

# News from Southeast Asia

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INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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These pages offer thematic essays from ISEAS Fellows and researchers. In this issue, the focus is on the recently concluded Indonesian Presidential elections. These essays are personal accounts of ISEAS researchers as they followed the ups and downs of the campaigning.



SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region. Areas of special concern include ethnicity, religion, tourism, urbanization, migration, popular culture, social and cultural change, and development. Fields most often represented in the journal are anthropology, sociology and history.

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## The twists and turns to the presidency

Ulla Fionna

NEVER BEFORE HAVE I EXPERIENCED such a roller-coaster elections in Indonesia. I was excited when I began observing the campaign in March 2014. It seemed like Indonesia's democracy was maturing. Parties used sophisticated campaign methods, there were fewer traffic-stopping mass rallies and evidence of more direct approach to voters. The Jokowi-popularised *blusukan* [impromptu visits] taught voters to demand more from their candidates and these visits certainly dominated the campaigns signifying the maturing of voters as well. Massive vote-buying was still rampant but overall progress could clearly be felt.

When the results of the legislative election came out in May I was a little puzzled and disappointed that Jokowi's fame could not propel PDIP to nominate him themselves. Many had thought that the momentum behind his rising star was enough, but it became clear that the party machinery failed. Instead the candidate-centred trend within Indonesian political parties proved too strong yet again, with candidates promoting only him or herself, and not the party, and certainly not Jokowi. This compelled Jokowi to rally more support to run as presidential candidate.

It was a positive sign that candidates with questionable track-records such as Golkar's Aburizal Bakrie struggled for support, despite his party coming strong in second place with 14.75 percent votes. His image suffered badly because of his inability to solve the Lapindo case, and despite his party's solid machinery, he becomes the first Golkar chairman not nominated as either presidential or vice-presidential candidate since the first direct presidential election in 2004. Jokowi's only serious rival was Prabowo Subianto, an ambitious former military general whose name has been closely linked with the disappearance of student activists in 1998.

Prabowo ran and lost alongside Megawati in 2009, but his Gerindra Party did well with 11.8 percent in the April legislative election. Head-to-head, Jokowi had a comfortable lead against Prabowo. In mid-May, most surveys put Jokowi in front with twice as much support for Prabowo. After the deadline for nominating candidates passed, only two names remained: Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. Almost immediately, Prabowo demonstrated the formidable capacity of his campaign team. With the financial backing of his businessman brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, and coterie of experienced international

**Jokowi For President!**  
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campaign professionals, he managed to cut Jokowi's lead quickly. By mid-June, Prabowo's poll numbers increased significantly to 38 percent, while Jokowi's hovered at 44 %. The former managed to convince many voters that he was the decisive leader that the country most needed. At this point, I was still optimistic that most Indonesians would not want to vote for Prabowo, whose 'decisive' image also carried the risk of a democratic rollback and even a return to authoritarianism.

However, by early July, I was concerned and frustrated. It was nearing polling day and it looked likely that many Indonesians would be swayed towards Prabowo. Experts and observers were clearly apprehensive. Even Jokowi's early critics, who initially disparaged his lack of clarity on campaign issues, started to campaign against Prabowo. The prevailing mantra was that while Jokowi may not be the best person to be President he was surely better than the alternative. To make matters worse, Jokowi's campaign lacked coordination. In stark contrast, the Prabowo camp was successful in starting several rumours including the possibility that Jokowi may be Megawati's puppet, a non-Muslim, a Chinese, was under foreign influence, or even communist. The man who barely three months ago looked set to waltz his way to the presidency was suddenly looking weak and helpless against a team who did not shy from dirty campaign tricks.

Depressed and preparing for the worst, I rationalised that if Prabowo were elected, it would be a wake-up call for Indonesia from complacency. If so, Indonesia would soon realise its mistake and vote him out in the next election. However, a couple of days before polling day the momentum began to swing back again to Jokowi. Whether it was because voters saw beyond the smear campaign, Jokowi's convincing debate performances, or the middle ground swaying back towards Jokowi, it began to look likely that Jokowi would pull it off after all. Still, when polling day came, uncertainties remained. Only after the booths were closed, and exit polls slowly started to point to Jokowi as the next president, could I breathe a sigh of relief.

But losing proved hard to accept. Prabowo, using some non-credible poll results, insisted that he had won. Then, hours before the official results were announced on 22nd July, he withdrew from the election causing confusion over what that meant for the results. After the results were announced, Prabowo brought the case to the Constitutional Court citing massive fraud by KPU as the cause for his loss. The Courts rejected his request after he failed to produce credible proof.

Although Prabowo continues in his search for other avenues to appeal the decision, I am, once again, a confident and proud Indonesian. We dodged a bullet with this election. The risk of a democratic rollback is still real. The road ahead is bumpy but we have a strong democracy that has withstood some challenging tests. It is now up to Jokowi to use this momentum to bring Indonesia forward.

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