

It is now twenty years since the fall of President Suharto, and Indonesia has made a remarkable transition in that period. It is a country with a large young population, a growing middle class and an obsession with social media. Its democracy and press freedom is constrained by a number of elements, discussed further below, but by most standards, Indonesians enjoy and have embraced enthusiastically the opportunity to determine who governs them.

Indonesian voters will go to the polls in April 2019 to elect a new president and national parliament, and the likelihood is that Australian federal elections will be held next year also. This conjunction of events might rightly be hailed as a demonstration of the lively democracy shared by both countries. But history suggests that there is also the potential for election-year politicking to disturb the current relative calm in the relationship between the two countries.

From today's perspective, there is no major issue which would stand out as an inevitable source of political fuel. However, the bilateral relationship is notoriously susceptible to shocks, as was the case during previous election periods, when disagreements over issues like boat turn-backs received widespread media coverage. And, as events surrounding spying allegations or the execution of two Australians showed, governments and others in both countries are liable to play to their home constituency rather than prioritising bilateral considerations in determining their public statements. This populist approach has sometimes led to a ratcheting up of rhetoric and bringing out of the megaphone. By their very nature, problems of this sort come out of left field, but given known sensitivities; there is certainly the potential for trouble to spring from issues like Papua and Indonesian suspicions of Australia, boats, treatment of each other's citizens and mutual dissatisfaction with perceived protectionist policies.

The looming election period has implications for the conduct of negotiations on the Indonesia/Australia Closer Economic Partnership Agreement. The two governments have agreed at the highest levels to push towards conclusion of negotiations, and recent statements continue to emphasise that the process is going well. The sooner, the better, because while the prospective Australian election has no particular implication for the Agreement, that is not the case in Indonesia. There, experience shows that protectionist sentiment can affect the climate for discussion of trade and investment issues and conclusion of agreements. Once nominations for elections are completed in August this year, such considerations could easily lead to complications and delays.

Indonesia has just emerged from nationwide regional elections. These showed a recurring trend for voters to oust incumbents, and a number of successful candidates had strong reformist credentials and demonstrated competence rather than backing from tainted party machines. This phenomenon, together with renewed patterns of strong support for various parties in particular regions, like Sumatra and West Java, has potential implications for the national legislative and presidential elections, but Indonesian analysts have concluded that local issues were at the heart of recent voting patterns.

Attention is now inevitably turning to prospects for next year. On the congressional side, the fact that elections are, for the first time, occurring simultaneously with the presidential election will have implications, including the prospect that President Jokowi's popularity will help his PDIP party's parliamentary showing. The presidential election looks like being another two-horse race, and a re-run of the 2014 contest between President Jokowi and former general Prabowo Subianto. The coming months will see an intensification of maneuvers to construct

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coalitions of support for the two candidates, and speculation is already hot about potential vice-presidential running mates for each candidate. A range of opinion polls put Jokowi well ahead of Prabowo, with other potential starters very much in their wake, and while Jokowi would be regarded as the favorite, it should be remembered that his margin over Prabowo in 2014 was not large; and the campaign itself can be expected to be hard fought, and not necessarily in accordance with the Marquis of Queensbury rules.

A particular point of interest will be the extent to which religious issues play into the campaign. In the freer atmosphere of current Indonesia, there is a much greater expression of Islamic sentiment than was tolerated under Suharto. While much of this is benign, the past decade, and particularly the last five years, have seen a growing intolerance of other religions and branches of Islam. A number of hard-line Islamic groups have expressed their intention to affect political outcomes, and events over the past two years (including particularly the conviction of the former Governor of Jakarta on blasphemy charges) show that such activity can have a greater effect than the views of the moderate majority. Certainly, candidates will look to burnish their Islamic credentials, including by looking for support from Islamic parties. Dirty tricks from some quarters, seeking to cast doubts on the Islamic bona fides of candidates, can also be expected.

The election will also take place in an atmosphere characterised by some retreats from the reformation process which began in 1998. A number of measures have restricted the capacity of the media and civil society to criticise the government and legislators; the defamation and blasphemy laws and conservative Islamist activism have intimidated some commentators; measures have been proposed affecting homosexuals and the sale of alcohol; government has been at best a lukewarm defender of some civil rights; and there are some recidivists in the military, the oligarchy and the party machines who would like to see a winding back of some of the reforms of the past two decades.

A point of special interest will be that millions of young Indonesians will be voting in their first presidential election. It is too simplistic to regard them as necessarily attracted to the outsider and reformer Jokowi rather than to the former general Prabowo, not least because Jokowi has appointed a number of generals to his inner circle. But young voters will in many cases be attracted to candidates who can demonstrate strong Islamic credentials, and their choices may be informed by only slight acquaintance with the unpleasant realities of pre-reformasi Indonesia.



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