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INSIDE Indonesia

Indonesia's election year: looking back

Written by: YATUN SASTRAMIDJAJA | Published: Feb 24, 2025 |



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Indonesia's election year – with legislative and presidential elections held on 14 February 2024, and regional head elections on 28 November 2024 – was a critical test case for Indonesia's democracy, and according to many the outcome did not bode well. Some 26 years after the end of authoritarian New Order rule, this election year marked the triumphant consolidation of power of an oligarchic elite that is poised to pursue its interests by hijacking democratic institutions,

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stretching their capacity to perform checks and balances to the limit. Observers had warned for an **illiberal turn** in Indonesia's democracy since 2017, a trend seen to deepen after the 2019 elections that gave rise to a new strategic alliance between former rivals Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. Now, after Prabowo's Jokowi-backed electoral victory, activists sound the alarm over a 'worst-case scenario' for Indonesia's democracy. But ruling elites claim that critics should stop whining, as they were legitimately elected through the democratic vote.

In **this edition** of *Inside Indonesia* we look back on Indonesia's election year to see what lessons can be drawn about the current state of Indonesia's democracy. We ask what the 'democratic vote' still means in a context of entrenched political clientelism and transactionalism, deepening dynastic politics and ever more sophisticated influence operations. We do so by zooming in on the role of dynastic politics and that of manipulative campaigns masked as positive branding behind Prabowo's victory, the role of social media in creating hyperrealities and parallel worlds that shaped voters' perceptions, and the consequences of national election outcomes on the regional elections held later that year.

Prabowo's victory

Prabowo's landslide victory – beating his opponents Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo in one round with nearly 59 per cent of the votes – is often attributed to Jokowi's **open support**. Jokowi's high **approval ratings** clearly benefited Prabowo's electability, especially since Jokowi's eldest son Gibran Rakabuming Raka was paired as Prabowo's running mate; together they vowed to continue Jokowi's program and legacy. Prabowo's strategic alliance with the popular president also granted access to state **institutions** and **resources** for his campaign, giving him a clear head start to the other candidates. But the 'Jokowi effect' was not the only factor shaping the election outcome. Prabowo's victory fits a broader pattern of elite families increasing their foothold in democratic institutions, indicating the consolidation of **dynastic politics** in Indonesia.

As **Jemma Purdey** writes, Prabowo's rise to presidency was not just one man's triumph, but a dynastic dream come true. She shows that Prabowo's ambitions have always been a shared endeavour of the Djojohadikusmo family, whose efforts to consolidate their political influence do not stop at Prabowo. With a new generation of Prabowo's nephews and nieces appointed to key government positions, the family's widening grip on power is cast for the future, beyond Prabowo, who is getting old (aged 73 at his inauguration). Purdey further points

to the remarkable lack of public backlash over the family's political incursions, even as criticism was mounting over Jokowi's dynastic ambitions, including his meddling in a controversial constitutional court **decision**, chaired by his brother-in-law Anwar Usman, which paved the way for Gibran's candidacy. In contrast, Purdey shows, the carefully cultivated story of the Djojohadikusumo family – in which glamour aligned with notions of nationalism, a legacy of Soemitro Djojohadikusumo, Prabowo's father and Indonesia's first Minister of Trade and Industry – mainly fed into the public's fascination with Indonesia's long-established dynastic families. Dynastic politics, it seems, is normalised in Indonesia, as long as the dynasty can boast nationalist credentials.

Besides fitting dynastic patterns in contemporary Indonesian politics, Prabowo's victory also fits a broader trend of strongman leaders gaining popular support through clever marketing strategies and coordinated influence operations – or public opinion manipulation through social media – that divert the public's attention from their past or current crimes. In Prabowo's 2024 campaign, the former army general's old strongman image – still prominent in his previous presidential bids in 2014 and 2019, when he frequently donned his military uniform and rode his horse on stage like a victorious marshal – was expertly rebranded into the image of an endearing *gemoy* (cute and cuddly) grandpa.

Taking a critical look at how and why Prabowo's campaign adopted this new image, **Ross Tapsell** argues that it represents a 'toxic positivity' that serves to systematically block criticism. Tapsell shows how such toxic positivity could invade the public through clever use of new digital cultures, including artificial intelligence. Fact-checkers and NGOs that were all geared up to counter the disinformation and hate speech seen in previous elections were left stunned by this new campaign strategy. Lacking the tools to expose public opinion manipulation through toxic positivity, they could only watch as the *gemoy* campaign won over the public. Tapsell therefore calls for a more critical approach to political communication beyond a narrow focus on disinformation, to understand how information is manipulated in a politics of toxic positivity.

Hyperreality and parallel worlds

Prabowo's successful *gemoy* campaign illustrated how the elite's influence operations had shifted to a strategy of misinformation without disinformation. Throughout the campaigns, fake news or 'hoaxes' about each candidate still made their rounds on social media, but they were no longer at the centre of concerted efforts to influence voters' perceptions of the candidates. Instead, as **Vidhyandika Perkasa** argues, influence operations are now all about creating

hyperrealities – or mesmerising simulations of reality that are often more appealing than factual reality – which cloud people's capacity for critical thinking and making rational decisions. Perkasa explains the various stages of influence operations, showing how they work to manipulate people's perceptions at a deeply psychological level. The only way to remedy people's susceptibility to influence operations, he argues, is to empower voters through solid political education that emphasises critical thinking.

