

A Dangerous Game of Military Politics in Indonesia

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By Stanley A. Weiss

This past spring, a former cabinet minister had an extraordinary meeting with the inexperienced first-term President of Indonesia, Joko “Jokowi” Widodo. Upon his arrival at the President’s office, the visitor quickly dispensed with any niceties and delivered a candid message bordering on insubordination to the head of state.

“There is no nice way to say this,” he told Jokowi. “You are not presidential material, and your political influence is very low. Not only are you not the most powerful person in Indonesian politics - you might not even be the fifth most powerful person in Indonesian politics.” He then added, “The only way you will be more effective is if you build support with the military, and make certain that the military leadership supports you.”

Whether or not Jokowi - a former furniture maker who is the first Indonesian leader without a military background - was offended by this message, he quickly took it to heart. Over the past six months, he has relentlessly pursued the military’s support, expanding their responsibilities and appointing a significant number of current and former military officials into his government. By one analysis, more military figures now “feature prominently in top civilian positions” than at any time since Indonesia’s transition to democracy in 1998. Most recently, Jokowi broke with precedent and selected a top army general to lead the state intelligence agency, a position traditionally held by a national police chief.

Which, to say the least, was unexpected. When he was elected in 2014, many analysts predicted that Jokowi would reduce the influence of the military in politics and policy. Now, many analysts are worried that Jokowi has given the military too much influence. With Indonesia entering just its 18th year of democracy after half a century of dictatorship, and with so many former military officers leading efforts on behalf of the government across the country, some are beginning to ask: is it possible that the country might slide back to military rule?

Answers to that question are mixed, but there is one truth that seems obvious to almost everyone in Indonesia today: the young President has been completely outmatched from

the very beginning. For a politician that many described, as recently as 16 months ago, as Indonesia’s version of United States President Barack Obama, the fall has been swift.

This, however, was not unexpected, at least for anyone paying attention to Obama’s struggles in America. In fact, two years ago, I wrote a piece, called “Jokowi’s Obama Problem,” that suggested Indonesia should be careful what it wished for. I argued that the primary problem facing both the U.S. and Indonesia - namely, deep political partisanship in the U.S. and endemic corruption in Indonesia - are cultural challenges that require a president to understand how the entrenched system works well enough to change it. Cultural challenges aren’t about simply changing laws, but changing minds, and working within the system to bring about real transformation.

It turned out that Obama, who had served less than six months as a U.S. Senator before running for President, didn’t have the skill to navigate through a system that didn’t want to play along, and got derailed - partisanship is as bad in America as it’s ever been. I wondered in the piece if the same thing would happen to Jokowi, who had served less than a year as Governor of Jakarta before declaring for President, and who didn’t have any true allies, let alone experience in national politics. Unfortunately, for Indonesia and its novice president so far, the answer is an unmitigated: yes.

Jokowi has few friends among the many factions that make up Indonesia’s rowdy young democracy. Parliament, controlled by a coalition that supports the candidate whom Jokowi defeated, has successfully blocked his every move. His cabinet routinely projects an image of chaotic infighting rather than consistent governance, prompting a senior official to say publicly that he couldn’t think of a single qualified person in the 34-member cabinet. Meanwhile, Jokowi’s political patron, the former President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who once called him a mere “party official,” recently picked a fight with the popular anti-corruption committee. Jokowi’s popularity and reformist image were the only casualties.

Jokowi's political difficulties have only compounded his economic woes. As the Financial Times put it in a bleak recent assessment, "growth has dropped below 5 per cent, planned infrastructure projects fail to break ground and government spending remains weak." Indonesia's currency has lost more than 12% of its value in the past year. It recently came close to a conversion rate of 15,000 rupiah per dollar - which many Indonesians consider a psychological, if not truly fiscal, point of no return. Many Indonesian leaders agree with the observation of a highly respected military leader, who says, "I don't see the light at the end of the tunnel for a solution on the economy. (Jokowi) has his own agenda and is not on track with what's needed or with what others are thinking."

Everyone agrees that Jokowi is in over his head. Endy Bayuni, the former editor of the Jakarta Post, says that during Jokowi's first year in office, "he negotiated poorly and allowed for other centers of power and that hurt him." Australian Kevin Evans, a leading political analyst, describes him as "a weak king with strong lords." Disturbingly, Jokowi has also revealed a vast ignorance of policy. A high-profile Asian journalist says, "Everyone I know in the palace says that he doesn't read reports and he doesn't read anything." More bluntly, an experienced political operative adds: "Democracy gives a chance for rookies to be president....Jokowi doesn't read or listen and he speaks at the wrong time." No one believes that he has the policy skills to fix the economy or the political skills to create significant reform.

It's no wonder the military was so attractive: it knows how to get things done. With an unmatched infrastructure across this far and wide island nation, and lacking the bureaucratic restraints imposed on civilian government, the Indonesian military has a chance to be for Jokowi what executive orders have been for Obama: a chance to work around the system rather than within it.

And work around he has. The Institute for the Policy Analysis of Conflict, a Jakarta-based think tank, recently released a report that the military's new assignments include increased security functions against counter-terrorism and drug trafficking, new responsibilities for agriculture and infrastructure, and a long list of "patriotic education" projects. The report concluded that the military seems "to be testing the political waters to see how far they can push their authority in the face of a weak president with little experience in security affairs."

Given Indonesia's history, these developments are unsettling. The question of a military takeover lingers in Jakarta, playing out in food stalls, mosques, and homes throughout the city. What would a plausible scenario for a military coup look like? If the economy reaches a breaking point, public disapproval of Jokowi can turn into sustained protests and riots. According to Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, a former cabinet minister and adviser to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, "If the rupiah hits 17,000 or whatever, one, two, or three banks will collapse and there will be chaos and police on [the] streets."

Under the reform-era Constitution, the military holds an obligation to "defend national unity and integrity." As a result, protests and riots may cause the military to intervene. The military, Kuntoro predicts, "will have to come in because the police can't control it. Then [the military] and the police will fight." With the expanding influence of the military, it's not hard to predict who would win that battle. And it's not hard to imagine that, in the name of national unity, the military removes Jokowi from office.

That, of course, is the worst case scenario. Indonesia's most powerful cabinet minister, Luhut Pandjaitan, a retired four-star general who is Jokowi's coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs, says that no such backsliding will occur. In a meeting with foreign journalists last month, Luhut argued that the military had lost its political powers a decade ago and insisted that Indonesia "has no plan" to go back, adding, that the military "cannot play this role anymore," and that he doesn't "see any military involvement in civilian activities." Instead, for now, the presidency and the military are working hand in hand to get the Indonesian economy back on track, while carrying out projects across the countryside that will contribute to the long-term success of the largest Muslim majority nation in the world.

It might not be enough to save the man elected to the nation's highest office. In the end, Jokowi might end up resembling an American president after all - just not the one we expected. "If the economy is not good soon," predicted a well-known senior lawmaker, reflecting on America's most famous one-term President, "Widodo is going to look less like Barack Obama, and more like Jimmy Carter."