

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 18 August 2023

Polarisations in Indonesia: Distinguishing the Real from the Rhetorical

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Indonesian workers march during the International Workers' Day near the National Monument in Jakarta, Indonesia on May 1, 2023 to demand for the revoking of the Omnibus Law and Job Creation Law. Photo: Anton Raharjo/ANADOLU AGENCY/Anadolu Agency via AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The polarisation perceived in mainstream electoral politics since the 2014 Presidential election campaign has turned out to be more rhetorical than real, reflecting mainly the opportunistic tactical calculations of the two rival candidates involved.
- This was revealed with the rapprochement in 2019 between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto and by the abandonment of past tactical alliances for new ones, as the 2024 Presidential election now approaches.
- Real polarisations do affect Indonesian political life, however, and are not the ones portrayed in the Presidential election campaigns.
- One such polarisation is between the social and political outlook of critical civil society and the political establishment embodied in the parliamentary political parties and government figures. This polarisation is easy to map as it is reflected in open opposition to major policies and laws passed by parliament and implemented by the government, albeit by societal elements not yet active in the electoral arena.
- Another polarisation is a more deeply sociological one which is reflected in a contestation between worldviews, namely between one that is a modernising, secular and socially liberal, versus the other that is traditional, religious and socially conservative.

INTRODUCTION

Between 2013 and 2020, almost all analyses of mainstream Indonesian politics argued that politics was sharply polarising.¹ It was also argued that this polarisation reflected a tension between secular and conservative Islamic politics as well as between democratic and authoritarian politics.² What gave rise to this analysis was the contestation in 2013-2014 and again in 2019, between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto for the Indonesian Presidency. The focus was purely on rhetorical polarisation, rather than real polarisations in society – polarisations to be discussed later in this essay.

The Presidency is an important position in Indonesian governance although it should be noted that neither a budget nor any substantial policy change can be implemented without the approval of a parliamentary majority. It was superficial from the start for commentators and academics to use the Presidential contest for framing all aspects of the country's politics. No doubt, with just two candidates standing for the Presidency, it was easy to fall into the trap of concluding that there were only two poles to Indonesian political contestation.

THE JOKOWI VS PRABOWO “POLARISATION” WAS RHETORICAL

There was indeed a sense of polarisation generated by the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns. As noted above, there were only two candidates for both of these elections. One candidate, Jokowi, was a small-town businessman and ex-mayor of Solo, with no substantial connection to the New Order authoritarian era.³ The other, Prabowo, was a general from the Suharto era, who was widely held responsible for the kidnappings of anti-Suharto activists in 1997 and 1998 and also for being behind the instigation of anti-Chinese riots in 1998.⁴ Furthermore, he was from a family that had become extremely rich during the Suharto era.⁵

The **first** perception of polarisation was based on these differences: new era vs Suharto era, democratic era vs authoritarianism. But while Jokowi was a furniture manufacturer with no political involvement, long before he went into politics, he already had a close relationship with Suharto-era General Luhut Panjaitan.⁶ Luhut himself had also been a business partner with Prabowo, with forestry concessions in Kalimantan.⁷ Luhut was later to be the “de facto” Prime Minister during Jokowi's two presidencies.⁸

The contrast between democratic and authoritarian era figures was emphasised in two ways. The first was through reference to the allegations made about Prabowo's human rights record, especially in 1997 and 1998, and also occasionally references to Prabowo having contemplated a coup against President Habibie.⁹ Prabowo was investigated on these questions and had to leave the Army, after which he left Indonesia to be an advisor to the Jordanian Army for several years.

Jokowi rarely, if ever, made reference to these issues in his public comments. Even in the 2014 Presidential Debates on TV, it was left to Jokowi's Vice-Presidential running mate, Jusuf Kalla – very much himself a Suharto-era figure – to make the single reference to the 1997-98 allegations against Prabowo.¹⁰ Jokowi said nothing in the national TV debates on human rights violations. However, a section of his supporters based in civil society (but not the PDIP)

campaigning strongly in support of Jokowi on this issue.¹¹ Anti-Prabowo academics outside Indonesia also campaigned strongly on this through their social media presence in Indonesia.¹² The fact that it was not something prioritised when Jokowi spoke to the nation on national TV in the presidential debates was also a pointer to the need for a nuanced reading of the political situation.

