

# The Indonesian Studies Program

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This issue offers three articles from the Indonesia Studies Programme (ISP) at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS). ISP promotes in-depth understanding of Indonesia through conferences, workshops, seminars, publications and timely commentary in regional and international media. ISP seeks to understand the effects of political and economic reform in Indonesia following the end of the New Order era, especially with respect to the implementation of decentralisation policies throughout the archipelagic nation.



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Indonesia will be holding its legislative and presidential elections simultaneously in April 2019. Since the 2014 presidential elections, and the victory of President Joko Widodo, Indonesia's electoral landscape has been marked by an unusual level of ideological division, and an upswing in populist politics and Islamist activism. Why have such divisions emerged, and will they affect the upcoming presidential and legislative elections? And what impact will the simultaneous implementation of these two different elections have upon campaigns and voter preferences? ISP has a team of researchers monitoring these developments, and providing timely analysis on campaign dynamics, patterns of coalition-building, and the broader consequences of these elections for the health and stability of Indonesia's democracy.

The Co-coordinators of ISP are [Dr Siwage Dharma Negara](#) and [Dr Norshahril Saat](#). For more information please visit: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/programmes/country-studies/indonesia-studies>

## Transactionalism and shallowness in Indonesia's election campaign

Max Lane

The campaign for Indonesia's April 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections officially kicked off on 23 September 2018. However, a more interesting process preceded the official campaign. It was the process to determine which parties fulfilled the requirements to stand candidates in the elections and which parties would enter into coalitions in support of the respective presidential candidates.

Such a pre-campaign process reflects two features of contemporary politics in Indonesia. First, Indonesian politics is still characterised by what can be called 'transactionalism' [*politik transaksi*], namely, a process of negotiations among a plethora of factions within the Indonesian elite driven by concerns about *elektabilitas* (popularity among the voting public).

The second feature is an extreme shallowness of contestation in the sense that all of the political and economic elite agree on most, if not all, aspects of cultural, social, political and economic strategies. This shallowness of contestation means that the elections will resemble a superficial image war with little, if any, policy content.

### Political transactionalism

During the 2014 elections, a crucial part of Joko Widodo's image was that of a politician who would reject *politik transaksi* – the politics of deal-making with political players and parties that would be given government positions such as those in Ministries. In reality, however, the idea that President Widodo could be a non-transactional president was always untenable. This is because, since 2004, the

national budget and other policies requiring legislation required parliamentary approval and Widodo's 2014 coalition of parties initially did not have a majority in the parliament, thus making transactions necessary. To run a stable government, Widodo needed to both satisfy all the parties supporting him as well as win over parties that had not supported him. He was able to do this by bringing over the National Mandate Party (PAN), the United Development Party, and Golkar, all of which had supported Widodo's opponent, Prabowo Subianto, in 2014. All these parties were given Ministries to run.

Transactional politics certainly featured prominently in Prabowo's 2018 selection of vice-presidential candidate. There was the initial question of whether Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's party, the Democratic Party (PD), would join the coalition with Gerindra, Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and PAN. Yudhoyono and the PD were caught in a bind. It was clear that there were ambitions for Yudhoyono's son, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (known as AHY), to be a presidential candidate in 2024. However, under existing law, a party that does not nominate a presidential candidate in 2019, would not be allowed to do so in 2024. PD had to join either Prabowo or Widodo. Most of the discussions carried out between Yudhoyono and Prabowo took place behind closed doors, so we cannot be sure of what exactly transpired. Finally, Yudhoyono as Chairperson of PD announced, standing alongside Prabowo, that PD would support Prabowo for President and join that coalition. There was no explicit commitment by Prabowo to choose AHY. Indeed, the public position was that PD would support whomever Prabowo selected.

Nevertheless, Yudhoyono outlined a series of policy points that he shared with Prabowo. These were, however, all formulated in very general terms, and could have also been supported by Widodo. There were no real ideological or policy differences of sufficient importance to be a hindrance to Yudhoyono joining either Widodo or Prabowo's coalition.

### Shallowness in contestation

Alongside this transactionalism is the shallowness in ideological contestation. The early phase of the 2014 Widodo Administration reflected both the transactional nature of Indonesian politics as well as the shallowness of contestation. For example, there were no ideological or policy issues preventing parties that previously supported Prabowo in 2014 to cross over to Widodo's side. Of the three parties in parliament, but outside the government, only one remains outside the government because of ideological differences, namely PKS. The other two, Yudhoyono's PD and Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra Party, represent rivals for the Presidency, and so need to cultivate a separate profile from the ruling coalition.

Indeed, the negotiations needed to form coalitions expose the shallowness of the ideological and policy contestation and the centrality of *elektabilitas* in the coming April 2019 elections. For example, Widodo's selection of 75-year-old Ma'ruf Amin, the Chairperson of the Islamic Scholars Assembly (MUI) and of Nahdlatul Ulama, demonstrates the absence of ideological boundaries. Ma'ruf Amin's willingness to be Widodo's vice-presidential candidate stands in contrast to his previous positions. He himself had proclaimed that he was a central figure behind the 2016 December 2nd (or 212) Islamic mobilisations against Jakarta Governor Purnama; mobilisations which relied on forces hostile to Widodo. He had also been a close collaborator with Yudhoyono during the latter's presidency, and has not been close to Megawati, Chairperson of the PDIP, Widodo's party. He had been a public critic of liberalism and pluralism, which at least a significant

segment of Widodo's supporters consider to be issues that the President supports. However, all these previous ideological and political positions have been quickly forgotten.

### Conclusion

Nevertheless, there are early developments that may hint at some change in democratic practices. First it should be noted that Prabowo's treatment of his coalition partners exhibits a disdain for transactionalism itself. Currently, any semblance of democracy mainly relates to the openness of negotiations between the myriad segments of the broad elite, including the middle class. As such, with the exception of West Papua, there are no serious political threats to the status quo from outside of the elite.

Gerindra's 2014 call for indirect elections rather than direct elections was based on the desire to limit negotiations to the electing of executives by parliament, in contrast to the current long-drawn negotiations that continue up to and throughout the campaign. Gerindra's call was desirous of more centralistic 'leadership' over the elite. One factor that may disrupt such transactionalism in this current campaign is the presence of two parties directly linked to Suharto, through family ties, in Prabowo's coalition. These are Partai Garuda and Partai Karya, linked to Tommy Suharto and Titiok Suharto respectively, which may call for a return to Suharto-style policies. This, however, is not clear yet. It also appears that the Prabowo campaign may wish to focus on economic policy questions rather than issues of either political culture or religion. The campaign orientation of the two Presidential candidates should become clearer as the election date draws near.

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