

PERSPECTIVE

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Contending Rhetoric in Indonesia's Presidential Elections: An Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The policy content in the sharpening rhetorical contestation in Indonesia's presidential campaign remains shallow.
- The policy manifestos of both camps contain the usual generic promises of economic and technological progress and social justice. However, the essential difference between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto in the main thrust of their campaign message is that of continuity versus change. Widodo asserts that his policies have worked but he would continue to deliver improvements. In contrast, Prabowo argues that Indonesia is headed for an existential crisis unless there is urgent radical change.
- The coalition-building efforts for this election have manifested Widodo's and Prabowo's contrasting leadership styles. Widodo seems more amenable to power-sharing and has sought to embrace a wider spectrum of Indonesia's fragmented elites. In contrast, Prabowo seems to prefer a more centralised leadership approach, and perhaps even a stricter style of governance reminiscent of the Soeharto era.
- The two contenders' appeal for popular support in the next phase of the campaign will continue to involve pitching their different leadership styles. Economic issues are likely to be given more profile, with less emphasis on human rights issues.

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INTRODUCTION

From outside of the forces behind the two contenders in the coming Presidential elections – Joko Widodo and Maruf Amin versus Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno – the comment that there has been no or little substantial policy debate has not been unusual since the beginning of the election campaign. Such comments have come from political analysts based in think tanks, polling organisations and universities as well as social or community organisations. There have also been occasional pleas from elements within the two camps of both contenders to shift away from rhetoric to policy debate.¹

It is not that two sides have not released campaign manifestos. Both have done this, and some media outlets have published or commented upon them. Both, however, talk in very general terms and in any case, these documents have been pushed into the background by the energy invested by both sides, including, indeed especially by supporters outside the officially organised camps, in contestation framed around other matters, not policy substance. Because of the significant use of social media in Indonesia, the impact of the activity and voices of supporters, including unorganised supporters, can be very strong, even defining the electoral atmosphere for many potential voters.

As I argued in an earlier Perspective,² the contestation that has evolved in this first phase of the electoral campaign has been shallow in the sense of the absence of policy debate about strategic national directions or even immediate pressing issues. Yet, it is still the case that there is a clear and sharp contestation occurring, both reflected in many and varied clashes between the two sides. In this situation, a number of questions arise. First, if there is a sharp, if shallow, contestation, what is it about in terms of perspectives or ideology? Second, what are the energies behind it? What actually divides the contenders? What is the difference between them – to what extent do they have different material or other interests?

THE SIMILARITY OF FORMAL RHETORIC

The Widodo-Amin manifesto is entitled “Meneruskan Jalan Perubahan Untuk Indonesia Maju: Berdaulat, Mandiri, Dan Berkepribadian Berlandaskan Gotong Royong” (Continuing on the Road to Indonesia Moving Forward: Sovereign, Independent and with a Character based on Gotong-Royong),³ It is a 38-page document with nine sections. The nine sections are:

1. Improving the quality of human resources.
2. A productive, independent and competitive economic structure.
3. Equitable and just development.
4. Achieve a sustainable environment.
5. Cultural progress that reflects the personality of the nation.
6. Enforcement of a legal system that is corruption-free, dignified, and trusted.
7. Protection for all nations and providing security for all citizens.
8. Management of a clean, effective and trusted government.
9. Synergy of regional government within the framework of the Unitary State.

Each section is covered in a few pages, setting out the general parameters for achieving the goals implied in the section headings.

There is very little that is specific or concrete in these descriptions. In this respect, the Widodo-Amin candidacy is relying on their record to give concrete form to these general policy parameters. This was stated clearly by current Vice-President Yusuf Kalla, who is the Chairperson of the Widodo-Amin Campaign Team. In December he was reported as emphasising that the Widodo Amin government would continue past policies, only better.⁴

Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno have also published their “vision and mission” document, entitled “Empat Pilar Mensejahterakan Indonesia”.⁵ This document has similar character to that of the Widodo-Amin document insofar as the majority of items are formulated in general terms, although there some that have a more specific character, such as regarding tax rates. This document is 15 pages long and takes the form of a list of policy aims, usually described in one or two sentences. The document provides five elements summarising the team’s mission:

