

Why Indonesian politicians want to weaken its anti-graft agency's powers

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Curbing corruption is one of the most important items on Indonesian President Joko Widodo's policy agenda.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy is still badly positioned on various indicators of corruption. Last year, Transparency International ranked Indonesia 107th out of 175 countries. Indonesia's ranking on the Corruption Perception Index is worse than that of India, China and four of the best ASEAN countries. Corruption has been crippling Indonesia's ability to attract foreign investment.

But, eight months into his presidency, Widodo's record of combatting corruption has thus far not been satisfactory. Jokowi, as the president is popularly called, stood by when the National Police (Polri), backed by politicians, undermined Indonesia's anti-graft agency, the KPK.

Now the Indonesian parliament is planning to revise a 2002 law on the KPK. If passed, elements of the revision could weaken the agency's powers to investigate corruption. Law and Human Rights Minister Yasonna H. Laoly, an appointment from the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), openly supported parliament's move.

Cutting the wiretap

The biggest blow to KPK investigative powers would be the plan to restrict its wiretapping authority. This has actually been effective in capturing fraudulent politicians in the act.

While politicians argued against wiretapping in the media, four local politicians from the Banyuasin district were arrested for bribery. More than Rp 2.5 billion was confiscated on the spot. This proved that the KPK's wiretapping authority has been effective in combatting corruption.

Amid the ongoing debates on the plan to revise the law, State Secretariat Minister Pratikno said that Jokowi rejected the idea. He signalled that Jokowi is still supportive of the KPK.

The ventriloquist doll

Unlike his predecessors, who mostly come from the wealthy political elite, Jokowi grew up in a poor area in Solo. His reputation of being humble, clean and honest, yet pragmatic and responsive, took him to become mayor of Solo, governor of Jakarta, and then president in a narrow win in 2014.

Jokowi's personal reputation for integrity is relatively intact. However, he has to govern within the powerful and complex system of oligarchy that has entangled Indonesia for decades. The oligarch is controlled by political elites who possess well-connected authority as well as economic affluence. Those are the elites within the ruling parties of PDI-P, National Democrat and National Awakening Party (PKB), or the opposition parties such as Gerindra, Golkar and others.

When Jokowi ran for president, he did not chair a political party, unlike his predecessors. He is not his own boss. It is understood that Jokowi can be easily circumvented by PDI-P chairwoman and former Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri and other party leaders such as Surya Paloh from the National Democratic Party, Aburizal Bakrie from Golkar and even his vice-president, Jusuf Kalla, the former Golkar Party chairman.

Judging from the way Jokowi dealt with the KPK and National Police rift, many regarded his position against the political oligarchs as that of a ventriloquist doll for PDI-P leaders and their allies. He and the PDI-P politicians would certainly deny this notion. But they would have to show compelling evidence to prove otherwise.

Recently, Jokowi has named a selection committee for the next KPK commissioners. With the undermining of the KPK by the police – two of its commissioners are being tried for corruption charges that many consider dubious – and the prospect that the KPK might lose key powers to investigate, the committee is having difficulties finding the best candidates who are willing to serve as commissioners.

If you are clean, why worry?

Why is parliament trying to weaken the KPK? The reality is many politicians do not like the commission and its uncompromising stance against corruption.

The KPK portfolio was regulated under Law No.30/2002, based on an argument that the Attorney-General's Office and the National Police were not strong enough to combat the rampant corruption in Indonesia. The law gives the KPK extraordinary powers to carry out any investigations, including wiretapping, and to prosecute suspects.

The KPK has succeeded in rooting out big cases and a lot of public money has been saved. Public trust in KPK has grown and it remains strong – until now.

KPK investigations have inevitably touched on political corruption. During the previous administration, the KPK convicted Anas Urbaningrum and Nazaruddin, the former Democrat Party chairman and treasurer, for corruption. Both were jailed.

The Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre continually reports to the KPK that trillions of rupiah in dubious bank accounts belong to members of the House of Representatives. A survey in 33 provinces revealed that the

public perceived the House of Representatives as the most corrupt institution in Indonesia. In 2014, the KPK reported 3600 cases of corruption, implicating members of local parliaments, governors, mayors and regents.

Rampant money politics puts politicians among those with most to fear from the KPK's investigative powers. This results in many political attempts to demoralise and weaken the anti-corruption agency.

Public support needed

With political attacks against the KPK, the future of the anti-corruption movement depends on the public – activists, students, academia and all the elements of civil society – relentlessly encouraging the government and politicians to fight corruption.

If officials and politicians are clean, they should not worry about the KPK. Instead, they should strongly support the agency in its formidable efforts to eradicate the scourge of corruption.