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# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS - YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## The Twin Axis in Indonesian Politics: Elite Personal Ambition and the Alienation of Civil Society

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Workers fold ballot papers for the presidential election, scheduled for 14 February 2024, at the General Election Commission (KPU) Yogyakarta warehouse in Bantul on 4, January 2024. Photo by DEVI RAHMAN/AFP.

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Two axis of tension were revealed in 2023 during the lead into the Presidential election campaign. The first relates to the political dynamics of personal ambition reaching a peak; the second relates to a dilemma faced by civil society in its relation to the political establishment.
- A 20-year process of consolidation of a homogeneous political outlook among the
  parties controlling the Indonesian electoral scene has facilitated a political life that is
  dominated by personal rivalry and ambitions, and which has opened the way for
  dynasty building.
- The moves by President Joko Widodo, following his 2019 rapprochement with rival Prabowo Subianto, has provoked resistance from sections of his supporters, which may in turn provoke new differentiations within Indonesian politics.
- To date, the most obvious beneficiary in the Presidential race from these developments has been Anies Baswedan.
- Meanwhile, the quandary for civil society whether to build towards an outright opposition to the whole political elite or to try to intervene within it is reflected in the slowness of the Workers Party (PB) to announce a clear position on who, if any, of the Presidential candidates, it will support.



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### INTRODUCTION

The election campaign for the February 2024 elections is well under way. Most attention at the moment is focused on the Presidential elections, overshadowing the equally important elections for the national and local parliaments. The Presidential elections have been attracting the most attention over the last 20 years. After all, considerable executive power is vested in that position, even if majority support in the parliament for government legislation and policy is also crucial.

This time, however, even more attention is focussed on the Presidential elections because of the emergence of the issue of political-dynasty building caused by the manoeuvres <sup>1</sup> of incumbent President Joko Widodo to secure the Vice-Presidential candidacy alongside Prabowo Subianto for his son Gibran Rakabuming Raka, and Chairpersonship of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) for his other son, Kaesang Pangarep. These manoeuvres, <sup>2</sup> which are being perceived as utilising state institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the National Police and the Elections Commission (KPU), have provoked accusations of Widodo returning to the method of the New Order and especially to political nepotism.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of this political dynasty phenomenon is the culmination of a dynamic that has been working its way through mainstream politics for two decades. Between 1998 and 2002, there was a brief political scuffle over the political character of Indonesian political life following the forced resignation of President Suharto. First, President B.J. Habibie and then President Abdurrahman Wahid introduced or discussed a number of reforms that have significantly liberalised political life. These reforms included the recognition of trade union rights and decentralisation. President Wahid also raised the possibility of ending the ban on "spreading Marxism-Leninism", arguing for a system of the "free market of ideas". While trade union rights and decentralisation were accepted by the majority of the political elite, Wahid's reforms were not and the majority of the parties in parliament moved to remove him.

Since that time, all of electoral politics has been in the hands of that parliamentary majority, even as its precise composition evolved. As this parliamentary majority consolidated, so did a shared perspective on economic, social and political developments. This perspective is characterised by satisfaction with the current political status quo and the state-assisted and corruption-lubricated support for the existing private sector, dominated by national and local oligarchies. For almost 20 years, parliament exhibited no major divisions, controversies or polarising debates,<sup>5</sup> not even those that had provoked controversy in society.

With the consolidation of this homogeneity of outlook, the dynamic among the parties became increasingly dominated by personal rivalries and ambitions. Indeed, the first wave of evolutions in the political party world directly reflected this. Figures such as Prabowo Subianto and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono left their Golkar or New Order military original habitat to establish parties as their personal vehicles. PDIP immediately after 1998 was the vehicle for Megawati Sukarnoputri. Later, the PDIP was used to promote Megawati's daughter, Puan Maharani, as a political figure. The split in the PKB, ousting Wahid, was to make the PKB the vehicle for Muhaimin.



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It was into this dynamic that Joko Widodo inserted himself back in 2005. It was a political arena where ideology and programme were insignificant and personal image-making was everything. Widodo was able to take advantage of a major weakness in the PDIP's situation in relation to the dominant politics of personal ambition. Megawati's Presidency was not a great success and when she stood against one of her own Ministers, who even had to establish a new party to compete against her, she lost. After Megawati lost against Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, she tried again in 2009 with former general Prabowo Subianto as her VP running mate and lost again, gaining only 27% against Yudhoyono. Ever since her first defeat in 2005, the PDIP, although very much dominated by Megawati, no longer had a credible Presidential candidate.

