Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Elections in Indonesia – will the continuity of the current policy lead to a gradual distancing from China?

A series of globally super-significant elections this year will start tomorrow in Indonesia, where more than 200 million registered voters will vote for all levels of government.

Indonesians have a holiday and a non-working day because otherwise, it would probably be impossible to carry out one of the most complex administrative operations in the world.

If the turnout of about 80%, recorded in the last elections in 2019, is repeated, more than 160 million Indonesians will vote tomorrow at as many as 800 thousand polling stations.

The government has taken measures to avoid a repeat of the tragedies in the previous elections when several hundred officials died of exhaustion trying to deliver materials and organise voting in the remote archipelago islands spanning through 3 time zones.

Continuation of Jokowi's course

The absolute greatest attention has been given to electing the president, given that Joko Widodo, popularly known by his nickname Jokowi, will leave after a maximum of 2 terms.

His presidency was marked by the rise of the Indonesian economy and the strong positioning of the country on the international stage, even though, for many, he has not sufficiently distanced himself from the legacy of corruption and political pressures on critics after the period of the firm hand of former leader Suharto.

The list of presidential candidates suggests that the race will be about preserving Jokowi's legacy and course without any significant adjustments to the most crucial aspects of foreign, economic, and domestic policy.

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This tendency is reflected in pre-election surveys, which give the greatest chances of taking the presidential office to retired Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, the current minister of defence.

He received strong support from the outgoing president, announcing that he would be a man to continue Jokowi's policies, even though he lost 2 previous presidential races to him in 2014 and 2019.

General Prabowo (72) symbolises the return of military structures to state leadership to some extent and not very pleasant associations with the Suharto era that ended during the 1990s.

Courting the young population

Indonesia has undergone significant civil transformation in the meantime, so the principal contender for the position of president has not pushed his military background too much as his trump card.

Moreover, through social media, which is the principal channel for broadcasting pre-election messages, he has presented himself as a pleasant, smiling grandad dancing on TikTok.

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Prabowo and his opponents have been courting the young population because they will decide who will lead the country in the next 5 years. About half of the registered voters are younger than 40. They belong to the Millennials (about one-third), and slightly more than 20% belong to Generation Z.

But they are not idle social media fun-lovers. They will likely prove crucial to shaping the future government and its policies at the elections.

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Their views have not been influenced by stories about the recent autocratic past under Suharto, nor the controversial role of Mr Prabowo in that period, because they were not born then or learned about it in school.

Anticipating new environmental policies

They are very interested in reducing corruption and poverty, particularly in environmental policies, which, during the strong industrialisation and construction of infrastructure under the outgoing president Jokowi, became one of the biggest Indonesian concerns.

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For example, Chinese companies control as much as 90% of nickel mining, one of Indonesia's largest exports.

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Under President Jokowi, there has been an effort to retain and process as much nickel as possible in Indonesia to increase the added value remaining in the country. However, environmental issues in the mining and processing areas remained unresolved.

This question indirectly obliges the future leader of Indonesia to reconsider the attitude towards the future influence of the Chinese economy. Electoral favourite Prabowo has not hinted at a shift away from China and wants to have continuity with the policy of his predecessor, who was open to Chinese economic influence.

Is a shift away from China possible?

Chinese investments have contributed to the stable and high annual growth of 5% and more of the Indonesian economy. However, a level has clearly been reached where there has been increasing talk of the need for the country to diversify the areas from which the principal investors come.

Singapore remains the no. 1 investor in Indonesia, even though it has been primarily a financial channel for investments from other markets (Western markets), followed by China and Hong Kong, with a total FDI of more than $11 billion last year, primarily during the period of the outgoing president Jokowi.

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Prabowo's opponents - Anies Baswedan, the former governor of Jakarta, and Ganjar Pranowo, the former governor of Central Java - are advocates of greater diversification of foreign investors and reducing dependence on

Chinese investors.

They recognised that numerous Indonesians do not look favourably at the dominance of Chinese operations in the industrial and mining sector due to environmental issues and poor working conditions, but also overall insecurity due to over-reliance on investments from one side.

However, any shift will be connected with cuts to a system of high corruption, which is widely perceived to have enabled the strong influence of Chinese companies.