Indonesia’s Future Trajectory under Joko Widodo

An Interview with Marcus Mietzner

After an intense election campaign, Indonesia’s constitutional court confirmed Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s electoral victory on 21 August 2014. In this interview, Marcus Mietzner, Associate Professor at the Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific, shares his thoughts on Indonesia’s future under President Jokowi. Dr. Mietzner discusses Indonesia’s political landscape, the resilience of its democracy, and the challenges Jokowi must confront in the years ahead.

Journal: Your primary research interests include political parties, elections, and the role of the military in Indonesian politics. What sparked your interest in the region?

Mietzner: Through personal connections, I first came to Indonesia as a teenager in 1986. Suharto, Indonesia’s long-time autocrat, was at the height of his power then. He had the backing of the military, and had designed a political system that conveniently perpetuated his hold on the presidency. Nevertheless, it was clear already in the mid-1980s that many Indonesians wanted democratic change. The year 1986 was also when Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos fell, demonstrating to the Indonesians that authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia were not invincible. Thus, I became very interested in the tension between increasing pressures for a democratic opening in Indonesia and Suharto’s determination to cling to power. This interest became my motivation to study and do research on Indonesian politics.

Journal: Please tell us about your latest work, Money, Power, and Ideology: Political
Parties in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia (University of Hawaii Press, 2013). What are some unique aspects of the political landscape in Indonesia? Are political parties in Indonesia a reliable liaison between the citizenry and the government?

Mietzner: Let us start with the not-so-unique aspects. Like their counterparts around the world, political parties in Indonesia struggle with their reduced influence in society. Across the globe, parties see their membership declining, voter turnout falling, and party identification (i.e. the percentage of voters who closely identify with a certain party) hitting record lows. When it comes to channeling the aspirations of the citizenry, parties face a serious challenge from a wide range of other societal actors: the media (especially social media), think tanks, non-governmental organizations, universities, grassroots activists, and religious groups. Indonesian parties are no exception to this trend. However, it appears that Indonesian parties are more solid than their equivalents in other Asian, especially Southeast Asian, countries. In Thailand, for example, most parties are very short-lived and often only serve the interests of a particular leader. The same is true in the Philippines and South Korea. In Indonesia, by contrast, a number of parties are deeply rooted in societal networks, with some of them operating since the 1920s. This makes the party system in Indonesia more stable than those in Thailand, the Philippines, or South Korea, while leading to less volatility in electoral results. In the parliamentary elections of 2014, all nine parliamentary parties of the previous term made it into the new parliament, and there was only one new entry. Hence, in terms of their stability, Indonesian parties are more comparable to those in Latin America and Eastern Europe than to parties in other Southeast Asian countries.

That said, political parties in Indonesia suffer from significant structural weaknesses. Chief among them is their continued entanglement in patronage, clientelism, and corruption. This, in turn, has made them deeply unpopular. To some extent, this is hardly surprising. Indonesia has an utterly dysfunctional party and campaign financing system. The state provides almost no public funding to party headquarters, and legal donations are rare and not encouraged by existing regulations. Therefore, the vast bulk of political financing is drawn from illicit sources, including kickbacks for government permits, bribes for the approval of certain budget items, the sale of bureaucratic positions, and the misuse of state funds for political purposes.
At the same time, we have seen more and more oligarchs taking over political parties. It is of utmost importance, then, that Indonesia reforms its political finance regime. This should not only include the introduction of significant public funding (as has been the case in many Latin American and Eastern European countries), but also incentives for donors to make legal donations, which then need to be publicly scrutinized. Without such reforms, it is difficult to see how illicit fundraising can be neutralized as a key element of party politics and political corruption in Indonesia.

Journal: Do you consider Indonesia to be a mature democracy? What is your take on the possibility of authoritarian backsliding in Indonesia?

Mietzner: Indonesia is not a mature, consolidated, or liberal democracy. Those scholars who have claimed that it is have often used a minimalist definition of a “mature” or “consolidated” democracy. Political scientist Samuel Huntington, for instance, insisted that a democracy can be called consolidated if it passes the “two-turnover test,” that is to say if the democracy has seen two peaceful power transitions after the initial regime change. Applying this measure, Indonesian democracy would have to be described as consolidated. In recent years, however, scholars have taken a more substantive view of democratic consolidation and progress. Political sociologist Larry Diamond, for example, developed a catalog of criteria that polities need to fulfill if they want to be considered a liberal democracy. Among these criteria are strong rule of law and low levels of social inequality. I endorse this substantive understanding of a liberal democracy over the purely procedural one and therefore do not view Indonesian democracy as consolidated. The rule of law is so weak and poverty still so widespread, that many citizens cannot fully participate in the political process. 43 percent of Indonesians continue to live on less than two dollars a day, and while they have made extensive use of their voting rights, their ability to become politically active remains limited.

