

# Indonesia Prepares for Election Rematch

March 18, 2019 (IN11077)

---

## Related Author

---

- [Ben Dolven](#)
- 

Ben Dolven, Specialist in Asian Affairs ([bdolven@crs.loc.gov](mailto:bdolven@crs.loc.gov), 7-7626)

---

Voters in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, are scheduled to go to the polls on April 17 to elect a President and the 560 members of the People's Representative Council, Indonesia's national Parliament. This will be Indonesia's fourth direct presidential election and the first time presidential and parliamentary polls are to be simultaneous. It is also expected to be one of the largest democratic exercises in the world: among democracies, Indonesia trails only India and the United States in the size of its electorate.

The presidential polls pit the same two candidates who contested the last elections in 2014: President Joko Widodo and former army Special Forces commander Prabowo Subianto. Widodo, almost universally known by his nickname, Jokowi, won the bitterly contested previous election by 9 million votes. Most opinion polls show him once again holding a lead over Prabowo, but the advantage may be narrowing as election day nears.

To many observers, the elections represent another step in the entrenching of democracy in Indonesia, serving as a prominent counterpoint to concerns that democracy is in decline in many parts of the world, including in Southeast Asia. Indonesia was led by an authoritarian government from 1965 to 1998, when popular protests brought down former President Suharto and ushered in a newly competitive political system. Widodo is the fifth president since then, and the second since direct presidential polls were introduced in 2004. Despite some irregularities, international observers have considered each of the presidential elections to have been free and fair.

## What's at Stake?

Indonesia is an important player in many issues of import to the United States and to Congress. This year, it began a two-year stint as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council. As the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, its policies towards religious tolerance (enshrined in the Constitution) and towards combatting violent extremism and terrorism are of interest to many in Congress. As the largest country in Southeast Asia, it plays a leadership role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the multilateral forum that seeks to promote regional economic integration and to address tensions in the South China Sea by negotiating a Code of Conduct for parties in those waters. Indonesia has welcomed Chinese infrastructure investment, including the construction of a high-speed railway between Jakarta and Bandung, but has also become more active in contesting Chinese actions in the South China Sea, including Chinese fishing in waters that Indonesia considers its own.

Indonesia is also a key player in global efforts to combat climate change: because of extensive rainforest deforestation, through both legal and illegal logging, it ranks as one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases. It is also home to numerous major U.S. investors, particularly in resource industries, and its treatment of those firms is a concern to many in Congress. Although Widodo has pursued some policies to remove obstacles to foreign investment, he has also,

like his predecessors, sought to force divestment of resource projects by foreign firms on economic nationalist grounds.

## Domestic Focus

Widodo is running largely on claims that he has accelerated Indonesia's infrastructure development and lowered prices, particularly in Indonesia's less-developed areas. He speaks of promoting Indonesia's technology sector, which has languished compared with some of its neighbors. Unlike his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, he has not actively sought to position Indonesia as a more active player in international fora, instead focusing more narrowly on "livelihood" issues.

Prabowo, the son-in-law of former President Suharto, has faced harsh criticism for human rights abuses committed by Indonesia's Special Forces in the 1990s while he was commander of the elite group known as *Kopassus*. His platform promises to promote self-sufficiency in food and to cut taxes on individuals and companies. Many see him as trying to appeal to conservative religious voters and a "law and order" vote that evinces nostalgia for the country's authoritarian past.

## Growing Religious Conservatism?

Some observers point to concerns that Prabowo's overt appeal to conservative Islamic groups heralds a possible move toward greater religious intolerance in Indonesia, where the national ideology, known as *Pancasila*, enshrines diversity and tolerance as national values. Widodo, a Muslim, has regularly faced whisper campaigns that he is not properly Islamic, or even that he is Christian. In 2017, an ally of Widodo's, Basuki "Ahok" Tjahjama Purnama—an ethnically Chinese Christian who succeeded Widodo as Governor of Jakarta—was convicted of blasphemy and jailed for comments allegedly made about the Koran. Many observers believed that ruling represented a worrying shift in Indonesia's judicial system away from independence to accommodate political pressure from conservative Islamists.

In a move many analysts believe was aimed at allaying possible Islamist criticism, Widodo chose a religious leader, Ma'ruf Amin, head of the country's largest Muslim group Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as his Vice Presidential running mate. Amin's role does not necessarily signal a shift to greater religious conservatism; a previous head of NU, Abdurrahman Wahid, served as Indonesia's president from 1999 to 2001, and was a strong proponent of religious and ethnic tolerance. But some in Indonesia raise concern that the country's leaders are increasingly being bound in word and deed by conservative groups.

## Can the Next President Govern?

The Parliamentary elections may be important, as Indonesia's diverse People's Representative Council has made it difficult for successive presidents to pursue broad reforms. Widodo has governed with a diffuse and shifting coalition, without firm control over his coalition mates or even his own party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). Prabowo's party, the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), is a personality-based party built around himself and holds 73 of the 575 seats in Parliament. Whichever candidate wins the Presidency will likely have to cobble together a coalition through considerable intra-party bargaining, limiting the degree to which his government can implement its campaign promises.