

Challenges to Joko Widodo: Indonesia's cultural and political complexity

Indonesia's new President Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, faces multiple challenges as he seeks to deliver on his electoral promises in a country where the provinces are increasingly powerful, communal identity growing and parliament dominated by the opposition, according to Indonesia expert Farish Noor, an associate professor at RSIS in Singapore.

Jokowi was elected in July in a hard-fought campaign against former army general Prabowo Subianto. Jokowi's success as mayor of Jakarta, as well as his 'everyman' demeanour and a reputation for probity helped secure him the most powerful position in the country.

Nevertheless, the new President, who was installed on October 20, faces formidable challenges, Farish told the audience at a lecture organised by the Jeffrey Cheah Institute at Sunway University. Jokowi faces not only a hostile opposition-controlled parliament, but also assertive politicians in the provinces, increasing communal identity among Indonesia's myriad ethnic groups and a growing, and more demanding, middle class.

"The complex nature of these challenges reflects the complexity of Indonesian society," Farish said. "Too many analysts tend to assume too much homogeneity and to look at the country through the lens of Jakarta. There are many Indonesias."

Farish, a Malaysian who teaches at a number of Indonesian universities and has travelled across the archipelago, says visiting provinces and districts outside Jakarta and the heavily-populated island of Java provides a more nuanced and accurate picture of life in contemporary Indonesia.

The devolution that has taken place since the fall of Suharto in 1998 means that the power dynamic with the centre has changed. Farish argues ambitious politicians need no longer court the powers in Jakarta if they want to establish themselves locally and that has contributed to increasing demands from the periphery. In South Sulawesi, he noted, local newspapers devote 12 or 13 pages to local events, with barely two or three pages of reporting on the rest of Indonesia. The size of the middle class has also grown and people no longer need to go to the capital to make their fortunes. The country's third fastest growing city, after Jakarta and Surabaya, is Balikpapan in Kalimantan.

"Today, across many parts of Indonesia there are movements everywhere for a greater sense of local identity," Farish said. "The relationship between the centre and the periphery has changed. Jakarta has become the lobbying point."

More assertive provinces may make it difficult for Jokowi to achieve his ambitious plans to modernise creaky logistics and communication networks across the archipelago, because the local tycoons who dominate key routes – and profit from the existing system – might be unwilling to give up control, according to Farish.

He highlighted how prices multiply depending on the distance not only from the capital, but major regional cities; a cup of coffee might cost 1,000 rupiah in Yogyakarta, but surges to 10,000 rupiah in the Papuan city of Jayapura in the far east of Indonesia. It's a similar situation with power. Many places are still not connected to the electricity grid, with communities reliant on generators in many parts of the country.

"This was a bread and butter election," Farish said. "Jokowi needs to translate ideas into policies."

Still, Jokowi's decision to include in the Cabinet respected technocrats, eight women and ethnic minorities as well as people from the opposition, although indicative of the political battle the new President is facing also provides some hope that he might be able to manage his rivals and navigate Indonesia's many complexities effectively.

"It's a compromise Cabinet," Farish told the audience. "Jokowi's main problem is that he faces a hostile parliament. He cannot antagonise the opposition coalition because it controls parliament and can block everything."