Indeed, given its many weaknesses, it is surprising that Indonesia’s electoral democracy has been so resilient. In the presidential election of 2014, we have seen a major populist challenge launched against the democratic status quo—and it failed. Prabowo Subianto, the former son-in-law of Suharto and one of his key generals, promised to return Indonesia to its pre-democratic constitution, which would have
done away with crucial reforms such as direct presidential elections. Instead, Indonesians opted for Joko Widodo, or “Jokowi,” a furniture businessman from Central Java who was first a small-town mayor and then governor of Jakarta. He is a product of democratic local elections, and thus a defender of the existing democratic regime. Nevertheless, 47 percent of Indonesians voted for Prabowo, suggesting there is a large constituency from which future attacks on democracy can draw. At the same time, the coalition that nominated Prabowo controls a large voting bloc in parliament, handing it significant powers to push for anti-democratic policies even during Jokowi’s presidency. Accordingly, the risk of democratic backsliding remains considerable. Ironically, this risk is not caused by the military’s alleged ambition to return to power (as most observers would have thought only a few years ago) but by the political maneuvers of civilian populists with deeply entrenched anti-democratic attitudes.

**Journal:** What are the most important issues that Indonesia needs to tackle in the coming years? What reforms or changes should be made to address them?

**Mietzner:** Outgoing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has left a stable but stagnant Indonesia to his successor. Behind the facade of stability and growth, Yudhoyono piled up a huge amount of unresolved problems that will now become Jokowi’s responsibility to tackle. To begin with, the solid economic growth over the last ten years (annual gross domestic product growth rates of around 5 to 6 percent) was largely the result of the commodities boom, not of sound economic management. Yudhoyono has done nothing to reduce Indonesia’s dependence on oil, gas, mining products, and timber, and this is now coming back to haunt the country as the commodity boom ends. Indeed, the manufacturing sector declined under Yudhoyono—a development Jokowi will have to reverse. Second, Yudhoyono leaves behind a rotting infrastructure. During his presidency, investment in infrastructure was half of what it was under Suharto and half of what it is in China. Jokowi will have to launch significant infrastructure projects in order to address years of neglect. Third, Yudhoyono failed to reduce energy subsidies—one of the biggest obstacles to better budget management. In 2014, Indonesia spent a record $33 billion, or 21 percent of its budget, on energy subsidies, most of which benefited the middle and upper classes. Jokowi has announced that
he will reduce these subsidies to a minimum, and the success of his presidency in its early period will be measured by his ability to fulfill this promise. Jokowi has indicated that he wants to shift the funds freed by the reduction of subsidies into developing the health and education sectors, areas that also need urgent attention.

In the area of political reform, Jokowi will not launch new reforms so much as he will have to fight attempts by his opponents to roll back already achieved democratic change. Prabowo and his allies have announced that they intend to review many of the pro-democratic reforms implemented through the 2002 constitutional amendments. This intended review includes the role of the Corruption Eradication Agency, the Constitutional Court, and direct presidential elections. Even before Jokowi's inauguration, Prabowo's parliamentary coalition succeeded in passing a law (with Yudhoyono's acquiescence) that abolished direct elections for local government heads—a reform that had been introduced in 2004 and was widely seen as a major step forward in Indonesia's democratic consolidation. While it is unclear at this stage whether the law passed by Prabowo's coalition will actually be implemented, it is symptomatic of the kinds of battles Jokowi will have to fight. Unfortunately, this will leave him with only limited opportunities to fix the dysfunctional political finance regime—which would have to be done in order to reduce political corruption and strengthen political parties institutionally. Jokowi fully understands the issue—he ran the first semi-meaningful fundraising campaign in Indonesian history, and he is also in favor of increasing state subsidies to parties. But I doubt he will be able to spend much political capital on this.

**Journal:** You have written extensively on Jokowi. What is Jokowi's vision for Indonesia? What domestic—and international, if applicable—obstacles will he likely face in implementing his political agenda?

