

## Asia-Ready Webinar Series

### **What's Next for Indonesia? The Role of Youth Voters in the Presidential Election**

The Asia-Ready Webinar Series is co-curated with various partners to allow youth to gain a better appreciation of the regional developments and a greater awareness of Singapore's interconnectivity with the regional markets.

Sat, 24 February 2024

10.30am – 11.30am

Online Event



#### About the Webinar

##### **Speakers**

Ms Uni Lubis – Editor-in-Chief at IDN Times

Mr Noory Okthariza – Researcher at the Department of Politics and Social Change, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia

## Synopsis

Indonesians head to the polls on 14 February 2024 to elect their next President who will shape the future trajectory of their country. The closely watched three-corner contest features 3 prominent candidates: Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto, ex-Governor of Jakarta Anies Baswedan and ex-Governor of Central Java, Ganjar Pranowo. This election is expected to be a defining moment in Indonesia's political landscape. Not only will it mark a transition after a decade under the current leadership of President Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), but the fate of the country will also lie in the hands of the younger generation voters.

Indeed, over half of the 204 million registered voters are under the age of 40, with one-third being millennials and another 22% belonging to Gen Z, leading candidates to employ various strategies to win over these youths. Case in point, a controversial move was made to amend the constitution to allow 34-year-old Gibran Rakabuming Raka (also Jokowi's eldest son) to run as the 72-year-old Prabowo's running mate – ironically splitting the Indonesian youths over debates about electoral fairness and the emergence of political dynasties. Social media campaigns and hashtags are also rampant, influencing the decisions of young digital natives. In this webinar, we will explore what makes these youths tick and their aspirations for the country's future.

*This webinar was brought to you by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).*

## What We've Learnt

### Indonesia's 2024 Election

On 14 February 2024, close to 205 million Indonesians cast their votes across more than 821,000 polling stations in the world's largest single-day election. As Southeast Asia's largest country in terms of land size and population, as well as the largest Muslim-majority nation globally, Indonesia's election was closely watched by observers within the region and beyond. The current Indonesian president, Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") has already served the maximum two terms in office and thus, this election marks the first change in leadership in 10 years.

The results of the Indonesian presidential election were decisive. Based on quick counts, which historically have been proven accurate, Prabowo Subianto won the Presidential race, clinching an estimated 58% of votes. Prabowo won by a large margin – while runner-up Anies Baswedan attained 25% of votes, followed by Ganjar Pranowo with the remaining 17% of votes.

### Background of Candidates

Prabowo is currently Indonesia's Minister of Defence, He was a former military-general once accused of human rights abuse, and this marks his third attempt at running for president. His running mate is 34-year-old Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the incumbent President Jokowi's eldest son. Widely seen as the Indonesian president who significantly improved the lives of Indonesians, Jokowi's popularity is undeniable. As such, Jokowi's endorsement of Prabowo and the choice of Gibran as his running mate boosted Prabowo's popularity in the eyes of voters. Mr. Noory pointed out that Prabowo's popularity indeed skyrocketed after the addition of Gibran to his team. The 'Jokowi effect' therefore was integral in influencing public sentiments towards Prabowo.

Moreover, Prabowo-Gibran's campaign emphasised stability. Their win underscores the country's desire for continuity instead of change. Beyond Prabowo's heavy emphasis on continuing Jokowi's policies, his campaign also promised to improve Indonesia's self-sufficiency in areas such as food and energy security.

Runner-up Anies is the former governor of Jakarta and was widely perceived as the leader of Indonesia's opposition. Therefore, it follows that his campaign centred on advancing change in Indonesia, especially amidst the perceived erosion of democratic values under Jokowi's presidency. His promise of change was also in response to the pre-election controversy surrounding the constitutional amendment in October 2023 allowing Jokowi's son to run as Prabowo's vice-president, with some suggesting that the move entrenches Jokowi's power beyond his term.

Ganjar is the former governor of Central Java and was endorsed by the largest party in Indonesia – Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). Ganjar's campaign centred on poverty reduction and improving social welfare through policies such as establishing quality healthcare facilities in rural villages and ensuring equal access and employment for all. While Jokowi is from PDI-P as well, he did not endorse Ganjar's campaign, a move that significantly reduced popular support for Ganjar.

