



## Interview

# President Jokowi Hopes to Rule by Proxy

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*Andreas Harsono has been closely monitoring the human rights situation in Indonesia for many years. In an interview with Watch Indonesia, he gives a sobering assessment of what can be expected from the upcoming elections for the future development of democracy, the rule of law and the situation of minorities. Human rights and the protection of religious minorities play only a subordinate role, if any, in the programmes of the presidential candidates. At the same time, Prabowo is standing for election as a candidate who is himself accused of the most serious human rights violations.*

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**Andreas, what are the main challenges regarding civil liberties and human rights in Indonesia today?**

Criminal defamation articles certainly are very significant in this respect. Activists or netizens could be easily charged. And their number is growing with the new criminal code. This new law was passed in December 2022. President Jokowi signed it in January 2023, with a three-year preparation period, meaning that it will be implemented in January 2026. Secondly, the increase of discriminatory regulations against gender, religious, and sexual minorities over the last 20 years. Research by a Professor at the University of London estimates that more than 700 of these exist.'

**How do these regulations affect press freedom?**

In terms of press freedom, again, Indonesia has criminal defamation articles, including the Electronic and Information Transaction Law. These laws can easily be weaponized against journalists. In the new criminal code, for example, publishing "fake news that results in riots" could attract a sentence of up to 20 years imprisonment. Additionally, the articles on blasphemy have been expanded from one to seven while apostasy can be punished with up to two years in prison. All of these articles can be implemented against both journalists and netizens, although the Press Council provides a specific mediation process for journalists accused of defamation.

## **Moving to freedom of expression, has there been an increase in political usage of these articles in the last five to eight years?**

Let's consider the case of Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti, two human rights defenders. During a discussion on YouTube they criticised a senior minister in charge of investment. Their criticism was based on the results of a study that was conducted by a coalition of credible human rights and environmental organisations, amongst them Greenpeace. The research report indicated that this minister may hold shares of a company that owned another subsidiary in a gold mine in West Papua. They were charged with criminal defamation for publicly talking about this material. The prosecutor demanded Haris be sentenced to four years in prison and Fatia to three and a half years. This is ridiculous. The cases against them should not be legally permissible. This creates an atmosphere of fear.

Furthermore, today, Hasto Kristiyanto, the secretary general of the PDI-P, one of Indonesia's largest political parties, was reported to the police for supposedly defaming President Jokowi in another interview on YouTube. This is totally ridiculous.

## **Despite widespread criticism of human rights abuses, Prabowo Subianto is currently in the lead in the polls. How will the circumstances you just described affect the campaigning period? And in what way do you think?**

Current laws basically say that citizens under 40 years of age cannot run for President or Vice President. But President Jokowi and his wife Iriana wanted their son, Gibran Rakabuming, who was not yet 40 years old, to run for the position of Vice President next year. A supporter of President Jokowi petitioned the Constitutional Court, asking the court to amend the law. The chief justice Anwar Usman is President Jokowi's brother-in-law.



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The other judges publicly stated that the chief justice had lobbied them to make an addendum in the presidential candidacy law so that his nephew could run. The court indeed issued that addendum, despite dissenting opinions, opening the way for Gibran to run for the election.

Later, an ethical committee found the chief justice to have breached the code of conduct of the constitutional court and recommended his dismissal. He was dismissed but the legal decision was already made.

Many people within the PDI-P talk publicly about how President Jokowi manoeuvred to switch his allegiance from his party's candidate Ganjar Pranowo, towards his own son and his son's running mate, Prabowo Subianto. And we could see some news reports that those PDI-P politicians were reported for criminal defamation by President Jokowi's supporters.

## So people who are questioning these processes are being harassed?

Yes. They are being reported to the police for criminal defamation against President Jokowi. It is already happening. I really hope the police will not press charges against these critics.

## Can you give us an example?

Hasto Kristiyanto, the secretary general of PDI-P, is a very poignant example. In an interview, he said that President Jokowi's cabinet secretary Pratikno had complained about his boss in that particular political manoeuvre. Pratikno reportedly "shed tears" when complaining about his moral dilemma in dealing with Jokowi.

Kristiyanto also talked about President Jokowi's treatment of his minister, his own party and the party chairwoman, Megawati Soekarnoputri, was just too much. During the interview, Kristiyanto himself was crying because he felt that this kind of behaviour could cause great damage not only to the party but also to Indonesia.

This is Jokowi's own political party that helped Jokowi run for offices—twice as the mayor of Solo, the governor of Jakarta, and the President of Indonesia. It was a very revealing interview from a PDI-P insider. But Kristiyanto was reported to the police for defaming President Jokowi.