**Mietzner:** Jokowi is not a visionary in an ideological or conceptual sense. He is a technocratic pragmatist who wants to deliver better public services to the citizenry. He wants better health care, better education, better public transport, better government services, quicker processing of business permits, and so forth. During the campaign, this focus on technocratic aspects of government effectiveness made him vulnerable to accusations that he had no bigger vision, and that almost cost him the
election. But he pointed out that voters who wanted to understand his vision should just study how he led Solo (the Central Javanese town where he was mayor) and the capital Jakarta. There he had introduced successful reforms in the areas of health and education, launched major infrastructure projects, insisted on transparency in all government processes, sacked corrupt officials, defended Christian bureaucrats when Muslim mobs demanded their removal, selected government employees through a competitive selection process, and defended the rights of citizens to elect their leaders in a democratic way. Eventually, the majority of voters were convinced by this, although his campaign team was often frustrated that he couldn’t verbalize these achievements in a more conceptual manner.

Undoubtedly, Jokowi will face countless obstacles in implementing his technocratic agenda. For instance, the bureaucracy—which will have to implement many of Jokowi’s ideas—remains one of the least reformed political actors in Indonesia. In fact, it forms the core of a “deep state” that has resisted many reform initiatives before. Jokowi’s plan of competitive recruitment for bureaucratic posts challenges traditional conceptions of seniority and established hierarchy within the civil service, and opposition to this idea is certain. Second, as I previously mentioned, Jokowi faces significant opposition in parliament, where pro-Prabowo parties are strongly represented. Parliament could potentially refuse to pass Jokowi’s budgets and new legislation, leading to political deadlock. Third, Jokowi also has little experience in managing the military and the police. As a former ex-general, Yudhoyono enjoyed some natural respect within the security forces, but Jokowi will have to establish his authority first before he can implement reforms in these two notoriously reform-resistant agencies.

Internationally, Jokowi may face resistance as far as his program of economic nationalism is concerned. In fact, as an entrepreneur who has run a successful export business, Jokowi is not a fanatic economic nationalist. But the general mood in the population and the elite, as well as the ideological disposition of his party (Megawati Sukarnoputri’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), led him to adopt some elements of economic nationalism into his platform. For instance, he promised to achieve Indonesia’s self-sufficiency in food supply within four years of coming to office. It is highly unlikely that he will achieve this, and it is not desirable either. Food
prices would go up, and Indonesia would be in the awkward position of wanting to export its products to other markets but closing itself down for imports. International investors and trading partners are set to be up in arms about this intended policy, which will make it even less likely to materialize.

**Journal:** Jokowi’s administration and the United States seem to share views on issues concerning human rights and democratic governance. Could these areas of common ground potentially provide a foundation for a strengthened relationship with the United States? In what other areas should Jakarta and Washington develop further ties?

**Mietzner:** First of all, the United States should be relieved that Prabowo wasn’t elected as president. He would have been a nightmare to deal with, potentially whipping up nationalist, anti-American sentiments whenever he needed to distract from domestic political problems. Prabowo also would have destabilized Indonesian democracy, bringing political uncertainty to the entire region. Jokowi, by contrast, is a moderate, soft-spoken pragmatist who has no interest in nationalist grandstanding. It would be wrong to assume, however, that Jokowi will usher in a new era of improved relations with the United States. Jokowi’s administration is likely to be more inward-looking than Yudhoyono’s, and that also means that the influence of the United States in Indonesia might decline as a result. Jokowi’s political priorities are building a better health care system and providing better educational services. He is much less interested than Yudhoyono in shining on the international stage and contemplating how Indonesia could help solve conflicts in the South China Sea or the Middle East.

Thus, while Indonesia will remain a reliable partner for the United States, and Jokowi’s foreign minister will implement the country’s traditional “free and active” foreign policy, Washington will encounter a president who would rather pay an impromptu visit to a village in order to check on the progress of a development project than attend an international summit. Indeed, if Washington is interested in building stronger ties, it should offer increased cooperation in the areas in which Jokowi is interested: opening U.S. markets to Indonesian products, sharing insights into the complexities of health care reform, and offering expertise in the
development of an effective bureaucratic apparatus.

*Marcus Mietzner was interviewed by Scott Wingo and Alex Rued on 5 October 2014.*