The **second** perception was that Jokowi and Prabowo, at least in 2013-4, had different stances on the question of direct elections for President and Vice President and other executive positions. During the Suharto era and the first few years of the post-Suharto era, the President was chosen by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). Direct elections for the Presidency were legislated under Megawati Sukarnoputri and implemented at the end of her Presidency. Jokowi supported direct elections and Prabowo questioned it. Critics of Prabowo claimed that Prabowo's stance was evidence of his authoritarianism – however, as we know, there are many political systems considered as democratic where the head of government is chosen by parliament, such as the Westminster system. The anti-democratic character of the election of the President under Suharto was not because the MPR elected the president, but because the regime's control of electoral politics meant that it also controlled the MPR. After 1998, such control of the parliament by the executive was no longer possible. There was no evidence that Prabowo was advocating a return to that situation, and in any case, soon after the 2014 election, Prabowo turned to support direct elections at all levels.¹³ The agreement was for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held at the same time, indicating that the basis for Prabowo's questioning of direct elections was more related to the problems of two waves of elections, rather than that, indirect elections would facilitate a return to authoritarianism.

A more nuanced look at the two candidates and their positions reveals that on these issues, they are not really polarised. This is even more the case if the context is examined. Authoritarianism seldom just grows out of a political figure's personality, but out of the political situation at hand. There was no political situation in 2013 or 2019 that even remotely came near to one that required an authoritarian response. There was no growing popular opposition or any destabilising rift among the elite that would call for strong-man rule. Prabowo himself never campaigned on that basis but rather, demagogically of course, campaigned against massive monetary "leakage" mainly to non-Indonesian business interests.¹⁴ This was especially so in 2013 and 2014, when his position implied a criticism of Yudhoyono, not Jokowi who had not yet held power. Prabowo's record indicated that he would be open to authoritarian measures if required, but over the last ten years nobody has seriously campaigned that such actions were required.

The **third** perception of polarisation, both in 2013-14 and 2019, has a more complex basis and, while still essentially rhetorical, does overlap with a real and significant **socio-cultural differentiation**. Its manifestation during both elections was in Prabowo's tactical alliances. Prabowo aligned himself very clearly with conservative elements in political Islam, especially the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Alumni 212.¹⁵ Both these organisations had come into political prominence during the campaign against the Governorship of The Greater Jakarta Region, where they opposed the Christian Chinese Indonesian politician, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. Purnama had been accused of blasphemy against Islam after making comments on Qur'anic verses. Prior to this both the FPI and Alumni 212 forces had no significant national profile.¹⁶ It appears that Prabowo, or his advisors, concluded from the large FPI/212

mobilisations, that these organisations would be a significant force in helping Prabowo win the elections. This happened in both 2014 and 2019, but was greater on the latter year. In 2019, Prabowo ended his campaign with a massive rally of FPI, Alumni 212 and other Islamist supporters, filling Jakarta's Istora Sports Stadium with white-cloaked men. This very prominent alliance, playing a central role in Prabowo's campaign, also heightened the sense of polarisation. Again, however, Prabowo himself did not give any prominence to demands for a greater religious character to the Indonesian state or society. The sense of polarisation between secular and religious issues was a consequence of the actual alliance itself, not any overt religious campaigning by Prabowo. As with the campaigning for Jokowi, supporters of Prabowo, not the candidates themselves, would take up the more polarising issues, giving these a heightened profile, as if the candidates were likely to move in a certain given direction if they won.

Both Jokowi's first and second term have shown that serious human rights reform was not a priority. The government's actions in the recognition of serious human rights have been very limited and basically tokenistic. Prabowo's joining the Jokowi government as Defense Minister, with his party, has shown that Prabowo and Jokowi have similar basic political outlooks.

Furthermore, during the whole period of Jokowi's second term as president, there has been no friction or any sign of "polarisation". When the government did eventually announce in 2023 its policy of compensation for some victims of past human rights abuses, including those of 1965 (although unspecified), neither Prabowo nor Gerindra raised any differences in opinion.¹⁷ In the first weeks of the manoeuvring around the 2024 Presidential nominations, the democratic versus authoritarian "polarisation" has also not resurfaced.¹⁸

Neither have there been any signs of Prabowo or Gerindra flirting again with the FPI or 212. Instead, in the context of Prabowo once again standing for the Presidency, he has sought to be seen as being in harmony with Jokowi, even more so than the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) itself. Additionally, Gerindra has formed a coalition with National Awakening Party (PKB) in support of Prabowo's Presidency.¹⁹ The PKB is more associated with the traditionalist Nahdatul Ulama, with some outspoken liberal figures, than the Arabist FPI or 212 Islamist organisations. PKB's support is primarily in East and Central Java, while the FPI and 212's main bases of support are in West Java and parts of Sumatra. Prabowo is not making the same mistake of overtly aligning with Islamist currents that will alienate voters in Central and West Java, in many parts of eastern Indonesia, and in north Sumatra.²⁰

Although the need to compete for votes in 2024 may yet spur candidates, or *their various supporters*, to take up inflammatory postures opportunistically, appealing to religious, ethnic or other such sentiments, there are still no signs of the kind of rhetorical polarisation associated with the 2014 and 2019 campaigns.