## Let's discuss PDI-P member Ganjar Pranowo. What is the relationship between Jokowi and Ganjar?



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In April 2023, after the internal selection process, the PDI-P nominated Ganjar to be the party candidate to run for president. Initially, Jokowi agreed to support Ganjar for president. But later that month, Prabowo Subianto talked to Jokowi, asking Jokowi to let Gibran run with him. Jokowi apparently agreed, believing that Prabowo could secure his legacy, especially in building the new capital in Kalimantan.

Within a week after the court's legal decision, Gibran, currently the mayor of Solo, joined Golkar Party, leaving the PDI-P, and becoming Prabowo's running mate. Jokowi publicly said that he, as Gibran's father, supported his son.

## Is Jokowi still backing Ganjar?

He did not say that he opposed Ganjar. Of course, by saying that he supports his son, it means he's supporting Prabowo, thus opposing Ganjar. Ironically, Jokowi ran against Prabowo twice in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. Jokowi obviously won but he made Prabowo his defence minister. If I could make a blatant comparison, it is like the U.S. President Joe Biden supporting Hunter S. Thompson, his son, to run with Donald Trump.

### **And how do you explain this?**

Oh, this is pure political ambition. President Jokowi hopes to rule by proxy. This is a classical Javanese power play. The Babad Tanah Jawi, the Chronicle of Java, describes how, for centuries, Javanese rulers used betrayal, treachery, and behind the scenes manoeuvres to remain in power, including by proxy.

### **What are the chances of Prabowo winning the elections?**

According to the poll, Jokowi and Ganjar are running neck to neck, around 40% and 40%. The third party candidate, Anis Baswedan, is around 20%. This is the fourth time Prabowo, a war criminal, is running.

### **Yes. Tell us a little bit more about Prabowo.**

In 1998, Prabowo was dismissed as an army general after admitting he had kidnapped student activists. He said he had released all of them. However, there are still 13 missing activists and many of the survivors testified that those missing people were in the same Special Forces detention as them. For this, Prabowo still has never been held accountable. He went away to Jordan when he was summoned after his dismissal in 1998. He only returned much later.

His role in a mass killing in East Timor in 1983 in an area called Kraras was subject of UN-authorized investigations. Again, Prabowo, as the battalion commander, was never held accountable for the killing of more than 200 civilians in Kraras. Of course, there are also other allegations against him.

### **Are there fears that if Prabowo doesn't win there could be an outbreak of violence? And how do you explain Prabowo's many supporters?**

We can talk about the lack of rule of law in Indonesia. Prabowo has never been held accountable. Ironically, he could always run for president, mostly using populist campaigns. He also did business as usual. In 2019, President Jokowi recruited Prabowo to be his defence minister. And for that, Prabowo was grateful, saying that this restored his honour. This is for a general who was dismissed 20 years earlier. This alliance being built between these two former rivals is significant.

### **What is the rationale behind this? Is it like a purely strategic move to secure the power base, or are there political convictions behind this?**

Jokowi claimed in 2019 that political divisions had to be stabilised. Prabowo then did not want to acknowledge his election loss. He reported the election commission to the constitutional court. Protests and riots ensued but finally, the court confirmed that Jokowi had won. Four years on, the court is losing credibility because of President Jokowi's political manoeuvres in relation to his son's presidential aspirations. This is a classic Javanese power play.

### **Do Prabowo, Ganjar and Anies Baswedan mention human rights and civil liberties in their campaigns? Are these actually issues in their campaigns?**

While all of them mention human rights on their platforms, they need to be more specific. Ganjar and Baswedan do pick up on past human rights abuses but leave out other crucial issues. They should state how they view discrimination against religious minorities. How they plan to end discrimination and violence against LGBT people; what they will do to end mandatory hijab regulations, child marriage, Female genital mutilation and so on.



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### **What do you think the prospects are for human rights or for an end to the misuse of defamation laws?**

This is a very difficult issue because most of these laws were written by the parliament after the fall of President Suharto. Any future president needs to amend all the laws that violate international human rights standards, including the ones on free speech. But I'm afraid none of them will do that. Blasphemy laws have been expanded and discrimination in the name of Islamic Sharia has been written into law. All because of the so-called majority. This is what I fear, that those Sharia-inspired regulations will flourish further and continue to be applied. Hopefully, I'm wrong. In 2014, Jokowi was rallying on the issue of human rights and by doing so, actually gained numerous votes. Now, we don't witness that any longer. It appears to no longer be an issue. Jokowi is much more occupied with economic development, infrastructure projects, and building the new capital. Human rights, even the rule of law, has become a minor issue.

