

Asia Rising Podcast – Jokowi

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine the news events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and in this podcast were going to examine the first six months of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo known widely as Jokowi. In this podcast you'll hear from a long time analyst and scholar of Indonesia Dr David Mcrae, Senior Research Fellow at Melbourne University's Melbourne Asia Institute.

Jokowi was inaugurated to the Presidency around six months ago, he was elected in July of 2014 and with a very significant popular mandate. There was enormous expectations on Jokowi to bring a new political style, popular political presidency to an office that had come to be seen as somewhat sclerotic and unable to deliver and expectations were very high about the change he could bring to the office. In the eyes of many analysts, his Presidency has not lived up to what many would have hoped.

Dr David Mcrae

Although Jokowi's poll numbers are still quite reasonable- high 50% to 70% support, I think he's made a number of politically motivated decisions over the first six months of his presidency that have undercut his government's effectiveness. In particular, he came into politics promising a new style of politics as a political outsider, a system where people would be selected on merit. But in fact he appointed a cabinet that really resembled nothing so much as that of his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. And Yudhoyono always spoke of how Indonesia's political system, where you have the President directly elected, but you have a legislature which is highly fragmented, there's 10 parties at the moment, none of whom, have more than 20% of the vote.

That means that you end up entering into compromises with these political parties to form your cabinet that really made it difficult for him to establish a cohesive government agenda.

Jokowi promised a professional cabinet, but his cabinet too is full of political party figures, or figures who owe their position in the cabinet to their closeness to the established elite. So he's had to make a lot of compromises in that cabinet, and I think that denied him some of the technical expertise that could have compensated for the fact that he made this really rapid rise to the Presidency from a small town mayor, and so doesn't have direct experience himself in a lot of the things he has to deal with as President.

Nick Bisley

Much of what had made Jokowi popular was the fact that he was a political outsider, outside the establishment from Jakarta, an ordinary Indonesian who had pulled himself up by his bootstraps, and yet that which made him popular, and that which gave him very wide ranging political appeal, seems to many, to be a considerable burden.

David Mcrae

It's something that he could have used to his advantage, we've certainly seen his former deputy in Jakarta, a politician 'Ahok', we say Jokowi has a weak political base because his party only got 20% of the votes and his party doesn't really fully support him. Ahok made his base even weaker by quitting his party altogether but he has taken on the legislature to get his budget through by really marshalling public support. When people polled his effectiveness there was 90% trust in Arhok

and about 8% trust in the DPOD.

But I think Jokowi has pursued a more accommodating strategy, he has tried to answer some pretty unreasonable demands on him at times by his party PDIP. He proposed a Police Chief that the Anti-Corruption Commission had already labelled as corrupt, I think in an effort to please his party and that just triggered a massive confrontation between the police and the Anti-Corruption Commission which, I guess, almost paralysed his government for a month.

Doing things like that, making those concessions to the party, alienates the most vocal sections of the popular support that he had outside the established political elite. For them, anti-corruption is a massive issue, governance is a massive issue and so when he goes away from that, it's harder for those people to come out unequivocally in support of him, and so that gives him less of an independent base to take on the established elite including his own party.

Nick Bisley

Although Jokowi's first six months have not been filled with the level of achievement that many of his most ardent supporters might have hoped for, none-the-less, many analysts would point to a number of big signature achievements.

David Mcrae

The big thing he has done has been to slash fuel subsidies, they consume a massive amount of the budget, up to about a quarter for various energy subsidies under Yudhoyono, and he came straight in, slashed the fuel subsidies within about the first month or so of his government. Projected over this year's budget, that would save about 10% of the budget.

That's allowed him to shift money to spending on social protection, to spending on infrastructure which is the sort of thing he does need to do to push economic growth and to convince the average person that he's making their lives better. The challenge he faces now though is that oil price is beginning to go up, the first increase that he's made since then wasn't for the full economic price of petrol.

He needs the money he's saving to spend on these different programs, but he really has to temper his populism to keep putting up the petrol price, he needs to because so many people disagreed with it. And if he sticks to it, which I think he has to, it does give him money to spend on some of his signature health and education policies in particular and to try to grow the economy.

Nick Bisley

Twelve or eighteen months leading up to the Presidential Campaign, Jokowi stood out amongst Indonesian political elite in all the polling as the most popular candidate and yet he only achieved his party's nomination very late and that was because of a great deal of personal rivalry between himself and the party chief, former President Megawati Sukarnoputri who also happens to be the daughter of Indonesia's first President. These tensions between the populist Jokowi and the more entrenched political elite around Megawati, both dogged his campaign and appeared to be posing some considerable challenges for his Presidency.