Joko Widodo joined the PDIP in 2004 in order to stand for election as the Mayor of Surakarta (or Solo, as it is commonly called). He had not previously been involved in the PDIP, but from the beginning, that party was just a vehicle for his personal ambitions, even if he was just a new figure in the party with no real influence. As a mayoral candidate and then as Mayor, he built his image as a distinct personality quite separate from any campaign or image style of the PDIP. He did attend PDIP events wearing PDIP uniforms on occasion; however even in the matter of dress, he cultivated his own image. When he later stood for the Governorship of Jakarta, his uniform was a chequered shirt, and not the red uniform of the PDIP.

The cultivation of a personal image included, at least while in Solo through till a short while after becoming president, the practice of "blusukan". Although a millionaire businessman, with close ties to some New Order business figures including former Generals, who had schooled his children overseas, the well-publicised practice of surprise visits to marketplaces and other symbols of the common people, helped make him very popular in Surakarta. This use of a down-to-earth close-to-the-common-people political style was buttressed by one major policy initiative. For the 500,000 residents of Solo, the vast majority of whom were poor and in a precarious economic situation, he provided free health clinics and hospital care, funded from the city budget. On his second time standing for election as Mayor in 2010, he scored over 90% of the vote, 7 catapulting himself to become a national figure. The PDIP, devoid of anybody else with that kind of profile, nominated him for the position of Governor of Jakarta in 2012, and then for president in 2014. Throughout this process, 8 obviously aware of the tenuous relationship between Widodo and the PDIP, Megawati herself repeatedly reminded him publicly that he should always act as a "petugas partai", "carrying out a party task" – a reminder that he never seriously heeded. During both his presidencies, he did not work to strengthen the position of the PDIP vis-à-vis other parties, but only worked to strengthen his own position. Although elected as a figure nominated by the PDIP, the PDIP has never held any major economic policy ministries 10 in his cabinets. Key positions – for example, Cabinet Secretary, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investments – have been held by his close friends and long-term collaborators, such as Luhut Panjaitan and Pratikno, and not by PDIP cadres. Jokowi's Chief of Staff for most of his time as President has been a former New Order general, Moeldoko. Other positions have gone to figures from the other parties, and this has weakened the overall position of the PDIP in the government.

Since 2015,<sup>11</sup> there has been common public commentary on worsening relations between Megawati and Widodo. This has now reached a peak.<sup>12</sup> Prabowo and Yudhoyono used their financial resources to establish political parties of their own, as did media tycoon Surya Paloh.



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Widodo, less resourced, hitched a ride on an established party whose weakness was its inability to produce a credible leadership personality of its own.

There are two underlying processes that need to be noted. First, the emergence of a dynasty-building President is a reflection of the basic features of Indonesian mainstream politics. Prabowo, Yudhoyono, Surya Paloh, Megawati and even the lesser personalities of the smaller parties have paved the way for Widodo and his sons. None of the current controversy centres on ideology or programme, only on the dangers of dynasty building itself.<sup>13</sup> Facilitating the specific Widodo manifestation of this personal ambition has been the PDIP's inability to produce a home-grown leader. The PDIP's weakness in this respect was what led to Megawati rehabilitating Prabowo in 2009 in an attempt to shore up her candidacy, and then to her raising up Joko Widodo. The PDIP is now facing off against a phenomenon that it had a part in creating.

