



Southeast Asian Studies at the  
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Conference Report

## **Jokowi's Indonesia: An Early Assessment (27 February 2015)**

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## Introduction

The Workshop “Jokowi’s Indonesia: A Preliminary Assessment” took place at the University of Freiburg on 27 February 2015. The event was organized by the Southeast Asian Studies program at the University of Freiburg, the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in cooperation with the Center for Transcultural Asian Studies (CETRAS). The seminar convened panelists and attendees from a range of disciplines and professions: economists, political scientists, anthropologists and participants from civil society organizations and political foundations discussed recent political trends in Indonesia.

The objective of the workshop was to take stock of Jokowi’s first four months in office. Coming to power as a reformist and highly popular candidate, Joko Widodo, the former mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta, captured the imagination and attention of Indonesia watchers worldwide. However, four months after his inauguration as president, widespread enthusiasm has given way to more moderate expectations and, in some camps, a rising sense of disappointment.

## Panel 1 - Successes and Failures

The first presentation, delivered by Marcus Mietzner (Australian National University), focusing on successes and failures of the Jokowi presidency, identified preliminary trends in Jokowi’s style of politics, but also referred to significant path dependencies in Indonesian politics. The successes that are currently chalked up to Jokowi’s administration - the abolition of subsidies on premium petrol, the expansion of healthcare coverage, and the passing of a budget consistent with his political objectives - call for some qualifications. Both the subsidy cuts and increased healthcare provisions can be linked to developments outside of Jokowi’s immediate influence: the former have been buttressed by declining crude oil prices, the latter have been partly initiated during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s administration.

Apart from these qualifications, it becomes apparent that Jokowi has devoted much of his attention to less politically contested (and more technocratic) policy issues such as health, education and infrastructure. This technocratic fixation has led some observers to criticize Jokowi for neglecting other important policy areas. Contrary to the impression he gave in the election campaign, issues such as human rights, democratic deepening, and political and security sector reforms seem to have been relegated to the sidelines. The strong influence of Megawati Sukarnoputri (the leader of PDIP, the party on whose ticket Jokowi ran in the presidential election) on the choice of ministers and other strategic posts has indicated that Jokowi is less independent than he had promised to be during the campaign. Indeed, some critical observers have concluded that Jokowi’s ambiguous course signals a subordination to political oligarchs and their interests. Moreover, the hawkish foreign policies of the current administration, including the sinking of foreign fishing vessels and the death penalties imposed on convicted foreign drug traffickers, have strained diplomatic ties.

The second talk by Michael Buehler (SOAS, University of London) provided a wider perspective by placing the Jokowi administration into the context of structural and political reforms. Any assessment of the first four months in office should take account of existing defects and constraints that shape Indonesia’s young democracy. While democracy is certainly still the main “game in town”, the process of democratic consolidation continues to be undermined by issues such as party finance corruption, vote buying, patronage politics and widespread corruption in all government branches. While in general Jokowi’s campaign was largely content-free, he did propose some political reforms related to these issues. Reforms in Indonesia, and Jokowi is no exception to this,

have focused on punitive reforms instead of altering the incentive structure. However, even those small reforms that have been undertaken run against some basic administrative and structural constraints. Inside the Indonesian bureaucracy, costing is poorly understood and administrations are non-responsive to success and failure. Watchdog organizations function poorly and are often incoherent in respect to their policy priorities. Given these constraints, it becomes evident that the current political and administrative landscape does not bode well for reform and poses considerable difficulties for any president who seeks to reshape the status quo. Existing literatures point to the fact that reform prospects rise when policy issues find support in wide parts of society and among political elites that are able to mobilize support for or against reform initiatives. At this point, however, Indonesia's capacity for reform seems limited and Jokowi finds himself confronted with considerable political opposition and resistance that will be difficult to overcome.



Discussant (left), Marcus Mietzner, Michael Buehler, Stefan Rother, Jürgen Rüländ

## Panel 2 - Economic, Societal and Foreign Policy Perspectives

The second workshop panel added additional perspectives by inquiring into economic, societal, and foreign policy issues. Regarding the demands of civil society and advocacy networks, Basilisa Dengen of Watch Indonesia<sup>1</sup> pointed out in her presentation that the Jokowi administration appears to be fairly responsive to and interconnected with political grassroots and societal interests. Compared to previous incumbents, who remained rather detached from society, Jokowi can draw on the support of vast numbers of local volunteers. Yet, at the same time, some of the new government's policies are inconsistent with societal needs and colored by oligarchic interests. The current administration occasionally consults with NGOs and civil society groups, but institutionalized means of inclusion and participation remain underdeveloped. Civil society also criticizes that Jokowi appears to be not very interested in policy issues that lie outside his current policy focus. Human rights issues, for instance, have seemingly been sidelined: many societal activists are highly critical of Jokowi's implementation of the death penalty for drug convicts (not least, because similar cases were suspended during Yudhoyono administration). Some observers believe that Jokowi cultivates an image of a strong leader in order to gain more popular support. Yet, while a majority of Indonesia's population supports a tough stance against drug traffickers, a number of key ally countries have sharply condemned Jokowi's rejection of clemency requests.