### **The Outcome**

The results came as a surprise to many in Indonesia, who did not expect the margin between Prabowo and the other candidates to be so wide. Many had expected that Indonesia would hold a second round of elections, as Indonesia's presidential election system requires a second round of voting between the top two candidates if no one wins more than 50% of the votes on election day.

However, this was unnecessary as Prabowo secured an estimated 58% of votes. Mr. Noory shared that Prabowo also won the majority of support across all age groups in Indonesia.

Around 52% of the voting population comprised of youths aged 40 years old and below, which includes Generation Z ('Gen-Z') and millennials. Although Prabowo is the oldest candidate at 72 years old, Prabowo won more than 65% of votes from Gen-Z and millennial voters. Out of the votes cast in favour of Prabowo, the majority (34.2%) were cast by voters aged 16 to 29 years old, followed by 21.7% of the votes from voters aged 30 to 39 years old. The widest margin between Prabowo and the other two candidates is found in the 16 to 29-year-old age

group. As the age of voters increased, the margin between Prabowo and the other candidates grew narrower. Prabowo's win signals that even millennials and Gen-Zs are seeking continuity on development programmes initiated by Jokowi.

### **Indonesia's Youth Voters and the Influence of Social Media**

The influence of social media is growing increasingly important in Indonesia. Ms. Uni highlighted that by the end of 2023, the number of TikTok users in Indonesia numbered 125 million, only second to the US. Moreover, a survey conducted by Indonesia's Communications and Information Ministry in 2022 highlighted that more than 70% of youth respondents surveyed looked to social media as their main source of information,<sup>1</sup> reinforcing the importance of social media as a key source of information influencing youth voters in this election.

This has changed the way candidates conducted their campaigns. Mr. Noory shared that the Prabowo-Gibran pair rarely conducted traditional in-person, face-to-face campaigns across the country. Instead, they advanced a sophisticated social media campaign. Prabowo's team created the campaign in a way that appealed to Gen-Zs, millennials, as well as Generation-X ('Gen-X') by targeting Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. Their strategy on TikTok, which Mr. Noory said was the top platform to target, was similar to the strategy previously employed by Philippines President Bongbong Marcos in the 2022 elections. Rather than creating negative publicity around the opposition, Prabowo's team aimed to create positive publicity and sentiments towards their own campaign.

For instance, Prabowo's team launched sophisticated social media campaigns and used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create cartoon avatars of the Prabowo-Gibran pair to transform their image and boost their "*gemoy*" character, which means "cuddly", "bubbly" or "cute". Multiple videos were also posted on social media showing Prabowo dancing at various events, further cementing his approachable and friendly image. The publicity materials also featured cartoon images of the pair, instead of a realistic sketch or image of the two. This strategy emphasised the physical appearance of candidates, filtered through technology, rather than their actual personalities or campaign promises.

Ms. Uni also shared a video of Prabowo looking visibly emotional after being criticised at the Presidential debate by his rival, Anies, also went viral and was shared by a Minister of Jokowi's cabinet. It helped to change his image from a former military general accused of human rights abuse to a sensitive and amiable grandfather figure. This video helped to generate positive sentiments towards a seemingly victimised Prabowo.

Another example of technology's influence in the election includes an AI-generated deepfake of the deceased former President Suharto, which was shared by a senior leader of Golkar party. The viral video showed the former President asking Indonesians to vote for the party in the legislative election to bring Indonesia back to the economic and political stability the

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<sup>1</sup> Deni Ghifari, "More Indonesians trust social media than news outlets: Research", Asia News Network, 2 February 2023, <https://asianews.network/more-indonesians-trust-social-media-than-news-outlets-research/>.

country enjoyed under Suharto. As Ms. Uni reiterated, this further reinforces the extensive influence of technology and social media in the election.

