Widodo predicted to be re-elected as Indonesian president

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Indonesian elections will be held tomorrow, not only for the presidency, but also, for the first time, simultaneously for the national parliament as well as provincial and local governments. The elections, now held every five years, involve carefully vetted candidates backed by rival factions of the ruling class, none of whom represents the interests of the working class and rural poor.

The contest for the presidency epitomises the limited character of the election. Joko Widodo, a former small businessman, won the presidency in 2014 by posturing as a "man of the people" who would help working people. He was backed by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri and her Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). His vice-presidential running mate was Jusef Kalla, a senior figure in Golkar, the political instrument of the Suharto dictatorship.

In one of his first actions as president, Widodo abolished fuel price subsidies—a regressive measure that hit the poorest sections of the population the hardest through increased fuel and transport prices. The decision was a clear signal to international finance capital that Widodo would meet its demands for massive infrastructure spending and pro-market reforms.

Widodo's opponent in tomorrow's election is Prabowo Subianto, whom he defeated in 2014. Prabowo is a former son-in-law of the dictator Suharto and a notorious ex-special forces commander. That Prabowo is standing for the presidency and is not in jail for his crimes, underscores the fact that the military and state bureaucracy remain a powerful behind-the-scenes force two decades after Suharto was forced to step down.

As he did in 2014, Prabowo is basing his campaign on nationalist demagogy, directed in particular against China, and appeals to Islamist bigotry. The ex-general has attacked Widodo over his deals with China to finance components of his massive infrastructure plans, worth an estimated $340 billion. China has heavily backed the controversial $59 billion high-speed rail link between Jakarta and Bandung that is bogged down in land acquisition and regulatory issues.

Anti-Chinese chauvinism directed against the country's Chinese minority and Chinese-owned businesses has been the stock-in-trade for Indonesian politicians for decades. This now intersects with the escalating US confrontation with China and Washington's efforts to undermine Beijing politically and diplomatically in Asia. Widodo, like leaders throughout the regime, has sought to balance between the US and China, which has become the leading investor in Indonesia.

Prabowo has accused Widodo of being too soft on China and of allowing too many Chinese workers to work on Chinese-funded projects. He has declared he will review all projects if he wins the presidency. While Prabowo has not attracted open support from Washington, his anti-China stance is in tune with the Trump administration's aggressive policies.

Prabowo has been backed by hard-line Islamist parties and organizations, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). The FPI played a prominent role in the persecution and jailing of former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama on bogus charges of "blasphemy" in 2017. Basuki, a Christian, was a protégé and prominent ally of Widodo and the campaign was also aimed at politically weakening the president.

In a bid to burnish his religious credentials, Widodo has chosen an Islamic cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, as his running mate for this year's election. Just days before

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the election, the president also made quick visit to Saudi Arabia where he met with the king and other senior Saudi officials on Sunday before making a brief pilgrimage to Mecca.

Widodo has attacked Prabowo's lack of economic experience, while claiming that his own policies would result in continued economic growth. Prabowo's vice-presidential candidate is a wealthy businessman, Sandiaga Uno. Their campaign has made bogus promises to lower food and fuel prices, and to cut food imports so as to assist small farmers.

Both Widodo and Prabowo are candidates of the wealthy cliques that dominate Indonesian politics. While Widodo is the favourite of foreign investors and their local partners, Prabowo favours more protectionist policies aimed at assisting less globally competitive sections of the business elite. Neither has the slightest concern for the tens of millions of impoverished workers and peasants in Indonesia.

The Indonesian economy has been growing at about 5 percent annually in real terms, boosting Widodo's claims to be creating a prosperous country. However, in an article entitled "Widodo boasts about economy but Indonesia could do better," the *Financial Times* noted the country's large current account deficit and dependence on foreign inflows to finance government debt. It compared Indonesia unfavourably to Vietnam, which has experienced far higher levels of foreign investment.

Election polling, which is particularly unreliable in Indonesia, has Widodo in front of his rival by as much as 24 percentage points. But the lack of certainty has led to a slowdown in foreign investment in the lead-up to the election. A senior bank financier told the *Nikkei Asian Review* last week he had been getting a lot of calls from investors asking if there was "any chance or possibility or any surprise that [Prabowo] will win."

While Widodo appears likely to be re-elected, he may face greater opposition in Indonesia's lower house of parliament—the People's Representative Council (PRC). A coalition led by Megawati's PDI-P, which is again backing Widodo, has dominated the PRC but some commentators are predicting that its majority will narrow substantially.

Achmad Sukarsono, an analyst with Control Risks, told CNBC: "We expect the next parliament to be more fractured. All this points to a more convoluted and disputed parliamentary process, and consequently a president with a diminished ability to enact his agenda."

The poll tomorrow involves some 193 million voters. They will queue up at more than 800,000 polling stations across the archipelago to elect office bearers at five levels of government. The preliminary outcome of the election will likely be known by the end of the day after the collation of "quick counts," but the official results will not be known for weeks.

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