According to Christian von Lübke (Arnold-Bergstraesser Institute Freiburg) a closer look at Indonesia's economy highlights additional challenges for the Jokowi administration. While economic fundamentals (growth rates, foreign debt, poverty lines, and socioeconomic indicators) convey an image of stability, a number of structural deficits pose major problems. The national infrastructure is in a dismal condition and the resource boom on which much of the current growth stems from, is slowing down. Moreover, Indonesia continues to struggle with weak legal institutions and widespread corruption. Against this backdrop, the likelihood of Jokowi swiftly tackling Indonesia's deep-seated problems and initiating sweeping reforms is slim. In view of his

reformist accomplishments as a mayor and governor, people's expectations remain high. Yet, due to the entrenched nature of structural constraints, popular enthusiasm and hopefulness are bound to level out. All in all, current observations suggest that the Jokowi administration will likely be characterized by incremental improvements and gradual reforms - rather than rapid and radical change.



Basilisa Dengen (second from left), Christian von Lübke, Joseph Capuno, Jürgen Rüländ, Discussants

The contribution on Indonesia's foreign policy by Jürgen Rüländ (University of Freiburg) returned to the theme of path dependencies. Also the Jokowi administration will have no alternatives than to heed to Indonesia's age-honored free and active (*bebas-aktif*) foreign policy doctrine. The strong nationalist flavor of foreign policy under the Yudhoyono government - exemplified in a regional leadership claim and a more elevated global role - is set to continue under Jokowi, albeit with different accentuation. Jokowi's shift

to maritime issues is overdue, both as a policy to protect the country's natural resources against foreign encroachment as well as a policy to boost economic development. But the policies of sinking intruding foreign fishing vessels and executing foreign drug traffickers threaten to isolate Indonesia diplomatically. Comments by foreign policy observers, that these policies will be without consequences, appear blue-eyed. Another change is a creeping re-militarization of foreign policy, which has been on the rise in the more recent past. While the military (or sources close to the military) has avoided in the past to comment publicly on foreign policy issues, the stance of the armed forces seems to be changing. Yet, with the exception of the "maritime axis" policy, the Jokowi administration has - unlike the predecessor government - so far abstained from launching grand foreign policy initiatives. Jokowi has thus largely confirmed the prediction of observers prior to his election that he will be a more inward-looking president.

## Conclusion

Taking stock of these complementing perspectives, the assessment of Jokowi's first four months remains ambiguous. Generally, political reforms in Indonesia have slowed down markedly since 2006. Jokowi's efforts over the last four months do not live up to expectations and thus have done little to reverse this trend.

Incremental change may be a more realistic expectation for the Jokowi presidency. The most important challenge to him may simply be that *good times make for bad policy* - the current bullish economic prospects of Indonesia, combined with the defective political structure of the country, render large-scale political reform unlikely. The neglect of a wide range of policy fields due to Jokowi's narrow thematic focus (on rather technocratic and non-political aspects of policy) may prove to exacerbate this problem.

Controversy arose at the end of the workshop regarding public opinion on democracy in Indonesia in general. Some panelists suggested that the majority of Indonesians may have become disillusioned and resentful of Indonesian politics. Hence Jokowi may face a problem of public apathy and adverse conditions when it comes to societal support for political reform. However, this

argument was countered by the observation that Jokowi's election was widely regarded as a triumph of democracy that reinvigorated people's interest in national politics. Undoubtedly, Jokowi will need broad public support if he is to stand a chance in initiating reforms. Jokowi's allies are plenty but rather disorganized, while the *ancien regime* and political elites are comparatively well-organized and coherent in their positions. In view of all this, one is left with the question whether or not Jokowi will be savvy enough to navigate the political playing field and stay one step ahead of elites resistant to change. Future assessments of Jokowi's presidency may return to this question in order to explain his performance.

Whether Jokowi will be able to extend his presidency in 2019 is difficult to predict. For one thing, his prospects may depend on whether economic developments bode well for popular support; for another they will likely depend on his ability to deliver on campaign promises, and confirm his image as an ardent reformer (against the resistance of status quo interests). If no alternative reformist challenger emerges in the run-up to the elections in 2019, Jokowi may stand a greater chance to retain his incumbency. In order to bolster his image as a strong and effective leader, he will not find much help in populist ploys, but rather in reformist action. Ultimately, much will depend on whether Jokowi is able to withstand pressures of the political and economic establishment and, in particular, of PDIP leader Megawati Sukarnoputri and her daughter Puan Maharani.

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