Second, the extreme manifestation of this politics of personal ambition constituted by Widodo's series of manoeuvres<sup>14</sup> has, ironically, introduced the first real potential for political differentiation. The key manoeuvres<sup>15</sup> were: the sudden rapprochement with rival Prabowo Subianto, getting Gibran nominated for and elected as Mayor of Surakarta, the Constitutional Court changing the rules to allow Gibran to be eligible to run for VP, and, flowing out of the above, having Gibran become Prabowo's VP running mate. The final manoeuvre required Widodo to play out a slow betrayal of his party, PDIP, with both he and Gibran proclaiming repeatedly that they were not doing so. 16 There were even a few days when it looked like the Elections Commission had done away with the Vice-Presidential Candidate debate, meaning that Gibran would avoid having to debate with his far more politically experienced competitors.<sup>17</sup> Widodo's other son, Kaesang's, sudden selection as Chairman of the fanatically pro-Widodo PSI, making him a possible ministerial candidate, adds to the sense of an undisguised dynastic move. 18 The appointment of Luhut Panjaitan's son-in-law as Chief of Staff of the Army further added to the atmosphere of political nepotism. 19 President Widodo has also moved to appoint several senior officers who became close to him while he was Mayor of Solo to key military positions.<sup>20</sup> All these manoeuvres have provoked a public reaction against what is being called New-Order style dynasty building.

A political differentiation Is starting to emerge over whether or not Widodo has gone too far. Sections of the middle class who campaigned for Widodo in 2014 have turned against him, as symbolised by the statement of Goenawan Mohammad, a famous public figure, journalist and writer. In the reformasi activist milieu, militant campaigns are developing, albeit focussed on Prabowo in the first instance.<sup>21</sup> In the artistic community, prominent figures such as Butet Kartaredjasa, have turned against Widodo – and been told by the police that he must not introduce politics into his performances.<sup>22</sup> Butet's response was to state from the stage: "Welcome back, New Order!"<sup>23</sup> President Widodo has had to come out publicly to defend himself against these mounting criticisms.<sup>24</sup>

The main impact of Widodo's manoeuvres has been felt by the PDIP. Hitting back, Megawati has now also used the comparison of the New Order to criticise "those newly in power". On social media, this criticism has been met with howls of cynicism, with netizens commenting that it was Megawati that elevated Prabowo, Widodo and Gibran in the first instance. Kaeseng himself replied with the comment that there have been no arrests for anybody "insulting the



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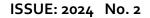
head of state" under Widodo. <sup>26</sup> During Megawati's short presidency, there were several activists arrested, tried and sentenced to up to 2.5 years in prison for this. <sup>27</sup>

#### IS ANIES BASWEDAN THE MAIN BENEFICIARY?

If Widodo's dynastic ambitions and Prabowo's accommodation of them alienate some voters, where can they turn? Such voters may also be alienated from the PDIP as the situation is at least partly of PDIP's own creation. Additionally, the PDIP's candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, has not yet established a charisma or authority that stands out against the combination of Prabowo and Widodo, who are now also backed by former President Yudhoyono. Some polling indicates that Anies Baswedan, originally the candidate scoring the lowest in the polls, is now gaining, even after the first presidential and vice-presidential television debates. Some pollsters even see Anies overtaking Ganjar and that the predicted second round of voting will see Anies running against Prabowo. Anies also, although in a more roundabout way, has also started to paint the Prabowo-Gibran-Widodo camp as being tainted by New Order style tactics.

A very ironical situation now prevails. Anies Baswedan may face off against the Prabowo-Gibran camp by taking advantage of any backlash against Widodo's excessive dynastic manoeuvres. Anies himself, in his own way, exemplifies the politics of personal ambition, freed from the ideological ties that have defined Indonesian politics for 20 years. Anies's first attempt at the Presidency was to put himself forward as a candidate for Yudhoyono's Democratic Party (PD). When the PD decided not to nominate anybody, Anies shifted to the Widodo camp and became one of Widodo's central campaign spokespersons; as reward, Widodo appointed him Minister of Education. Then after a falling out with Widodo, Anies stood for Governor of Jakarta in 2017, nominated by a combination of Prabowo's Gerindra and the Islamist PKS. Running against Ahok, who was supported by Widodo, Anies also flirted with the right-wing fundamentalist Alumni 212 who campaigned on a sectarian and racist stance. In 2023-24, Anies is backed by both the PKS and the more pro-pluralist PKB, connected to the NU, as well as the secular NASDEM party.

