

ARGUMENT

Jokowi Offers Prabowo a Piece of the Pie

The new Indonesian defense minister is a threat to the president—and democracy.

BY AARON CONNELLY, EVAN A. LAKSMANA | OCTOBER 31, 2019, 2:38 PM

In late May, riots raged in parts of Jakarta following the announcement that incumbent Indonesian President Joko Widodo, better known as Jokowi, had been reelected to a second five-year term by nearly 17 million votes.

In the State Palace just over a mile away, Jokowi's advisors saw the hand of retired Lt. Gen. Prabowo Subianto, Jokowi's defeated challenger, in the protests. Prabowo, they allege, had instigated the riots in the hope of a popular uprising that would overthrow Jokowi and install Prabowo in his place.

If that was the plan, it did not work. The riots were quickly put down, and authorities charged some veterans close to Prabowo with treason and the illegal movement of weapons. At one point, the police notified Prabowo that he too might be the subject of a treason investigation.

Instead, just five months later, Jokowi has announced Prabowo as the defense minister in his second-term cabinet.

It is a decision without precedent in Indonesian political history—and one that could have extraordinary consequences for the world's third-largest democracy. Although Jokowi made the decision in the hopes that it would bring stability, it will likely offer just the opposite, and it could augur poorly for human rights and the rule of law.

Before he entered politics, Prabowo was one of Indonesia's most powerful generals as the commander of the Army Strategic Reserve Command and the son-in-law of the dictator Suharto. A graduate of advanced infantry and special forces courses at the U.S. military's Fort Benning and Fort Bragg, he was a favorite of American military advisors. Many anticipated he would one day command the military and even succeed his father-in-law. Nor did Prabowo merely marry into power. His own family comes from a Javanese aristocratic line that goes back centuries. Prabowo's grandfather founded Indonesia's central bank, and his father was a prominent economist and minister. As Prabowo's army career took off, his younger brother, Hashim, made a fortune in the private sector.

When protests threatened to bring down Suharto in 1998, Prabowo ordered a special forces team to kidnap various pro-democracy activists. He claims all those his troops kidnapped were returned unharmed—although more than a dozen other activists never came back. Suharto stepped down on May 21, 1998, allowing Vice President B.J. Habibie to succeed him.

The following day, after Prabowo was stripped of his command, he went to the palace with a number of his

men. He says he voluntarily relinquished his weapon before seeing the new president; others present say he had to be disarmed. Prabowo says that he was merely pleading with Habibie to keep command of his troops. Habibie and his aides, fearing a coup attempt, refused these demands and left the palace. Prabowo claims he had no intention of seizing power.

Prabowo was dismissed from the military months later, following the recommendations of a board of senior generals. After a period in self-exile, Prabowo has spent the last decade seeking the presidency through his own political party, the Great Indonesia Movement, or Gerindra, which is built around his personality and populist rhetoric and supported primarily by his brother's fortune.

Prabowo's brand of economic nationalism and identity politics has appealed to voters. Gerindra has done well in the last two legislative elections in 2014 and 2019, each time securing just over 10 percent of the allocated seats in the national legislature. While Prabowo has lost two consecutive presidential elections, his party remains the third-largest in the People's Representative Council, after the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, affiliated with Jokowi, and the Golkar Party, which was once a cornerstone of Suharto's rule.

Jokowi, a mild-mannered, almost shy figure who rose from humble origins, appears at first to present a stark contrast to Prabowo. He first came to national attention as the successful mayor of his hometown of Surakarta. He was supported by Prabowo in his election as governor of Jakarta in 2012, only to turn on his sponsor by running against him for president in 2014. This year's rematch has cemented their rivalry and Indonesians' impression of the two as representing opposite poles of Indonesian politics: Jokowi supporters tend to be more pluralist, while Prabowo supporters are more conservative.

Yet Gerindra's inclusion in the cabinet does not represent a significant ideological concession on the president's part. Indonesian parties tend to cohere around patronage networks rather than a shared vision for the country. Whether a party or a legislator supports the president's program depends primarily on whether it stands to benefit from the program. With Gerindra in the cabinet—another party executive was appointed to the lucrative fisheries ministry—it will undoubtedly share some of the fruits of governance.

Jokowi hopes that prestige and patronage will be enough to secure Gerindra support for his legislative agenda of economic development through improvements to infrastructure and labor reforms. In the Indonesian system, where lawmaking rarely occurs without the concurrence of a supermajority of parties in the legislature, having Gerindra on his side could be the difference between success and failure.

