# Is This a Constitutional Democracy

## Familial Harmony, Pancasila, and Javanese Values in Indonesia's New Government

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Indonesia, a country that has experimented with constitutional democracy since 1998, inaugurated its new president, Prabowo Subianto, on October 20, 2024. His so-called "Red and White Cabinet" (*Kabinet Merah Putih*) may appear peculiar from the perspective of Western democracies due to its concentration of power. Prabowo assembled a "bloated cabinet" of 48 ministers constituting a hodge-podge of anti-Sharia pluralists, nationalists, Islamists, protectionists and anti-regulation neoliberals, all swearing fealty to the magico-religious state ideology and foundation, the *Pancasila*. Effectively, this harmony-oriented leadership consumes any meaningful political opposition, emblematic of constitutional democracies. We argue that the "oligarchy" explanation, a jargon that is rather overused in Indonesian studies, might not provide the full picture, as the new administration seems to reflect the folk understanding of the state. Prabowo's cabinet eerily parallels the ideology of the "family state", which envisions the state as a large Indonesian family working together to maintain familial harmony.

### Historical antecedents of familial cabinet

Throughout its 79 years of history, Indonesia has a tendency of forming a "bloated cabinet" representing multifarious political streams as well as independent technocrats, resulting in an overwhelming majority in parliament. For instance, towards the end of Sukarno's "Guided Democracy" era, the number of his ministers exceeded 100. Its composition included various political streams that existed at that time, despite their essentially conflicting ideologies, such as nationalists, traditionalist Islamic groups, Catholic and Protestant political groups, as well as leftists and communists, in line with his Nasakom concept (Nationalism–Religion–Communism).

Most notably, ministerial positions have become a way for sitting presidents to cultivate and consolidate support. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, for instance, managed to build a large coalition that included nationalists, traditionalist and reformist Muslims, Islamists, as well as independent technocrats. He even sought to reconcile with the main opposition figure and the leader of the traditional-nationalist Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Megawati Sukarnoputri, to the extent of securing the seat of the Speaker of the Parliament to her husband.

Eventually, the same pattern repeated itself after Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was elected president in 2014 with the support of the PDI-P. He started his term as a weak president, since his opponent in the 2014 elections, Prabowo Subianto, built a coalition that controlled the majority in parliament. Nonetheless, he slowly managed to enlarge his coalition from an alliance between traditional-nationalists and traditionalist Muslim parties to one that included other nationalists and reformist Muslim parties. The climactic moment came after he won his second term in 2019, when he brought Prabowo Subianto – his opponent in the 2014 and 2019 presidential Elections – into his government and gave him the position of the Defence Minister, a rapprochement that was rife with traditional Javanese symbolism. With Prabowo joining Jokowi's administration, the "Onward Indonesia Cabinet" was in control of 82% of parliamentary seats, while the cabinet itself eventually consisted of 34 ministers and 18 deputy ministers.

## Making sense of Prabowo's familial cabinet

The tendency of "bloated cabinet" repeats itself right after Prabowo was sworn in as president. In the evening of 20 October, he announced the composition of his "Red and White Cabinet", a reference to the red and white color of the flag. He greatly enlarged the size of his cabinet to 48 ministers, 56 deputy ministers, and 5 heads of ministerial-level agencies, making Prabowo's administration the largest since Sukarno's 100-ministers cabinet. This coalition encompasses almost all political parties who participated in the 2024 elections. In line with Indonesia's long-standing obsession with technocrats, the cabinet also features academics who appear independent on the surface, including the legendary incumbent finance minister Sri Mulyani.

While the gender balance of the cabinet leaves a lot to be desired, in terms of ethnic and religious composition, the "Red and White" cabinet is inclusive of different segments of the population. It includes a West Papuan Minister of Human Rights as well as Chinese Indonesians. The cabinet has many representatives from the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest traditionalist Muslim organisation in Indonesia who advocates and practices a form of folk Nusantara Islam, but it also includes members of its counterpart, the reformist Muhammadiyah, and an Islamist party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The cabinet also maintains some of the figures who are known as the right-hand men of the previous incumbent, Jokowi, who had a fallout with his original political party the PDI-P over his support of Prabowo's candidacy and the controversial nomination of his son as vice presidential candidate. Meanwhile, it may seem that Megawati's party, the PDI-P, is excluded from the "bloated cabinet" and emerged as a credible opposition force, as none of its members were named ministers. However, the cabinet includes Budi Gunawan as well as ST Burhanuddin, two figures with a close association with both Megawati and the PDI-P, which implies that unofficially the PDI-P is part of the Prabowo administration.

Many observers are quick to blame Prabowo's move as the manifestation of the business as usual attitude from many "oligarchs" who dominate Indonesian politics to exploit the country's wealth. However, considering the historical pattern of big government repeatedly being formed in Indonesian history, this explanation may not be sufficient to provide the full picture. After all, more elites sharing the same pie means that everyone will get less portions.