1. Building a fair, quality-based and insightful national economic environment by prioritizing the interests of the Indonesian people using a political-economic path in accordance with article 33 and 34 of the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia 1945.
2. Building an Indonesian community that is smart, healthy, quality-based, productive, and competitive; and that is safe, harmonious, peaceful and dignified and protected by just social security without discrimination.
3. Building justice in the legal sector that is not selective and is transparent, and realizing the unity of the Indonesian people using a quality-based democratic path in accordance with Pancasila and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia 1945.
4. Rebuilding the noble values of the nation to realize a country that is fair, prosperous, dignified, faithful, devoted, noble (in accordance with the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia Article 31 paragraph 3), friendly and blessed by God Almighty.
5. Building a national defence and security system independently able to maintain the integrity and territorial integrity of Indonesia.

Perhaps a very close reading might allow the identification of specific differences, but if they exist they do not present themselves to a reader in any meaningful way.

The differences between the perspectives of the two contenders are not highlighted so much in their formal documents but rather in their campaign activities. As noted earlier, however, their campaign activities have also not highlighted concrete policy differences. On 21 December, the major daily newspaper *Kompas* published a report by journalist Devina Halim entitled “3 Bulan Kampanye, Visi Misi Kedua Paslon Tak Jelas, Lebih Sibuk Saling Serang” quoting different political observers.⁶ This kind of sentiment is often expressed also in vox pops on television, in the social media, and sometimes by community organisation spokespersons. If it is not through debates over policy differences – assuming there are major differences, despite the similar content of the vision and mission rhetoric – how then is the contestation between the two contenders manifested?

POLITICAL MEANING OF CAMPAIGN RHETORIC

A recent television talk show on Metro TV took as its theme “Jokowi’s optimism versus Prabowo’s pessimism”.⁷ This contrast has been taken up with great enthusiasm by supporters of President Widodo, both formally through his coalition’s political parties, through the mainstream media supporting Widodo and through his less organised supporters on social media.⁸ This stance by Widodo supporters describing Prabowo as “pessimistic” against Widodo’s optimism can be traced back to at least April 2018 when Prabowo made a statement that current policies would result in Indonesia disintegrating or collapsing (*bubar*).⁹ This polemic resumed more recently when Prabowo made the claim that if he and Sandiaga Uno did not win the election, Indonesia would “punoh”, a quite drastic word meaning to become *extinct*.¹⁰

This has become a major distinction between the two campaigns. Prabowo describes Indonesia’s socio-economic state as parlous, requiring urgent – but generally unstated – measures. Widodo describes Indonesia’s socio-economic status as improving, requiring a continuation of current policies, with – generally unstated – improvements (in implementation). Prabowo’s latest statement regarding Indonesia becoming extinct was connected to his presentation of figures relating to per capita income. The way he presented the data is interesting in that it demonstrates that Prabowo’s rhetoric attacks the Widodo government from the left. His emphasis is on income inequality, the privileges and power of elites, dependence on Western financial power and lack of access for ordinary people to educational and other social facilities. It should be noted, however, that he neither explains the origins of these phenomena, which predate both Joko Widodo and Yudhoyono’s presidencies, and even Suhartos, nor elaborates on concrete solutions.

In his “Indonesia will be extinct” speech, he accepts the analysis by some observers that the top 1% of Indonesian society controls half of the country’s wealth. He correctly stated that the country’s per capita income was US\$4,000, but that given 49% of the country’s wealth was owned by the 1%, the real per capita income – for the other 99% presumably – was only US\$1900. From this figure he then deducted US\$600 representing a figure for national debt calculated on a per capita basis. This left Indonesia with a per capita income of US\$1300. This he said put Indonesia on the same level as “Rwanda, Afghanistan, Chad, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso”.¹¹ In his speech, and in other speeches also, he allocates the blame for this situation on not only the Widodo government but on “the elites” – by which he seems to mean the political party elites.

This tone of extreme urgency has pervaded most of Prabowo’s campaigning over the last three months. Associated with this tone has been a *posture* as regards what needs to be done. This posture is reflected in his assertion in the same speech that he and his team can “fix the country in a short time”.¹² There are no references to any specific measures that he thinks needs to be taken – although perhaps these will be identified over the next three and a half months.