It has been previously asked whether the greater presence of Anies Baswedan on the central political stage will bring with it, for the first time in 20 years, greater policy discussion.<sup>32</sup> As a competition between personalities rather than ideologies or programmes, Anies does have a different background from both Prabowo and Ganjar. He is an academic and technocrat. Prabowo has been a military officer and, for the last quarter of a century, a full-time politician. Widodo has been a middle-level businessman and a politician who boasted he preferred reading comic books to politics.<sup>33</sup> Baswedan's first major hit jab at Prabowo-Jokowi has been a critique of the plans for a new national capital and that he would use the budget for the development of already existing small towns throughout the country and for the education and health sectors. He also argued that the new capital would exacerbate social inequality.<sup>34</sup> At one level, this is also an attack on Widodo the person, as this project has become closely identified with Widodo. On another level, Anies is using his technocratic perspective to outline alternative uses for the budget. It is yet to be seen how serious this particular differentiation, based more on skill sets and style than ideology or programme, will become the longer Anies campaigns.





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### WHO WILL LABOUR AND THE NGOS SUPPORT?

The connection between elite politics and the social opposition,<sup>35</sup> embodied in the activities of Masyarakat Sipil ("civil society") – NGOs, and issue groups, trade unions and the nonconglomerate media – is complex. Two key elements of this relationship in the election process have been reflected in the ambiguities of the new Labour Party (PB)<sup>36</sup> and in discussions among social activists as to whether to boycott the elections totally or to urge people to vote "anybody but Prabowo" or "Don't vote for a kidnapper."<sup>37</sup>

The situation faced by the PB as regards the Presidential election in many ways sums up the dilemmas of the sector. The PB leadership throughout 2023 and up until October stated that they would not support any candidate who had ever supported the Job Creation (Omnibus) Law.<sup>38</sup> This stance eliminated all the candidates. While Anies Baswedan had, perhaps, been unclear on the issue, all three of the parties backing him supported the Omnibus Law in the parliament when it was introduced and passed. In any case, the PB has announced that it would not support Baswedan, accusing him of trying to interfere in internal union affairs.<sup>39</sup> The PB had indicated that it would hold a special convention to make a decision on this issue. To date, however, no such convention has been held. Sources inside and connected to PB have explained that some forces inside the PB do not want a convention, arguing that there is no need to support any Presidential candidate. They argue that the PB should abstain from supporting any of the three pro-Omnibus Law candidates and concentrate on electing their candidates for the parliament.

To date, the PB has not made a clear statement on this question. In one statement, Said Iqbal, PB President, stated that the Party's communications with Presidential candidates were not in their roles of representatives of their parties but as individuals, perhaps leaving open the possibility of an individual candidate distancing himself from his supporting party's past positions. On December 5, Iqbal stated at a meeting organised by the National Workers Union (SPN) supporting the PB, that the SPN would follow the PB's decision on Presidential candidates, indicating that the PB was still planning such an announcement. Meanwhile, the PB is supporting the ongoing campaign for a 15% increase in wages which it no doubt hopes will help its campaign. While Prabowo at one meeting declared support for workers struggles, at another he called for workers not to demand excessive wage increases from business. This may push PB towards Ganjar, although Iqbal has also admitted that at the local level, individual union officials may have their own inclinations.

This sums up the whole dilemma for the civil society sector: should they build and become a full-blooded political opposition, presenting themselves as an alternative, or be a pressure group intervening within the elite, and seeking positions of influence. It will not be until well into January or February that both the question of any new differentiation growing among the existing parties, and of how civil society will respond becomes significantly clearer.

### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://fulcrum.sg/out-of-the-elektabilitas-mire-comes-the-push-for-dynastic-power/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/10/26/jokowi-is-building-a-political-dynasty



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> https://majalah.tempo.co/read/opini/170015/dinasti-politik-jokowi

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://majalah.tempo.co/read/opini/170015/dinasti-politik-jokowi

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> https://fulcrum.sg/polarisations-in-indonesia-distinguishing-the-real-from-the-rhetorical/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See Wawan Mas'udi, Creating Legitimacy in Decentralized Indonesia: Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo's Path to Legitimacy in Solo, 2005 – 2012, Ph. D. Dissertation for useful analysis of Widodo's initial rise in Solo. https://rest.neptune-prod.its.unimelb.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/e038b33c-1b26-5b50b201-d9c2f0cceafc/content

https://pilkada.solopos.com/raih-90-suara-jokowi-rudy-menang-meyakinkan-di-pilkada-solo-2010-

<sup>8</sup> https://news.republika.co.id/berita/n3i89b/waduh-pdip-sebut-presiden-harus-tunduk-pada-perintah-

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/1258929/12/deretan-menteri-dari-pdip-yang-aktif-bertugas-dikabinet-presiden-jokowi-1700730694/20

<sup>11</sup> https://www.batamnews.co.id/berita-3284-megawati-tak-pantas-marahi-jokowi-di-forum-kongrespdip.html

https://www.suara.com/news/2023/12/01/132120/staf-khusus-presiden-buka-bukaan-soalhubungan-jokowi-dan-megawati-usai-pernyataan-penguasa-kayak-orba There are many reports and comments in the media on this issue. There was even a hoax video going viral.