REAL POLARISATIONS AND POLITICAL LIFE

The fact that mainstream electoral politics has been characterised by rhetorical, rather than real polarisation does not mean that serious ideological or cultural differentiations do not exist in

society, even to the extent of a polarisation. In fact, it can be argued that there are two such ideological polarisations, interacting with each other, but not substantially manifested in mainstream, that is electoral, politics. These are between:

- An organised civil society oriented to social justice, democratic rights and socially liberal political outlook and a political establishment solidly oriented to the current hierarchy and values inherited from the New Order era of crony capitalism.
- An increasingly modernising, secular and socially liberal world view, especially in urban centres, and a very traditional, religious and socially conservative world view.

The first of these polarisations is relatively easy to document. Criticisms by civil society organisations, trade unions and other grassroots bodies, of the political establishment embodied in parliamentary parties and government figures are articulated openly.

In recent years, there has been an easily visible polarised response around the major legislation unanimously passed by parliament and signed into legislation by the President: the law on the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Job Creation Law and the new Criminal Code.²¹ While it is clear with these that there are two very distinct poles, there is a great and fundamental power imbalance between the two. The reality is that it is the establishment parties that dominate the formal political processes, recruit memberships on a large scale (whatever the ideological shallowness of this recruitment) and also dominate the media. Figures from the political parties spend thousands of hours on television as talking heads while civil society figures get much less air time. This therefore raises a question of whether this polarisation is felt across society or only across politically active society. One legacy of the 32 years of Suharto's authoritarian rule was the disorganisation of society and the fundamental retreat from the political life of the population. This points to another more specific polarisation, perhaps better described as a contradiction, namely the tension caused by a perspective advocated by civil society organisations which has no representation in the formal, i.e., electoral political world. The current attempt to form and run a Labor Party campaign in the 2024 elections, whether this time around it wins votes or not, reflects the reality of a polarisation around policy, or even ideology, however embryonic.²² The Labor Party, whose support comes from some (but not all) sections of the trade unions and civil society organisations, has already announced that it cannot support any of the current three figures being proposed as Presidential candidates because these all support the Job Creation Law, which it opposes. The existence of this polarisation and also its depth and strength are visible and relatively easily to monitor.

The second polarisation – between modern, secularising, social liberalism and traditional, religious social conservatism – is more difficult to analyse and assess precisely. It is not reflected in mainstream electoral politics. While it is true that the Islamist party, the PKS, refused to vote for a new law against Sexual Violence because it did not criminalise sexual intercourse outside marriage, a few months later the whole parliament voted for such a criminalisation in the New Criminal Code.²³ To the extent that there may be differences around such a question, it is more of degree than being actually polarised. Of course, part of this polarisation is visible to the extent that it overlaps with some civil society organisations concerns with democratic and human rights, such as LGBT rights, while religious organisations

and some traditional pro-family groups are very hostile to recognition of such rights. Homosexual sexual relations are even more criminalised in the new Criminal Code.²⁴

However, assessing a polarisation between secular and religious consciousnesses is more complicated. Some of the more explicit political manifestations of this are perhaps easy to identify, such as a steady, if gradual decline, in the votes for political parties that explicitly identify with Islam.²⁵ However, even those parties that don't do so – such as PDIP, Nasdem and Gerindra – still make sure that they appear as religious. It is also not sufficient to look at polls and other manifestations of people *identifying* as religious – as Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, or Aliran Kepercayaan (native religions).²⁶ The issue is not one of identification but changes in behaviour that reflect changes in ideological outlook or world view. Such changes in consciousness are rarely a planned process but rather the outcome of deeper sociological changes.

At this point in attempting to assess the processes connected to this polarisation, we are restricted to anecdotal evidence, some of which have become widely noted. Much more research and closer observation are needed to gain clarity on this process. We can only raise some questions in these final paragraphs.

