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Jokowi sworn in to tackle a divided Indonesian government



Joko

Widodo (right) will replace Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as Indonesian president. He faces strong opposition in the parliament. EPA/Made Nagi

Indonesia's president-elect Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, will be sworn into office today in a divisive political environment.

Jokowi, who won 53.15% of the votes in the presidential election, will have to work with a parliament controlled by the opposing coalition. Defeated candidate Prabowo Subianto's Red-and-White coalition holds 292 seats. Parties supporting Jokowi hold 207 seats.

On Friday, Jokowi met with Prabowo after months of political tension. Prabowo stated that his party should now support the new president. He also said that he would remain critical if the government went against the people's aspiration.

The meeting does not ensure Prabowo's coalition will go along with the Jokowi government. Although Prabowo did not say it openly, being critical could still also mean being obstructive to Jokowi's reform plans.

Divided government

Indonesia's current political landscape, in which different political parties or different coalitions of parties control different branches of government, is generally referred to as "divided government".

A divided government is nothing new. It happens in developing as well as in developed countries.

It happened in Ecuador after the military regime in 1979 as well as in Mexico between 1997 and 2000. Germany and the United States also have divided governments.

At times, a divided government can result in better checks and balances. Members of parliament could seriously discuss public policy proposed by the president and all arguments are openly verified.

During the first term of the Clinton administration in the US, when there was a unified government, the US budget ran into deficit. In the second Clinton administration, when the Democrats controlled the presidency and Republicans controlled the Congress, policies were changed and the US budget enjoyed surpluses.

However, a divided government may also lead to protracted bickering among politicians. The political tug-of-war between the executive and legislative can turn into zero-sum games, with the people being the ultimate losers.

The road for Indonesia

Indonesia has a critical and hefty policy agenda for the next five years. Jokowi's success in manoeuvring through Indonesia's political landscape will be fundamental to progress for two reasons.

First, it could determine in what form democracy survives in Indonesia. Jokowi is the first president to come from outside the circle of Indonesian political elites; he won by sheer weight of support from the people. Old political elites, the New Order oligarchy figures and even the military seem to be ready to seize the opportunity if Jokowi fails to deliver.

Second, Jokowi's success or failure in managing the political numbers will determine whether he can deliver his public policy agenda. People expect Jokowi to make policy breakthroughs, something that rarely happened during the decade-long Yudhoyono presidency. However, the political challenge is greater for Jokowi, as he won with only 53% of the popular vote compared to Yudhoyono's 62%.

Jokowi needs to cut the fuel subsidy that is eating almost one-fifth of the state budget. He needs to deal with a current account deficit, rupiah depreciation and issues of competitiveness in international trade as the new **ASEAN Economic Community** approaches next year. He also needs to reform the bureaucracy and combat corruption.

Within the parliament, Jokowi's Great Indonesia coalition has already lost five consecutive battles against the Red-and-White coalition. Most notably, the Red-and-White coalition succeeded in **eliminating direct elections** for local leaders. Although Yudhoyono hastily annulled this law in apparent response to the public criticism, the future of democracy at the local level remains unclear.

Prabowo's brother, billionaire Hashim Djojohadikusumo, has **openly threatened to disrupt Jokowi's administration** through the House of Representatives.



Prabowo's Red-and-White coalition, which holds a parliamentary majority, may disrupt Jokowi's presidency. EPA/Bagus Indahono

The political literature suggests the president has a number of options to survive a divided government. First, a “go it alone” course of action: the president continues with his ideology and programs without parliamentary consent. Second, “go public”: the president involves the public in the policy-making process to gain popular support. Third, “bargain within the beltway”: the president negotiates and makes compromises with the parliament.

Friday's meeting shows that Jokowi is open to a persuasive approach when dealing with political opponents. He certainly needs more of this approach in five years to come.

Jokowi holds some cards

Jokowi actually has a lot of political means at his disposal. His relatively untainted reputation is a good start to deal with members of parliament with records of alleged corruption.

House of Representatives Speaker **Setya Novanto**, for example, has been implicated in a number of graft cases recorded by the KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission). The KPK has also investigated the newly elected People's Consultative Assembly chair, former forestry ministry **Zulkifli Hasan**, for allegedly turning a protected forest into a commercial project.

There are also various records of human right abuses, tax avoidance and alleged corruption among the parliamentary members that Jokowi could use politically to claw back against his opponents.

The essence of democracy is to deliver promises for the people. Jokowi and members of parliament should keep in mind that their actions will have an impact on the lives of ordinary Indonesians.