<sup>13</sup> https://www.arahpublik.com/suara-publik/1253074010/budayawan-pendukung-jokowi-lawanskenario-dinasti-politik-prabowo-gibranini-pesan-goenawan-mohamad

<sup>14</sup> https://fulcrum.sg/out-of-the-elektabilitas-mire-comes-the-push-for-dynastic-power/

<sup>15</sup> https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-20/new-indonesian-dynasty/102995142

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Accusations of treachery towards the PDIP by Widodo and Gibran are rife across public discussion. There are too many reports to reference here, and a more sarcastic one taking up the issue of "Gen Z"'s take should suffice: https://mojok.co/terminal/keluarga-jokowi-tidak-berkhianat-mereka-hanyamenjadi-gen-z/

<sup>17</sup> https://www.kajianberita.com/2023/12/02/kpu-ubah-format-debat-kandidat-hindari-debat-cawapresdiduga-untuk-melindungi-gibran/

<sup>18</sup> https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/09/25/19504431/kaesang-pangarep-resmi-jadi-ketuaumum-psi

<sup>19</sup> https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1803991/menantu-jadi-ksad-ini-daftar-jabatan-luhut-binsar-

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> https://mediaindonesia.com/politik-dan-hukum/608191/hut-ke-60-wiji-thukul-ikohi-orang-baiktidak-pilih-penculik

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> https://www.amnesty.id/hentikan-intimidasi-terhadap-ekspresi-kritik-pegiat-seni/

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jigJPDBIXuo

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<sup>25</sup> https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c1v269nnexgo

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> https://tirto.id/hasil-survei-capres-cawapres-setelah-debat-ke-2-prabowo-unggul-gTN5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20231201/15/1719913/masuk-kampanye-pilpres-2024-ini-surveielektabilitas-anies-cak-imin-prabowo-gibran-ganjar-mahfud

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/10/03/12250341/jejak-kiprah-politik-anies-baswedan-darikonvensi-demokrat-hingga-didukung?page=all



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> https://fulcrum.sg/anies-baswedans-run-for-president-will-it-provoke-new-distinctions-in-contestation/

<sup>33</sup> https://politik.rmol.id/read/2018/11/19/366887/viral-video-jokowi-lebih-suka-baca-komik-daripada-baca-buku-politik

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> See <a href="https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ISEAS\_Perspective\_2023\_5.pdf">https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ISEAS\_Perspective\_2023\_5.pdf</a> re "social opposition".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> https://fulcrum.sg/will-the-labour-party-successfully-challenge-the-dominance-of-elektabilitas-politics-in-indonesia/
<sup>37</sup> https://mediaindonesia.com/politik-dan-hukum/608191/hut-ke-60-wiji-thukul-ikohi-orang-baik-

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<sup>41</sup> https://www.koranperdjoeangan.com/said-iqbal-spn-siap-menangkan-partai-buruh-di-pemilu-2024-dan-lanjutkan-aksi-mogok-nasional-tuntut-kenaikan-upah-15/

<sup>42</sup> https://tirto.id/kepada-kspn-prabowo-gibran-janji-perjuangkan-hak-buruh-gSNL

<sup>43</sup> https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20231108121043-4-487347/prabowo-beri-peringatan-keras-soal-upah-kepada-buruh

<sup>44 &</sup>lt;a href="https://www.koranperdjoeangan.com/said-iqbal-spn-siap-menangkan-partai-buruh-di-pemilu-2024-dan-lanjutkan-aksi-mogok-nasional-tuntut-kenaikan-upah-15/">https://www.koranperdjoeangan.com/said-iqbal-spn-siap-menangkan-partai-buruh-di-pemilu-2024-dan-lanjutkan-aksi-mogok-nasional-tuntut-kenaikan-upah-15/</a>