One of the anecdotal phenomena is the spread of the wearing of the hijab in state schools, something almost unheard of during the New Order period.²⁷ In late 2022 and early 2023, there was considerable TV and press coverage of this phenomenon, and even more on social media. The Ministry of Education had to issue a clarification that girls could not be forced to wear a hijab, but still, some school heads and teachers insist that children do so. Mothers of children, many of whom experienced greater clothing and other freedoms during the New Order period, use social media to demand the same freedom for their daughters.

This phenomenon does, of course, reflect socially conservative attitudes towards women, demanding stricter control of how they dress and assuming it is females who are responsible for unwanted male sexual interest rather than men. There may be another layer to this, noticeable in both schools and on university campuses. This is when students bow and kiss the hand of teachers or lecturers. This was also a very rare behaviour during the New Order. This change is also often discussed on social media.²⁸ Both these observations, the wearing of the hijab being the most widely discussed, reveal a new presence of conservatism. The wearing of the hijab is clearly associated with religion (Islam) but the reinforcement of hierarchy among youth at school is not necessarily so. Rather than reflecting a deepening religious consciousness, it is more likely that there is now a greater reliance on tradition, which in Indonesia can have aspects of religion, for the buttressing of hierarchical authority. During the New Order, the established hierarchy rested on the enormous power of the New Order state, backed by the military and resting on at least two years of terror, systematic reorganisation of power and the awe provoked by a decade of sudden economic growth. In the wake of the exposure of economic and political fragility in 1997-98 and the emergence of a rivalry-ridden new elite constantly being exposed for corruption by its own Corruption Eradication Commission, the state no longer has the necessary aura to sustain respect for the various hierarchies. Even on the question of the status of women, state-backed organisations such as Dharma Wanita enforced patriarchal values. This meant less pressure on parents and schools to inculcate conformity – the state would do that later on. Now with a much less authoritative

(and less authoritarian) state, the existing hierarchies of authority have to rely on tradition for enforcement, sometimes also drawing on elements of religion, albeit not with religion as its source.

These and other similar phenomenon such as hostility to LGBTQ people, open campaigning for polygamy,²⁹ and movements against pre-marital sex,³⁰ emerge haphazardly in response to the spread of socially liberal behaviour and attitudes that threaten existing authority hierarchies. Even so, the existence of religious institutions that produce the equivalent of a priesthood means that there exists a thick layer of people, mainly men, trained in how to present conservative world views. These institutions have unruptured histories going back over a hundred years in the archipelago. While the spread and intensification of urban life facilitate secular modernisation and socially liberal behaviour, there are not yet the equivalent intellectual institutions that can advocate authoritatively for a secular worldview. The religious defence of traditional sources of authority can draw on the whole world of “kyaihood”, whereas new secular outlooks have not yet any such equally authoritative spokespeople. The traditional-religious worldview is more explicitly present than the secular worldview, which is still embodied in social behaviour rather than public advocacy. The partial exception to this is when democratic and human rights civil society elements advocate for the rights of people whose space is expanded by liberal social norms, even if they are not involved in an outright exposition of a liberal worldview. This particular polarisation is between a defence of hierarchical authority using religio-traditional cultural resources, and an urban-life-encouraged, secular modernisation still without an articulated worldview.

ENDNOTES

¹ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, Non-Democratic Pluralism in Indonesia at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/nondemocratic-pluralism-in-indonesia/>, October, 2019.

² Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, “Indonesian Politics in 2014: Democracy’s Close Call”, *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00074918.2014.980375>, 3 December, 2014.

³ Ben Bland, *Man of Contradictions: Joko Widodo and the struggle to remake Indonesia*, Penguin Southeast Asia, 2020.

⁴ Gerry van Klinken, “Prabowo and Human Rights” at <https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/elections-2014/prabowo-and-human-rights> Apr 27, 2014.

⁵ <https://money.kompas.com/read/2020/12/04/160458326/mengintip-kekayaan-hashim-djojohadikusumo-adik-menhan-prabowo?>

⁶ “President appoints trusted adviser to strategic role” in https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1572636741&Country=Indonesia&topic=Politics&subtopic=opi_3, January 6, 2015.

⁷ <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20190219175214-4-56465/kisah-luhut-pernah-kelola-ratusan-ribu-hektare-bareng-prabowo>

⁸ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220330143715-32-777953/politikus-demokrat-peran-luhut-seperti-perdana-menteri> Luhut, apart from being the Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Affairs has been given at least 15 other positions by President Widodo: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1728100/daftar-15-jabatan-luhut-binsar-pandjaitan-yang-diberikan-jokowi-apa-saja> e

⁹ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-1108675/habibie-saya-rasa-apa-yang-ditulis-sintong-benar>

¹⁰ These televised debates are still available on YouTube.

