Jokowi's balancing act

Protecting minority rights will be his biggest test in his second term as Indonesia's President

When Joko Widodo, or Jokowi as he is popularly known, was elected President of Indonesia in 2014, it was a moment pregnant with new beginnings for the region. Democracies in Asia have usually been afflicted by the same inglorious cast of characters: dynastic heirs, military strongmen, corporate tycoons and religious hardliners. Widodo's victory indicated the possibility of renewal via the democratic process even in a large, developing, Muslim-majority country. He was a novel breed of leader: middle-class and humble, with a pluralistic outlook and commitment to clean government.

Islam, a mainstream force

In 2019, Mr. Widodo is back at the helm of Indonesia, having once again beaten back his rival, Prabowo Subianto, a former military general dogged by accusations of human rights abuses. But this time the political prognosis is more sobering. Mr. Widodo's years in power have witnessed a shift in the role that political Islam plays in the public life of the world's third largest democracy, from a relatively marginal factor to a mainstream force that no political party can ignore. The President has proved no exception, demonstrating a willingness to bend to religious considerations, even when they run contrary to his inclinations.

During the long campaign season, both candidates tried to outdo each other in brandishing their Muslim credentials, despite the fact that neither is traditionally pious. Mr. Prabowo's mother and brother are Christians, while Mr. Widodo is a heavy-metal fan who seems happier riding motorcycles than at prayer. But the vow to support religious clerics became a central plank of Mr. Prabowo's campaign, throughout which he organised mass prayers and ended speeches with shouts of “Allahu Akbar”. His supporters are known to have carried out fake news campaigns portraying Mr. Widodo as a Christian or an atheist Communist, and at times even a logic-defying both.

On his part, Mr. Widodo rushed to Saudi Arabia on Haj just a week before the elections and laced his public rallies with traditional songs of devotion to Prophet Muhammad. But his most pointed concession to the religious lobby (and to his liberal supporters his most disappointing) was to appoint Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Islamic cleric, as his Vice-Presidential running mate. The choice was intended as a bulwark against accusations of impurity, a charge that has been Mr. Widodo's political Achilles heel in the past. As a tactic, it has paid off, but its strategic implications remain open and worrying.

Mr. Widodo's track record in office when it comes to pandering to Islamists has been chequered. He has taken on some religious extremists, banning the Hizb ut-Tahrir, a radical group that aimed to establish a global caliphate. He also walked back a decision to allow Abu Bakar Bashir, spiritual leader of the terrorist organisation Jamaah Islamiyah to walk free from prison on humanitarian grounds. However, the latter decision was only taken following a huge international outcry.

The President's greatest failure was his silence during the move-ment to charge his former deputy, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, with blasphemy. Ahok (as he is known), a Christian of Chinese descent, was Mr. Widodo's running mate for the 2012 Jakarta Governor elections. In 2017, he was sentenced to two years in jail for having told voters in a speech that they shouldn't be duped by religious leaders who misuse a particular Koranic verse to justify claims that Muslims should not have non-Muslim leaders. Not only did Mr. Widodo stay quiet during Ahok's prosecution, he even joined demonstrators in prayer. His new Vice-President, Mr. Amin, testified against Ahok at the trial.

On the economic front, Mr. Widodo's first term as President was adequate, if unspectacular. Annual growth averaged 5%, well below the 7% target, in part because he caved in to pressure and backtracked on difficult reforms like reining in fuel subsidies. On the plus side, he lined up more than $300 billion of infrastructure projects, including the opening of Jakarta's first subway line after 34 years of planning. He also rolled out a popular national health-insurance scheme and pumped money into education.

What lies ahead

Going forward, Mr. Widodo has his work cut out trying to get increased foreign investment amid a climate of economic nationalism. It also remains to be seen if, and how, he decides to tackle the thorny issue of restrictive labour laws. A final challenge will entail finessing Indonesia's response to China's growing economic clout in the archipelago. China has emerged as a major foreign investor in Indonesia, but there are worries about the consequences. A trope of the Prabowo campaign was the claim that under Mr. Widodo, Chinese goods and workers had flooded the nation.

But it is protecting minority rights that will remain Mr. Widodo's greatest and most fraught test. Forging a unified national identity out of its fractured ethnic and religious demography has been a remarkable achievement for Indonesia. Seven out of eight Indonesians self-identify as Muslims; more Muslims live in Indonesia than in any other country. And yet the state also recognises five other religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Confucianism. The archipelago is home to 719 languages, spoken by people from over 360 ethnic groups. Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, literally One Out of Many, is the defining catch phrase of modern Indonesia, and it will be Mr. Widodo's charge to ensure substance to the sentiment.

Given term limits, this will be Mr. Widodo's final stint as President. The optimistic scenario is one where he is able to slough off electoral considerations and finally tackle the liberal reforms and policies many still assume are close to his heart.

However, taking his record into consideration, it seems more probable that he will continue to co-opt his opponents rather than confront them. He has emerged as a tinkerer and incrementalist, rather than a visionary. To an extent, this is both necessary and even advantageous in a political landscape characterised by coalitions and consensus-building. Mr. Widodo leads a 10-party alliance and needs to garner support from a polarised Parliament. However, there is a fine line between pragmatism and opportunism, and the jury is out on which side of this line he will eventually come down.

Mr. Widodo has one more chance to go down in the history books as a great President. The likelihood is that he will be remembered as a nice guy who tried, but not hard enough.

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