## Questions Answered

*By Ms Uni Lubis and Mr Noory Okthariza*

### **How do youth voting patterns differ across Indonesia?**

Mr. Noory emphasised that the level of education and where voters live would influence their level of interest in the various issues raised by the presidential candidates. While on average, the highest level of education for Indonesians in the country remains at the Grade 7 and 8 levels (equivalent to Secondary 1 and 2), this also varies across the provinces. More educated youth voters living in the cities might be more concerned with issues relating to geopolitics and climate as compared to less educated youth voters living outside the cities.

That said, it is hard to predict the voting preference of younger voters in Indonesia. Unlike in the US, where young, educated voters tend to vote for the Democrats, there is not such an established voter tradition along party lines in Indonesia.

Overall, the data shows that Prabowo-Gibran won the majority of the votes across all the provinces, except West Sumatra and Aceh. Ms. Uni singled out Prabowo's campaign policy of digitalisation support for entrepreneurs as possibly having garnered support from Indonesian youths, of which a significant portion are interested in entrepreneurship or are entrepreneurs themselves.

### **To what extent are dynastic politics at play here? How might this hurt or help Jokowi's sociopolitical legacy?**

There have been concerns over dynastic politics shaping the Indonesia's elections. Beyond Jokowi's clear endorsement for Prabowo-Gibran's campaign, Gibran's nomination was also controversial. His uncle, Chief Justice Anwar Usman, ruled in favour of a constitutional amendment that allowed candidates to circumvent the minimum age for presidential and vice-presidential candidates, if the candidate is an elected regional leader. This effectively paved the way for 36-year-old Gibran to run in the presidential election. Some believe this is a move by Jokowi to further entrench his family's influence beyond his presidential term, fuelling concerns about the potential weakening of Indonesia's democracy.

When Prabowo initially selected Gibran as his running mate, most speculated that this would negatively affect his popularity given the controversies surrounding Gibran's nomination. However, this was not the case; in fact, this move bolstered his popularity. This can be explained by the immense popularity and power that current President Jokowi enjoys in Indonesia. With his popularity, negative sentiments surrounding any controversial move are minimised.

Moreover, most youth voters and Indonesians do not see the appointment of Gibran as a concerning extension of dynastic politics. In fact, many voters were not aware of the controversy in the court's constitutional process, and this lack of awareness could be due to the lower levels of education of many voters in Indonesia, where on average, the highest level of education remains at the high school (equivalent to secondary) level. Many individuals would also have been more swayed by the sophisticated social media campaign of Prabowo than by considerations of electoral fairness and dynastic politics at play.

**How does the outcome of this presidential election affect Indonesia's relations with Singapore? What do you see as the impact of Prabowo-Gibran's term on Singapore's foreign policy and economic investments (given how Singapore is the leading foreign direct investor)?**

In terms of Indonesia's relationship with Singapore, we will likely see significant continuities in Prabowo's foreign and trade policy. Singapore has been and will continue to be important for Indonesia, as it is Indonesia's top foreign direct investor.

It is also important to note that Prabowo's personality is strong, and some would say, impulsive. For instance, his comments at the Shangri-La Dialogue regarding the Russia-Ukraine peace plan were unexpected by all, including Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His background is also unique. His father was the first Indonesian to attain a doctorate degree from a European university, his grandfather is one of the founders of Indonesia's largest bank, and his younger brother is one of the wealthiest individuals in Indonesia. He was also the son-in-law of former Indonesian President Suharto.

Moreover, Prabowo spent some years growing up in Zurich, London, and Hong Kong. With his international exposure, many expect that he would have a more cosmopolitan perspective, and thus will deploy a different foreign policy approach from Jokowi. While Jokowi is somewhat self-isolating and has never attended any United Nations General Assembly meetings, Prabowo will likely be more active on the global stage. Nevertheless, while Indonesia's future foreign policy might be communicated with a certain 'flavour' or tone unique to Prabowo, the broad principles of 'free' and 'active' foreign policy to preserve Indonesia's national interests and independence will prevail.

#### Additional Resources

[Indonesia's 100 million Millennials and Gen Zs prepare to choose their president | Indonesia Decides](#)

[Indonesia election gives glimpse of AI influence on democracy](#)