

ASIA

Indonesian Leader Starts New Term With Reputation as Reformer Tarnished

Widodo pledges to push economic reforms, but critics say the president is beginning to resemble conventional politicians



Indonesian President Joko Widodo is sworn in during his inauguration ceremony Sunday. PHOTO: OSCAR SIAGIAN/GETTY IMAGES

By Jon Emont

Updated Oct. 21, 2019 2:09 pm ET

When Joko Widodo, a plain-speaking former furniture dealer, rose to power in Indonesia in 2014, he was seen as the face of change—a politician with humble roots who pledged to fight corruption and transform the way Southeast Asia’s largest economy was managed.

But as Mr. Widodo begins his second term as president this week after winning a solid majority of the vote in April, some of the progressive activists who were once among his biggest supporters say he is becoming a member of the political elite from which he once stood apart.

Their two biggest gripes are the president’s move to limit the power of the country’s anti-graft watchdog, which has been investigating politicians from political parties now allied with Mr. Widodo, and his party’s bill to revise the criminal code to punish crimes like extramarital sex. The bill comes amid a popular mood that has turned more religiously conservative in the world’s most populous Muslim country.

In an inaugural speech on Sunday, Mr. Widodo pledged to forge ahead with economic reforms, but he didn't address the two topics that have sparked some of the largest student protests since the fall of dictator Suharto in the late 1990s. Tens of thousands of young Indonesians took to the streets in September, facing off with police officers firing tear gas and water cannons.

Mr. Widodo has supported a new supervisory commission over the antigraft body, saying it was necessary for checks and balances and would be appointed by the president. Many protesters saw the move as an attempt to appease his coalition allies at the cost to one of Indonesia's most trusted institutions. Prior to the changes, the anti-corruption commission could launch investigations and wiretap suspects without seeking approval from any higher body.

Dozens of prominent Indonesian economists released an open letter to Mr. Widodo last week encouraging him to restore the body's power, saying that fighting corruption was crucial to Indonesia's economic development.

Protesters have also called on Mr. Widodo to reject a pending bill that, if passed, would revise the criminal code to make both criticizing the president's honor and extramarital sex punishable offenses. Human-rights advocates say the latter would effectively criminalize gay sex, as same-sex marriage isn't legal in Indonesia.

Mr. Widodo asked Parliament to postpone the bill's passage after protests broke out, but lawmakers, including those who are members of the president's coalition, say they still intend to pursue the law. Mr. Widodo has said little publicly about the contents of the bill, though political experts say the bill couldn't have advanced this far without his administration's support.

Dinno Ardiansyah, a student leader at Trisakti University in Jakarta, who has joined rallies in the capitol, said the students were still waiting for Mr. Widodo to "take the side of the people" and issue a presidential order to restore the power of the anticorruption commission. Some protest leaders say they will continue to hold rallies if the president doesn't act.

A member of the president's staff didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Widodo won a solid re-election victory in April against his opponent, a former general who was once married to the daughter of Suharto, who ran as a conservative nationalist and had significant Islamist support.

During his first term, Mr. Widodo focused on improving the nation's infrastructure. Now, critics say he is focused on grand gestures—such as shifting the Indonesian capital from Jakarta to a remote part of the country that he says would be less vulnerable to flooding and natural disasters—instead of focusing on what they see as more pressing issues.



Student protesters burn tires during a rally in Jakarta on Sept. 27. PHOTO: TATAN SYUFLANA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“It’s puzzling why Widodo is so preoccupied with the interests of party leaders and financiers rather

than the constituents who elected him hoping for change,” said Kevin O’Rourke, head of Reformasi Information Services, a risk analysis firm that produces a weekly newsletter on Indonesian current events for investors

While the Indonesian economy appears largely stable, the jobs that are being produced tend to be in relatively low-wage sectors and youth unemployment rates approached 20% last year, according to the World Bank.

Mr. Widodo, 58 years old, entered the presidency five years ago after winning two elections for mayor of Surakarta, a midsize city in central Java. Known for his simple style of speech and habit of venturing into the city to consult with citizens about their problems, he was catapulted onto the national stage when a coalition of parties drafted him to run for governor of Jakarta in 2012.

He won and made an impression as an understated man focused on the day-to-day problems of residents, including by improving poorer residents’ access to health and education, burnishing a reputation that ultimately made him a successful presidential candidate in 2014.

Supporters, such as his new Vice President Ma’ruf Amin, a clerical leader, say that Mr. Widodo’s first term dealt with key issues such as inequality within Indonesia’s sprawling archipelago by building out highways, airports and public transportation.

One of his first steps as president was to invite Indonesia’s anticorruption commission to conduct an audit of his cabinet appointments. The commission is an institution that has secured convictions against hundreds of politicians, judges and other officials since it was founded at the dawn of Indonesian democracy in the early 2000s.

Indonesian anticorruption activists say the recent changes would end its independence.

Some Indonesians and observers say the president is beginning to resemble conventional politicians in other ways, too. Mr. Widodo has long competed with Indonesia's most powerful political families, and now he looks to be creating one of his own.

The president's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, has joined his father's political party with plans to run for mayor of Surakarta. Mr. Joko's son in law could be a candidate for mayor of Medan, the largest city on the island of Sumatra.

"He's a politician like the others," said Arlian Buana, an Indonesian writer who voted for Mr. Widodo in 2014 but abstained in 2019. "He's begun to clear a path for his children."

Write to Jon Emont at jonathan.emont@wsj.com

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.