Taking a closer look at the hyperrealities constructed on social media, [Yatun Sastramidjaja](#) and [M. Alif Alauddin](#) show how digital campaigns used new strategies of seduction that also differed across social media platforms. While Twitter (or 'X') remained the arena for classic influence operations – where armies of paid [buzzers](#), or anonymous social media influencers, bombarded the platform with ready-made campaign messages – TikTok had emerged as the key battleground to win over voters, especially young swing-voters, giving rise to a very different type of influencing. The authors show how Twitter and TikTok formed parallel worlds during the campaign; prevalent sentiments on Twitter – where criticism of Prabowo and Gibran abounded – were effectively countered by clever TikTok trends going viral. Different from Twitter, where buzzers were easily spotted, TikTok blurred the lines between the stage-managed of buzzer operations and the spontaneous participation of authentic users, which benefited Prabowo's *gemoy* campaign.

Amidst the cacophony of campaign banners, protest messages surfaced to urge the public to 'boycott human rights offenders', referring to Prabowo (poster on the left), or call for Jokowi's impeachment for abuse of power (poster on the right) / Remco van Loenen



The TikTok effect appeared to have been a decisive factor, as a majority of voters from the Millennial and Gen Z generations, who made up more than half the electorate, did **vote** for Prabowo-Gibran. This led commentators to decry the lack of historical awareness among Indonesia's youth, who seemed not to know – or, worse, not to care – about Prabowo's **dark military past**. However, as Julia Lau and Maria Monica Wihardja point out, based on a national survey, **swing voters** from Gen Z (born after 1996 to early 2010s) were actually more likely to vote for Anies Baswedan than for Prabowo, who mostly attracted older swing voters. Indeed, as Sastramidjaja and Alauddin show in this edition, the stereotypical image of a naïve Gen Z swayed by the *gemoy* trend was also belied on TikTok, where a new youth movement emerged around Anies' campaign for democratic change. Moreover, youth have been at the forefront of a new popular resistance to dynastic politics, which gained strength in the run-up to the regional elections.

A new hegemony and counter-hegemony

Soon after Prabowo-Gibran's victory, it became clear that the political dynamics that had shaped the presidential election's outcome were also set to impact the regional elections on 27 November 2024. A clear indication of that was Jokowi's role in pushing forward or openly endorsing candidates for governor and district heads, as well as furthering the grand coalition of political parties called Koalisi Indonesia Maju Plus (Advanced Indonesia Coalition Plus, or KIM plus), which had backed Prabowo-Gibran in the presidential election and now rallied behind pro-Jokowi/Prabowo candidates in eleven key regions. As **Ward Berenschot** argues, this indicates that national elites were set on tightening control over regional politics. In the past two decades, he writes, regional political dynamics rarely mirrored national politics, but this shifted in the 2024 regional elections. Berenschot demonstrates how regional politics have become more aligned with national politics, reflecting an ongoing trend of power recentralisation, as seen in the new notion of 'linearity' of party coalitions. Reminiscent of the centralised politics during the New Order, this trend of nationalisation of regional elections signals a deepening of democratic backsliding beyond the national level.

Thus, a new hegemony has been imposed on Indonesia's democracy, which further extended from national and regional party coalitions down to the public. According to a **Kompas survey** published on 20 January 2025, the 100th day of Prabowo's presidency, Prabowo's government enjoys a staggering 81 per cent approval rating, even surpassing Jokowi's approval rating at the height of his popularity. However, these survey results conceal the parallel reality of growing resistance.

Already in the run-up to the February 2024 elections and right after the announcement of its outcome, various new protest movements emerged – from the ‘four finger’ campaign, to the viral documentary *Dirty Vote*, to *student-professor* protests spreading through Indonesia’s campuses – each challenging Prabowo’s bid to power and more broadly the dynastic politics of the Jokowi-Prabowo alliance. These protests continued well after the elections, both on social media and on the streets. In August 2024, calls for action under the slogan ‘*Emergency Alert* for Indonesia’ (Peringatan Darurat Indonesia) filled Indonesian social media, culminating in nationwide *street protests* on 22 August 2024 – joined by thousands of students, urban poor and civil society groups – against a bill on regional head elections that would pave the way for Jokowi’s second son, Kaesang Pangarep, to seek office in Central Java, while blocking Anies Baswedan from running in the Jakarta elections. Despite repression, protests have continued ever since.

One noteworthy expression of protest was the ‘Vote for All’ (Gerakan Coblos Semua) movement during the Jakarta elections, initiated by the Urban Poor People’s Network (Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota, or JRMK), which urged constituents to vote for all candidates on the ballot thus rendering their vote invalid. As *Amalinda Savirani* describes, this movement signalled a shift from JRMK’s previous strategy of signing political contracts with electoral candidates, indicating rejection of the elite-centric and transactional nature of regional elections. At the risk of closing off the opportunity for negotiation with political elites, Savirani argues, this movement affirmed that the people still have an important role to play in a democracy, maintaining the hope that true democracy is possible and worth fighting for. Perhaps as a result of this urban poor movement – which was joined by activists from the earlier ‘four finger’ campaign as well as Anies Baswedan’s young supporters after the KIM Plus coalition blocked his candidacy for the Jakarta office – the Jakarta election saw a historically *low* voter turnout: less than 43 per cent of registered voters cast a (valid) vote. Jakarta was also one of the two regions in Indonesia (the other being Bali) where the Jokowi/Prabowo-backed KIM coalition failed to secure a victory for their candidate in the regional elections.

Whether Indonesia’s election year indicates that democracy really is *in danger*, as Thomas Pepinsky writes, or is ‘*fighting for its life*’, as Dan Slater puts it, remains an open question. It is clear, however, that a new hegemony is evolving, linking elite interests from the national to the regional levels, but one that also meets with a new counter-hegemonic opposition that is bound to make itself

heard in the years to come.

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