The tone and posture of the campaign are that strong and urgent (unspecified) measures need to be taken to respond to an existential crisis. It is this tone and posture that elicited a series of responses from the Widodo camp accusing Prabowo of being pessimistic and trying to generate panic. ‘Don’t demean and denigrate Indonesia’, has been the appeal made by Widodo supporters against Prabowo.¹³

This tone and posture contrasts with that of the Widodo campaign which emphasises an improving situation for Indonesia. This orientation means that Widodo spokespersons, such as Jusuf Kalla as mentioned, are now positioned as defending the socio-economic status quo against Prabowo's rhetorical attack from the left.

There is, at the same time, a fundamental, although implied, difference in approaches in terms of the political leadership that each side is presenting to the voting public as necessary. Prabowo's tone and posture speaks for urgent, fast and drastic – though again unspecified – actions. Widodo's tone and posture speaks for a stable and patient continuation of current policies. This difference is also echoed in other spheres. Of course, to propose dramatic policy change might expose him to the accusation of failure. To date also, there seems to be no promises of anything dramatically new, even within his policy parameters.

The two contenders' postures also reflect different attitudes toward how they relate to dealing with the various Indonesian political elites. Widodo, despite protestations in 2014 that he would not be a "transactional" leader, i.e. he would avoid excessive politics of deal-making, has shown he is acutely aware of the nature of the Indonesian economic and business elite, namely that it is extremely fragmented. The objective reasons for this situation is the under-developed nature of Indonesian capitalism where the vast majority of businesses operate at a provincial or district level, providing the material basis for 20 factionalised political parties, as well as many other vehicles representing a myriad of interest groups. Widodo's political tactics are to embrace the broadest spectrum of elements within the political elite. His coalition ranges from former Suharto-era generals and the Suharto-era Golkar Party, to religious conservatives, to the Suharto-era opposition party, PDIP, to the urban middle-class liberal, Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) – and many more. They all get positions and concessions. The most dramatic recent allocation of a position to one element of this coalition was the selection of the very conservative Islamic cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, as Widodo's Vice-Presidential running mate. This selection in itself has meant a range of concessions to political Islam's desire for an increased profile in national politics – although this may, at the same time, be dividing political Islam more seriously.¹⁴

Prabowo's posture aimed at presenting himself as a leader who will act urgently and firmly in response to an existential crisis for the nation has been accompanied by a very visible disdain for deal-making with other elements of the elite. Indonesia's electoral laws have meant that Prabowo's party, Gerindra, needed to enter into coalition with the Demokrat Party, the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and the National Mandate Party (PAN) in order to be formally nominated as a Presidential candidate. He could not avoid coalition politics. However, his approach was to make no serious concessions to his coalition "partners". He appointed neither a member of nor anybody close to any of his coalition partners as his Vice-Presidential running mate. This was despite obvious pressure from Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for his son, AHY, to be selected, and despite pressure from PKS and its religious supporters for a PKS nominee or a religious figure to be appointed. Instead Prabowo selected a close associate from his own Party, Sandiagu Uno. Uno was the incumbent Vice-Governor of Jakarta and his resignation to take up the position as Prabowo's running mate left a vacancy.¹⁵ Despite pressure from PKS for his replacement by a PKS nominee, which they claim was part of a deal with Gerindra, Gerindra has resisted on their demand to date.

In analysing Prabowo's coalition, a key factor to consider in assessing the political content of the implications of his tone and posture, are his acceptance into the coalition of the two newly registered parties associated with the Suharto family. The largest seems to be the Karya Party (PK), in which are to be found Suharto's children Sigit Harjojudanto, Siti Hardiyanti Indra Rukmana (Tutut), Bambang Trihatmodjo, Siti Hediati Harijadi (Titiek), Hutomo Mandala Putra (Tommy), and Siti Hutami Endang Adiningsih (Mamiék).¹⁶ The second is the Garuda Party lead by figures associated with Tutut Suharto's television station. The Karya Party explicitly campaigns for a return to Suharto-era politics and features a picture of Suharto on all its campaign posters.¹⁷

Prabowo's own campaign activities only intermittently combine with the Karya Party's campaigning, although he sometimes appears with his wife (now separated) Titiek Suharto. The connection is well-known and there has been no disavowal of the call for a return to the Suharto era by Prabowo or Gerindra. (Although it can be noted that Gerindra spokespersons appearing on television, and even Tommy Suharto, avoid reference to Suharto's authoritarianism, preferring instead to mention some of the New Order's economic development policies.)

