

# Democracy's betrayal: When preventing the worst is no longer the priority

The likely victory of presidential pair Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, respectively the defense minister and son of President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, in the Feb. 14 election could mark one of the darkest episodes in the history of post-Reform Indonesia.

President Jokowi's meddling and lobbying, or *cawe-cawe* in local parlance, is still fresh in our minds. He blatantly played with the system to stack the deck in favor of Prabowo-Gibran in the lead-up to the election: from the Constitutional Court's controversial decision that allowed Gibran's nomination as Prabowo's running mate to the appointment of over 200 acting regional heads, and from the mobilization of state apparatuses like the military, the police, civil service and village heads to support the pair and up to the politicization of the social assistance (Bansos) program and state resources.

All these maneuvers are highlighted in the documentary film *Dirty Vote*, released just three days before voting day.

The unholy circle behind Prabowo's apparent success presents a paradox regarding how the new administration will address stubborn issues such as corruption, collusion and nepotism.

However, what has infuriated many is that the patterns shown in the Prabowo-Gibran campaign strategy resemble those of Fer-

dinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr in the Philippines. First, Bongbong chose Sara Duterte, the daughter of outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte, as his running mate to form a strong alliance.

Prabowo-Gibran's strategy in the 2024 election was more or less the same as Bongbong's political rebranding that won him the Philippine presidency in 2022 with over 59 percent of the vote.

For instance, the Prabowo team has been using "*gemoy*", which means cute and cuddly and is derived from the Indonesian word "*gemas*", to describe the presidential candidate. Interestingly, Bongbong (BBM) and Sara also used "*gemoy*" as the name of their popular campaign, particularly in referring to the pair's "BBM-Sara's Dance Challenge".

Using this campaign strategy, the two presidential pairs tried not only to wipe their peoples' collective memory of past dictatorships and human rights abuses, but also to deliberately create a new wave of political participation that strayed from the usually tense politics.

Another similarity is in how their political machines were bankrolled by oligarchs. Massive funding has enabled both "*gemoy*" pairs to reign on social media.

It's understandable that they chose to focus on winning hearts on social media platforms rather than through public debates or media interviews. Debates would



## Insight

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mean exposing themselves to direct "attacks" that might unearth their indisputably dark past.

This is where our elections are no longer a battle of ideas, but a war of perception.

An investigative report by *Time* (2022) showed that Bongbong benefited greatly from the disinformation spread across social media platforms. He managed to convince millions of Philippine youths that stories about the dictatorship of his father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr, were slanderous.

The Prabowo-Gibran national campaign seemed to have employed the same method to try and convince Indonesia's Gen Z voters and deny the criticisms thrown at them by political rivals.

As Vedi Hadiz (2024) wrote, examples abound in which democracy harmed or even killed itself.

This pattern has been replicated in many countries: A presidential candidate's vision includes some change that captures the concerns of the middle class that feels economically left behind. After all, Hadiz says, the pow-

ers behind the curtain of elections will eat away at democratic institutions.

In Indonesia, democracy's suicide attempt was already evident under Jokowi's tenure. Some of us may remember how, back in 2014, his predominantly middle-class sympathizers came together in an organic movement, calling themselves "Relawan Jokowi", or Jokowi's volunteers. They really were united under Jokowi as a humble "man of the people", but more than that, he charmed people with the promise of change that *Time* touted as "A New Hope" after 10 years of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) presidency.

But Jokowi's close relationship with the people didn't last long. Instead, he consolidated his opponents, including rival Prabowo, under a power-sharing deal.

SBY and his Democratic Party have also changed course and become part of the alliance supporting Prabowo-Gibran. With SBY and Prabowo now on his team, Jokowi is the true winner

of the game, embracing former rivals in a soft, semi-authoritarian political maneuver.

This is the Jokowi-style democracy without opposition, enabling him to run his government akin to an autonomous state.

In his quest to quell dissent, President Jokowi is seemingly committed to an unsettling strategy: stifling the free speech of his middle-class critics. The modus operandi of his strategy appears to be the criminalization of his political opposition, often through threats and corruption investigations.

But here we are. Like it or not, we have to admit that Jokowi is one of the shrewdest politicians Indonesia has ever seen. Underneath the controversies surrounding him, he remains popular, even scoring around 80 percent in several public approval surveys.

How come? The answer lies in his strategic approach toward social transfers, specifically targeting society's poor and disadvantaged segments. In this way, he has successfully bound their loyalty to him, helping him to win over the hearts and minds of many Indonesians.

Adding to this, Jokowi's clever use of algorithmic politics on social media ensures his actions go unnoticed, overshadowed by his selective achievements with infrastructure as his trump card. His failed food estate project, a collaboration with Prabowo, has been deftly described as "normal"

to Gen Zers, even as damning evidence floods social media.

It's not surprising therefore, that the "Jokowi effect" gave a significant boost to Prabowo-Gibran's popularity among Gen Z voters.

This phenomenon is an ironic reflection of a country that has transitioned democratically, but with many of its citizens trapped in the precarious "rising middle class" situation. Poverty rates may be falling, but this precariat class is rising, pinning their hopes on a state that exhibits patrimonial characteristics rather than those of a welfare state.

Now, amid a multitude of issues involving nepotism and serious ethics breaches, will Indonesia's next-in-line keep their heads buried in the sand? Will Prabowo's inauguration, if he is declared the winner, be smooth sailing? The next episode in Indonesia's history is about to unfold.

Overall, the tales of Prabowo-Gibran and Bongbong-Sara, respectively featuring Jokowi and Duterte as protagonists, serve as valuable lessons. What constitutes political truth depends on who and how many supports it, so democracy is no longer about preventing the worst from ruling, but about enabling one to preserve power.

We can only now hope that the next administration will not descend even further into the pits of postelection democratic decline.