David Mcrae

I think it's led him to make bad decisions. I'd go back to that police chief nomination which has really done the most to weaken the Anti-Corruption Commission of anything that's happened over the past decade. And that was a decision, I think made in full knowledge that Budi Gunawan, the Anti-Corruption Commission, considers corrupt was a favourite of Megawati's. It leads to a dysfunctional relationship with PDIP. PDIP just held their congress over the past week in Bali. Jokowi went and attended and although he'd prepared a speech, wasn't given a chance to deliver

it, certainly not in public and that sort of stuff just generates bad headlines, you had Megawati at that Congress also saying that in her view, 'the President was a Party Worker and giving a veiled threat to those who didn't want to work for the Party should just leave.'

It puts him in a really tough position, because one of the real lines of attack, the Prabowo's camp had during the election, was that Jokowi was a puppet of Megawati and when Megawati is essentially hectoring the President, I think that feeds into this idea that Jokowi remains the puppet of Megawati. Whereas Megawati herself was furious with Jokowi.

The one thing I would say though is, he's the President. It's part of his job to develop his own power base, for instance, when he appointed the Cabinet, he allowed Megawati to veto some of his ministerial choices from her party and I think what we haven't seen him do is really stare her down. What would she have done, what would the party have done if he's just said in the first instance, "these are my choices, they are going to be Ministers?" And I think he hasn't done enough to assert himself over the first six months.

Nick Bisley

New Presidents in any constitutional system are always based with a decision between achieving short term political goals and are trying to achieve long term strategic ambition, whilst operating in an environment in which they need to maintain popular support. At the outset, Jokowi's long term ambitions have not always been clear. It might be interpreted by some that he'd been taking a number of smaller policy decisions and then building capital so that as his five year term unfolds he can begin to cash that capital in on more difficult and harder decisions in the years to come.

David Mcrae

Those who are hoping Jokowi will push a reform process, certainly I think, you're seeing among some of Jokowi's supporters, a fear that if he flops for five years it could push a revisit to the idea of another strong man like Prabowo emerging in the next election, that leads people to hope he will grow into the role. And he probably has some time to do it, because, as disappointing as his performance on corruption has been, we've also seen a creeping re-entry of the military in some areas of civil life that they had been previously excluded from, his polling numbers are still good.

He had the great fortune to inherit the Universal Health Insurance System that was just getting started. He's had the opportunity to rebrand as his own and so if he can plug more money into that health insurance scheme, if he has some successes on education, hopefully that gives him some breathing space to grow into the role and become a bit more effective at resisting some of these vested interests.

Nick Bisley

By all accounts, Jokowi's first six months have been quite uneven, some real achievements and some fairly bad decisions. His popularity has declined but not precipitously, certainly the case that Australia's Tony Abbott would be very happy with the polling numbers that Jokowi currently enjoys, and yet in many respects, he's only six months in, he's got four and a half years to go and for an Indonesian President, the 'To Do' list is extraordinarily long.

There's a rapidly declining currency, it's at its lowest level since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998. There are huge problems around corruption, around governance and question marks about Jokowi's political style and his political operation. Jokowi's key task is identifying the most important challenges he needs to tackle to secure, not only his legacy, but secure re-election in four and a half years' time.

David Mcrae

To get anything done you need an effective government and so he has to make sure that he has his decision making in order, that he's not beholden to unreasonable requests from Parties, and so I think at that level, he will face up to some of the ministers who he's appointed, don't have backgrounds appropriate to their portfolios. At some point he made need to move some of them on. He also needs to make sure he has the power base to do that, because obviously that can affect his relationship with the parties they come from. That's one side of it is getting governance better than what it has been.

But then when you look to what would keep him popular, give him a chance to be re-elected, when people are polled, the things that pretty consistently come through are the economy and jobs, the price of basic goods and then corruption as a third thing there. So again it comes through to, I guess, making people feel that he's made a difference to their lives.

I mean the real feature of his election was this return of volunteerism, to Indonesian Politics. He had people volunteering their time to support him outside of a party that wasn't really campaigning for him actively, you had volunteers even organising massive concerts and the like to support him and he has to repay that in people feeling things have improved over five years. Again that will probably mean delivering on things that can push economic growth, resisting the urge to start funding fuel subsidies again so that he has money to spend on social protection, health and education.

He can actually have a stab at rolling out, in a meaningful way, this idea he has of a Maritime Highway to increase the connectivity between different islands in the hope that this will push economic growth in Indonesia. So getting governance in order and keeping the economy going and distributing the funds the government has in a way that the average person feels is making a difference in their lives. I mean that would be the blue print I think.

Nick Bisley

That was Dr Dave Mcrae of Melbourne University's Melbourne Asia Institute.

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