One contrast is therefore that between Widodo's approach of embracing the broadest possible range of potential supporters and Prabowo's disdain for coalition negotiating on the one hand and his closeness to the Suharto camp on the other. A second contrast is that between Widodo's pitch for patient continuation of policy on the one hand with Prabowo's pitch for urgent action by a new leader on the other. The latter hints at a real difference between the two. Widodo has a power-sharing approach to mobilising the Indonesian elite while Prabowo prefers a more centralised leadership.

POLITICS TOWARDS THE ELITE; POLITICS TOWARDS SOCIETY

The contrasts mentioned above primarily relate to how the two contenders prefer to relate to Indonesia's fragmented elite. At this point in time, attitudes towards popular or lower-class forces do not emerge as active issues in campaigning, because such forces are not yet active on the national political stage.¹⁸ The "non-elite" – i.e. the great mass of society – are present in national politics only as potential voters for one of the 20 parties or one of the two contenders for the Presidency. The implications of the difference between Widodo's power-sharing approach and Prabowo's "urgent strong leader" approach for democratic political life at the mass level is not yet clearly manifest.

One of the leading human rights organisations, the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras), has argued that neither of the contenders has shown an interest in resolving outstanding human rights questions.¹⁹ Human rights groups have always argued that Prabowo has a case to answer in relation to the kidnapping and disappearance of anti-Suharto activists in 1998.²⁰ Others have expressed concern at his support for conservative Islamic political activity which rails against political and social liberalism.²¹ The statement by Prabowo's campaign manager, ex-General Djoko Santoso, that he would willingly violate human rights if it meant saving Indonesia from collapsing ("runtuh") has added to such concerns.²²

On the other hand, there has also been criticism of what some see as an “authoritarian turn” by Widodo, manifest in the government’s promulgation of regulations that allow it to disband organisations it deems to be opposed to the state ideology of Pancasila.²³

While policy debate has not been prominent, Prabowo’s rhetorical attack from the left points to what kind of appeals – beyond the pitch for urgent, strong leadership – to the mass of the population may develop during the remainder of the campaign. The left rhetoric focuses on economic issues, as Prabowo’s reference to per capita income and wealth distribution indicates. This aspect of campaigning has also been a priority in the activities of Sandiaga Uno, who has been campaigning around the issue of price rises in basic goods, in particular food, in the market places.²⁴ Widodo’s *blusukan* style (folksy visits to market places) has been taken up by Uno with the aim of agitating around claimed high prices for these commodities. Widodo’s response has been a combination of using official Statistic Bureau figures to show that the Gini Coefficient has improved and emphasising the various programmes that make health services and schooling more accessible.

As the campaign moves into the next phase between January and April, and televised debates begin, these economic issues may loom larger in the public discourse. The contrast between a power-sharing approach to government, associated with pluralism and democracy by its supporters, and a centralised leadership approach, linked to religious social conservatism and Suhartoism, is likely also to continue to feature prominently.

¹ On the shallowness of contestation at the beginning of this campaign, see Max Lane, "An Empty Start to the 2019 Election Campaign", *ISEAS Perspective*, 27 November, 2018 at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_75@50.pdf

² *Ibid.*

³ For the complete document see: MENERUSKAN JALAN PERUBAHAN UNTUK INDONESIA MAJU: BERDAULAT, MANDIRI, DAN BERKEPRIBADIAN BERLANDASKAN GOTONG ROYONG, at <https://www5.jetro.go.jp/newsletter/jkt/2018/VISI%20MISI%20FINAL%2022%20SEPT%202018.pdf> For a media summary in English, see <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/12/04/here-are-jokowi-marufs-nine-missions-for-2019s-presidential-poll.html>

⁴ <https://www.liputan6.com/pilpres/read/3854833/jusuf-kalla-jokowi-pilihan-terbaik>