### **And not a campaigning issue for any of the candidates?**

Let's see how their campaign goes. In 2015, one of Jokowi's presidential advisors, Sidarto Danusubroto, told a Human Rights Watch Delegation, including Ken Roth, that the issue of human rights is a very important issue in Indonesia. Danusubroto said when the 1965 tragedy took place—the biggest mass killing in Indonesia's history—between 500,000 to one million people were killed. He said the Indonesian Communist Party was then the third largest in the world—after China and the Soviet Union. It was banned. But how many millions individually survived? Danusubroto had high hopes for Jokowi because the descendants and survivors of the anti-communist mass-killing numbered around 50 million people—a big chunk of voters. It was simple that past mass killings were important.

**To switch to another important issue: The relationship between Islam and politics in Indonesia is complex. Over the years we have seen an increasing political mobilisation of, what we could call, right-wing Islamic interpretations or sentiments. What influence do you think this could have on the election campaign?**

Islamism is an issue that is difficult to avoid in Indonesia, especially after the fall of Suharto. For obvious reasons, many of the political parties pick their candidates based on how acceptable they are for Muslim voters, especially in densely populated areas like Java.

West Java, East Java and Central Java represent about 60% of the electorate. Prabowo is widely speculated to win in West Java as he did in 2014 and 2019. Ganjar is expected to win in Central Java, having been the governor. Baswedan is targeting East Java. His running mate, Muhaimin Iskandar, comes from an elite Nahdlatul Ulama Muslim family in East Java.

I am afraid that the promotion and implementation of Sharia-inspired regulations, which discriminate against minorities, will remain a dominant feature—at least for the near future. Most Indonesian voters have yet to understand the negative impact of discriminatory regulations. The hijab regulations, for instance, have sanctions, ranging from expulsions from school or employment and even prison sentences.

### **So how do the candidates address “Islamic issues”?**

I’m afraid that they will try to lure Muslim voters without critical explanation about what Islam really means for the political system in Indonesia. Voters need to understand that “religious harmony” means the majority has the veto power over the minorities. Indonesia has slowly shifted from the principle of religious freedom, enshrined in the 1945 constitution, to religious harmony with a 2006 government regulation.

Maybe the PDI-P is more open towards religious minorities. The PDI-P has the biggest percentage of minority candidates from Christian backgrounds or other faiths. But again, it is not enough to educate the public about the negative impacts of the 700 discriminatory regulations made in the name of Islamic Sharia in Indonesia, action is required.

### **What kind of Islam does Baswedan represent?**

Baswedan himself is a U.S.- educated political scientist. What worried me was that back in 2017, when he was running for the Jakarta governor office, he used Islam, in this case, the blasphemy law, to corner his opponent, then Jakarta incumbent Jakarta governor Basuki Purnama, by letting his supporters accused Purnama or Ahok, himself a Christian ethnic Chinese, of committing blasphemy against Islam. Ahok not only lost the election, but ended up in prison for two years. Using the blasphemy law as a political weapon is very dangerous.

### **Do you think we will see the Islamic card being played to knock out opponents or install laws intended to silence people in the upcoming election?**

I wouldn’t be surprised if this happens. I’m very worried. There is a saying in Bahasa Indonesia, “Bila gajah berkelahi, mati pelanduk di tengah-tengah.” If big men are fighting, the people will die. Obviously, there is tension between the Jokowi camp and the PDI-P. Jokowi wants to ensure that his son wins the election. The big men are going to fight. This is bad news for the people in Indonesia.

## **What is your worst fear?**

Violence between the camps, among their supporters, including after the election, when voting results are disputed.

## **Let's try to end on an optimistic note. If you had three wishes, Andreas, what would you ask these candidates to fulfil?**

(Laughing) I prefer to be more spiritual on this. Once I went into an ancient cave in southern Java. Facing the beach, I was trying to learn about President Suharto's Kejawen belief, the traditional Javanese religion. Of course, it was with incense, with prayer, with ancient Javanese language. The prayer was being conducted in ancient Javanese. With candles, dark night. The shaman who thought that I was going there to seek fortune asked me, "What do you wish for, Andreas?" I said, my wish is for religious freedom in Indonesia. He was surprised. But he did his prayer. And after the prayer, which took about five minutes, he told me that this was also his prayer.

## **So, if I understand you correctly, all together your wish for freedom of religion and expression? What is needed to achieve this?**

We need to get rid of all the defamation articles based on criminal law in Indonesia. We need to get rid of them all. I might sound naïve, because in Southeast Asia—Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Myanmar—criminal defamation laws are proliferating. Only East Timor does not have any criminal defamation articles. I wish East Timor to be an example for other Southeast Asian countries.

### **Our Interview Partner**

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