV news report at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_WdJbZSm4U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_WdJbZSm4U) There are numerous reports of disputes between Baswedan and the national government on how to handle the floods.
- <sup>21</sup> <https://tirto.id/jokowi-operasi-rahasia-corona-anies-emil-ganjar-sebaliknya-eFus>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200317174119-20-484286/tim-corona-anies-dirombak-lewat-keputusan-jokowi>

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