Instead, the repeated formation of a big government that includes a broad range of political actors cannot be separated from the folk understanding of power. For the Javanese, who are the biggest and most dominant ethnic group in Indonesia, due to its Hindu-Buddhist past and the influence of Indic folklore such as Mahabharata and Ramayana, life is perceived as a constant battle between anarchy and order. Therefore, in the Javanese tradition, it is desirable for the ruler to maintain harmony and prevent chaos from occurring during her/his reign. One way to maintain harmony for the ruler is by absorbing power from all other sources of power that exist in society, including from adversaries. For the Javanese, the harmonious period is when the state power is concentrated in the hands of the ruler, while if the state power is dispersed, it is viewed as a time of disorder. This contrasts with the concept of constitutionalism, which seeks to limit power.

To date, all Indonesian Presidents have been either Javanese or partially Javanese. What usually escapes the eyes of international and Indonesian observers alike is how they, perhaps with the exception of the modernist Muslim B. J. Habibie, appeal to and are informed by traditional Javanese conception of power and legitimacy. For instance, anthropologist Thomas Anton Reuter reported the practice of Indonesian Presidents visiting the site where the Javanese prophet-king Jayabaya, who famously prophesied the return of a messianist Just King (*Ratu Adil*), achieved spiritual liberation (*moksa*). Both President Abdurrahman Wahid, who is known among Western scholars as a Muslim cleric, and Megawati Sukarnoputri "were secretly given the divine power to rule (*wahyu raja*) the nation of Indonesia" by a spiritual leader with a

profound knowledge of the Jayabaya prophecy. Thus, despite the haughty declaration of some authors that "Indonesia no longer needs the Just King", the belief in such a messiah is still very well alive in Javanese society.

Indonesian Presidents have also taken decisions in line with Javanese traditional beliefs. The Muslim cleric Abdurrahman Wahid regularly meditated at the tomb of Sufi saints to speak to their spirits and obtain their blessings before undertaking major governmental decisions, such as sacking cabinet ministers. Jokowi was probably the most conspicuously traditional Javanese of all in recent years; his political theatrics can only be understood from the lens of Javanese philosophy, and he reputedly also relied on traditional Javanese astrology to decide the correct (*cocok*) day to launch mass COVID-19 vaccinations.

There is a strong case that Prabowo was influenced by the folk Javanese understanding of power when constructing his cabinet, given that he was known for being obsessed with rejuvenating Indonesia's "glorious" past. Indeed, in his inaugural speech, Prabowo declared, "but let us realise that our democracy has to be characteristic of Indonesia, fit (*cocok*) for our nation. Our democracy comes from our history and culture." Strikingly, he further proclaimed, "Our democracy has to be polite", "cool and calming" (*sejuk*), and "peaceful", "a democracy where correction is done without insulting". To support these statements, he referred to the fourth principle of the *Pancasila*, "democracy led by the wisdom of thoughts in harmonious deliberation (*permusyawaratan*) and representation (*perwakilan*)". At another occasion earlier this year, he also said, "I have participated in five general elections and let me attest, let me testify, that democracy is really, very, very tiring (…), democracy is very, very messy and costly". These statements reflect his conviction that the state shall be based on the Indonesian identity, and that oppositional democracy is "very messy" and thus incompatible with traditional conceptions of the state.

Prabowo is also notable for being a vehement supporter of the original 1945 Constitution, which was the basis of Sukarno's and Suharto's authoritarian regimes before it was amended massively from 1999 to 2002 to allow Indonesia's transition to a constitutional democracy. Prabowo himself has openly declared his desire to return to the original 1945 Constitution, while the statute of his party, the Great Indonesian Movement, speaks of the "purity" of the Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution that was enacted on August 18, 1945.

The original 1945 Constitution was mainly drafted by Supomo, the first Indonesian adat (customary) law professor who was also an aristocrat from the Javanese Royal House of Kasunanan. This original Constitution reflects the family state concept that conceives the State and the people as a unity (*manunggaling kawulo gusti*). Under this idea, the role of the government is to "maintain unity and balance in society", analogous to how traditional Indonesian village leaders are conceived as always deliberating (*bermusyawarah*) with all families in their village to maintain harmony. Given Prabowo's penchant for the original 1945 Constitution, and as is also discernible from his inaugural speech, it is likely he had a similar idea in mind: that the President shall not foster enmity between different segments of society, but rather maintain harmony by embracing all opposing political factions.

## Conclusion

Prabowo's cabinet reflects the folk and historical understanding of power in Indonesia. It is the very manifestation of the banyan tree, whose thick leaves give a sense of calm (*sejuk*) and harmony (*rukun*), with its wide branches symbolising the protective and all-embracing nature of the state. This banyan-tree like cabinet thus seeks to uphold familial harmony between all political segments, which involve the awarding of ministerial positions to placate them.

Despite Indonesia's transition to a constitutional democratic system since 1998, elements of folk understanding of the state, power, and law have continued to shape and form the thinking and actions of political and judicial actors. With the prevalent use of subtle but visible symbolisms of Javanese culture, it is perhaps time for scholarship to pay attention to such folk understandings seriously to understand why the

Indonesian democratic Reformation has failed to produce a liberal and constitutionalist democracy.

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