⁵ For the full document see: <https://www.pataka.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/visi-misi-02.Prabowo-Sandi-2019.pdf>. For a media summary in English see: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/12/04/salient-points-in-prabowo-sandiagas-plans-for-fair-and-prosperous-indonesia.html>

⁶ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/12/21/09315571/3-bulan-kampanye-visi-misi-kedua-paslon-tak-jelas-lebih-sibuk-saling-serang>. See also from in November: <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/11/15/06580041/kedua-paslon-dinilai-gUnokan-politik-identitas-untuk-raih-suara>

⁷ <http://video.metrotvnews.com/election-update/VNxqoy1b-optimisme-jokowi-melawan-pesimisme-prabowo>

⁸ See <https://www.beritasatu.com/politik/529884-jokowimaruf-geloran-optimisme-prabowosandi-usung-pesimisme.html>; <https://www.kompasiana.com/wilychristians/5c18662412ae947f0512aa7d/dibalik-optimisme-jokowi-dan-pesimisme-prabowo>; among many others.

⁹ <https://www.merdeka.com/politik/sindir-prabowo-soal-ri-bubar-2030-jokowi-minta-pemimpin-harus-optimis.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181217173007-32-354336/prabowo-kita-tak-bisa-kalah-kalah-negara-ini-pUnoh>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/12/19/05050061/prabowo--saya-yakin-dapat-perbaiki-kondisi-negara-dalam-waktu-singkat>

¹³ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181226183725-32-356564/tim-jokowi-minta-prabowo-tak-hina-dan-kecilkan-indonesia>

¹⁴ Eve Warburton, "Indonesia's Presidential Nominees: a Quick Take" at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8076-indonesias-presidential-nominees-a-quick-take-by-eve-warburton> see also: Ahmad Najib Burhani and Deasy Simandjuntak, "The Ma'ruf Amin Vice-presidential Candidacy: Enticing or Splitting Conservative Votes?" at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_51@50.pdf

¹⁵ Warburton, *op cit.*

¹⁶ <https://news.detik.com/berita/4125828/seluruh-keluarga-cendana-akhirnya-berlabuh-di-partai-berkarya>

¹⁷ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181207223106-32-352028/prabowo-sandi-akan-bawa-indonesia-seperti-zaman-soeharto>

¹⁸ An initiative in April 2018 by five trade unions to form a unified political bloc of broad grass-roots forces has not yet developed further. See Max Lane, "Trade Unions' Initiative To Create Alternative Political Force in Indonesia", *ISEAS Perspective*, 10 August, 2018 at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_44@50.pdf

¹⁹ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/12/10/23034841/haris-azhar-jokowi-dan-prabowo-tak-miliki-kapasitas-dalam-pemenuhan-ham>

²⁰ <https://pilpres.tempo.co/read/1159533/debat-capres-i-angkat-isu-ham-sandiaga-sebut-prabowo-tak-masalah/full&view=ok> There are many media reports on this issue.

²¹ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181202075345-20-350455/massa-reuni-aksi-212-serukan-prabowo-subianto-presiden-2019>; <https://news.detik.com/berita/4347973/fadli-zon-kalau-perlu-212-kita-jadikan-hari-persaudaraan>

²² <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181227181547-32-356828/ketua-timses-prabowo-pilih-langgar-ham-daripada-negara-runtuh>

²³ Tom Power, “Jokowi’s authoritarian turn” in New Mandala, 9 October, 2018 at

<https://www.newmandala.org/jokowis-authoritarian-turn/>

²⁴ See for example <https://www.merdeka.com/politik/politik-pasar-tradisional-ala-sandiaga-uno.html>. There are many media reports of these visits to traditional markets by Uno as well as of responses by Widodo. For the latter see for example:

<http://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2018/11/25/jawab-sindiran-jokowi-sandiaga-uno-dalam-3-tahun-saya-sudah-kunjungi-270-pasar>

For statistical data on the extent of price rises, see:

<https://tradingeconomics.com/indonesia/inflation-cpi>;

<https://tradingeconomics.com/indonesia/food-inflation>;

<https://www.bi.go.id/en/moneter/inflasi/data/Default.aspx>. Official statistics put annual inflation, including for food, at between 3-4%.

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