That does not mean the president trusts Prabowo. He has named several other former generals and powerful figures to key positions to balance one another out and to contain Prabowo. Retired Gen. Fachrul Razi, appointed as minister for religious affairs, was a deputy military commander and a member of the disciplinary board that recommended Prabowo's discharge. Fachrul is a close associate and military academy classmate of retired Gen. Luhut Pandjaitan, the coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment. Luhut, a close confidant and former business associate of Jokowi who sponsored his rise to the top of Indonesian politics, was a decorated special forces officer.

Jokowi also appointed Mohammad Mahfud, a constitutional law professor, as coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs, leading the broader security establishment including the defense ministry. Mahfud was a former defense minister and later served as chief justice of the Constitutional Court. The home minister, former National Police Chief Tito Karnavian, is deeply loyal to Jokowi, as is the current commander of the military, Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto.

Jokowi's effort to create a balance among his ministers is a classic strategy practiced by the kings who once

ruled Java, and typical of Jokowi, who hails from the cultural heart of the island. But it is also a huge risk.

Prabowo will be the most powerful defense minister since democratization. He is likely to continue to lead Gerindra and has long-standing and deep ties to the Army special forces, which he commanded from 1995 to 1998. He is surrounded by dozens of influential retired generals, such as Djoko Santoso and J.S. Prabowo—many are also part of Gerindra.

Prabowo is also a polarizing figure for the military establishment. On the one hand, some see him as a nonsense, professional soldier's soldier with a deep love and generosity for the rank and file. For decades, he has provided financial support for the logistical needs of various Army units and the education of dozens of officers.

Others in the military see him as a rule-breaking maverick who relied on political connections to get ahead. They resent that his conduct has tarnished the military's reputation and that upon entering politics, Prabowo and his men tried to extend and utilize their influence within the military, setting back organizational cohesion and professionalization as democracy took hold.

Jokowi's gambit could go one of two ways.

Prabowo could take his first chance at public office in two decades to prove his critics wrong, restore his reputation, and leave a legacy as one of Indonesia's most effective defense ministers. With his extensive knowledge of foreign affairs, he could be a powerful voice for Indonesian interests in regional forums. He could energize the defense ministry's role in policymaking and improve its relationship with the uniformed military. He might use his personal authority to push the military to complete its long-overdue organizational transformation and technological modernization to contend with a challenging strategic environment.

Or, if his past is any indication, Prabowo could be a disaster. He might seek to dominate the security establishment beyond the bounds of his legal authority, increasing frictions within the military and between the military and civilians. It seems likely that he will advocate hard-line approaches to internal security, including the recent unrest in the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, and demand a greater role in counterterrorism. Both moves would exacerbate military-police tensions that have grown heated over the past few years and distract the military from defending Indonesia's interests as the rivalry between the United States and China gathers steam.

Moreover, Prabowo's presence in the cabinet is likely to lead to more brittle Indonesian politics. The relationship between the two leaders is not one built on trust or respect. Both men will be on the alert for any signs that the other is seeking to undermine his authority. As an ancient Javanese political proverb notes, "There cannot be two suns in the sky at same time."

In a political crisis, a mere resignation or dismissal might be a relatively benign outcome. The history of the two men serves as a warning. The risk that Jokowi will use his control of the police and attorney general to prosecute Prabowo remains, and the risk that Prabowo will use his network within the military to seize power cannot be discounted. Democracy in Indonesia can no longer be taken for granted.

Prabowo's elevation also represents a failure of over two decades of U.S. policy. Though the United States sanctioned the Indonesian military for human rights abuses committed during the tumultuous transition to democracy, it promised to ease them if individuals and units were held responsible for their actions. The Indonesian response has been uneven, but the United States has continued to ease restrictions. Earlier this year, then-acting U.S. Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan announced that the last set of sanctions, on

joint training exercises with the Army special forces, would be removed in 2020.

Prabowo, however, was considered irredeemable. In the summer of 2000, he was denied a visa to enter the United States, consistent with U.S. obligations under the U.N. Convention against Torture. It has now been two decades since he set foot on U.S. soil. Though the slight appears to weigh on Prabowo, he evinces little ill will toward the United States. Diplomatic sources say he has repeatedly sought to be granted a visit.

The U.S. relationship with Indonesia is too important to risk denying entry to Prabowo now. It seems likely that someday soon, he will ascend the steps of the Pentagon to meet with his American counterpart. The moment will be one of somber reflection for those Americans who put accountability at the heart of U.S. policy over the past 20 years, but it will be one of vindication for Prabowo.

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