¹¹ During the final election rally in 2014, Jokowi announced a ‘manifesto’ entitled Nawacita. This manifesto mentioned human rights and was consistently referenced by his civil society supporters, and especially those elements mobilised as ‘relawan’, volunteers. <https://mediaindonesia.com/politik-dan-hukum/198260/relawan-bertekad-tuntaskan-nawacita-jokowi> For Nawacita see <https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/5484/nawacita-9-program-perubahan-untuk-indonesia/0/infografis>

¹² The Australian National University’s *New Mandala*’s critical pieces in Prabowo played a particularly prominent role, with very large numbers of hits in Indonesia.

¹³ In July, 2014 *New Mandala* was still arguing that Prabowo wanted to bring back indirect elections for the President. <https://www.newmandala.org/dont-be-fooled-prabowo-still-wants-to-get-rid-of-direct-presidential-elections/> However, over the last 9 years there has been no attempt to do this, although there remain those voices who would like to see executives elected by the representative bodies, rather than directly.

¹⁴ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190407224509-32-384139/jokowi-respons-prabowo-bocar-bocor-yang-mana-bocornya>

¹⁵ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200611090752-617-512060/pa-212-anggap-prabowo-tak-perlu-jadi-capres-lagi-di-2024> Even by 2020, the Alumni 212 grouping was no longer enthusiastic about Prabowo.

¹⁶ See Charlotte Setijadi, “Ahok’s Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia”, ISEAS Perspective, 8 June 2017, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_38.pdf

¹⁷ <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1678229/pemerintah-mengakui-12-kasus-pelanggaran-ham-berat-masa-lalu>

¹⁸ One tangential manifestation of this followed a meeting between the former national above-ground spokesperson for the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PRD), Budiman Sujatmiko, and Prabowo, when Budiman stated that Prabowo should not be held hostage to any past negative human rights record. The majority of the activists alleged to have been kidnapped with some disappearing in 1997 and 1998 were members of the PRD. Budiman’s meeting attracted widespread criticism from other former PRD members and human rights activists – especially via social media – thus re-raising Prabowo’s record as an issue. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/07/20/14264071/budiman-sudjatmiko-sebut-prabowo-tak-perlu-diganduli-masa-lalu-kontras-buka>

¹⁹ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230709185245-32-971326/prabowo-sebut-gerindra-pkb-sudah-teken-kesepakatan-politik>

²⁰ For an example of how cultural loyalties connected to parties operate at the local level, see Deasy Simanjuntak, “Jokowi’s Defeat in Sumatra and the Future of Religiously Charged Binary Politics” in *ISEAS Perspective*, 5 September 2019. See also the section “Political Economy and Parties” in Max Lane, *Decentralization and Its Discontents: An Essay on Class, Political Agency and National Perspective in Indonesian Politics*, ISEAS 2014, for an analysis and graphs on the geo-cultural boundaries of party support.

²¹ See Max Lane, “Indonesia’s ‘Social Opposition’ Remains Weak but Hopeful” at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_5.pdf <https://maxlaneonline.com/2023/07/13/will-the-labour-party-successfully-challenge-the-dominance-of-elektabilitas-politics-in-indonesia-by-max-lane/>; <https://fulcrum.sg/indonesias-new-criminal-code-the-political-establishment-versus-civil-society-again/>

²² <https://maxlaneonline.com/2023/07/13/will-the-labour-party-successfully-challenge-the-dominance-of-elektabilitas-politics-in-indonesia-by-max-lane/>

²³ <https://fulcrum.sg/a-victory-for-the-social-opposition-upping-protection-for-victims-of-sexual-violence/>

²⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/08/indonesia-new-criminal-code-disastrous-rights>

²⁵ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2022/04/21/islamic-parties-may-face-uphill-battle-in-2024-elections-experts-say.html>

²⁶ Traditional beliefs are also now formally recognised as religions.

²⁷ <https://fulcrum.sg/religious-dress-in-schools-polemic-and-indonesias-philosophical-vacuum/>

²⁸ E.g. <http://berdiaspora.blogspot.com/2013/06/tenggelamnya-budaya-egaliter-di.html>

²⁹ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/09/30/14243441/pks-buat-program-solidaritas-salah-satu-poin-atur-soal-poligami-utamakan>

³⁰ <https://cfds.fisipol.ugm.ac.id/id/2021/12/09/indonesia-tanpa-pacaran-fenomena-internet-berbasis-religi-terbaru-di-indonesia/>

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