

Indonesia's April 2019 elections

On 17 April 2019, Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country and third largest democracy (190 million voters), will hold presidential, parliamentary, regional and local elections. Incumbent President, Joko Widodo, is expected to win comfortably and retain a parliamentary majority. The only other presidential candidate is 2014 runner-up Prabowo Subianto, forecast to lose by a bigger margin than in 2014.

A presidential system

Indonesia's 1945 [constitution](#) establishes the president as head of state and government. The House of Representatives is the lower and more important house of parliament, which adopts legislation, whereas the Council of Representatives of the Regions proposes and monitors legislation on regional matters. The president and the two houses of parliament are directly elected every five years, most recently in 2014. Presidents can serve no more than two consecutive terms.

Presidential election: Joko Widodo versus Prabowo Subianto

Under current [legislation](#), candidates must be nominated by political parties (or coalitions of parties) having won at least 20 % of seats or 25 % of votes in the previous parliamentary election. The only two candidates meeting this stringent requirement are the same pair that contested the 2014 election: incumbent and clear front-runner, Joko Widodo (commonly referred to as 'Jokowi'), and rival Prabowo Subianto.

Indonesian politics is often more about personalities than politics. In 2014, Jokowi, being a relatively youthful 52-year-old at the time, something of an outsider to national politics and an ambitious reformer, was sometimes compared to [Barack Obama](#). As governor of the capital, Jakarta, the former furniture factory owner was known for his hands-on approach, with [unannounced visits](#) to meet local people around the city and hear their complaints; he was credited with getting things done and tackling corruption.

This time, Jokowi will be judged on the track record of his first term, which has been mixed. His most popular achievements include a universal free [healthcare scheme](#), and [financial support](#) for children from poor families, enabling them to complete secondary education. Despite [delays](#), major transport and energy infrastructure projects, such as a 150 km high-speed [railway](#) from Jakarta to Bandung, are progressing; in March 2019, the first line of Jakarta's metro finally [opened](#), a step towards overcoming the monumental [traffic jams](#) that paralyse the city. On the economy, the government has cut red tape, helping the country to move up nearly 50 places in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business [ranking](#) over five years, to 73rd out of 190 economies; at the same time, it also [lifted](#) restrictions on foreign investment. However, these measures have failed to ignite growth, which remains stuck at around 5 % – enough to keep the [economy](#) on an even keel, but not to create the new jobs needed for a fast-growing population or to allow substantial modernisation; in 2014, Jokowi's target was 7 %. Despite this, in 2018 a record [65 %](#) of Indonesians were optimistic about the economic situation, up from 45 % in 2014.

Jokowi's foreign policy mostly resembles that of his predecessors, prioritising good relations with neighbours and international partners, including China. Although part of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone falls within waters [claimed](#) by China, it [denies](#) being in any maritime dispute with Beijing.

Progress in many areas has been unimpressive. Jokowi [fought off](#) efforts by Indonesia's parliament to dilute the powers of the KPK, the country's anti-graft agency; however, corruption remains [endemic](#). Despite being a priority on the president's 2014 programme, human rights have made little progress: discussion of the 1965 massacre of communists remains off-limits, separatists continue to [denounce](#) the situation in occupied Papua, the country's LGBT minority is increasingly [embattled](#), and in Aceh, the only province to apply Sharia law, offenders are regularly [caned](#) in public.

For commentators, if Jokowi is Indonesia's Obama, challenger [Prabowo Subianto](#) more closely resembles Trump, not least due to his 'make Indonesia great again' slogan. Prabowo's right-wing populist rhetoric is targeted at the under-privileged, with [claims](#) that poverty is growing (despite data suggesting the contrary). As a retired general and son-in-law of former dictator Suharto, Prabowo himself is very much one of the

elite. In terms of policies, he would like Indonesia to achieve [self-sufficiency](#) in energy, water and food, become more [assertive](#) towards China, and spend more on [defence](#). Prabowo's human rights record is poor, with [accusations](#) that in 1997 he was complicit in the disappearance of several Suharto opponents.

The role of religion in the presidential race

In 2014, Jokowi was seen as an advocate of pluralism. Because of his willingness to share power with non-Muslims, such as Jakarta deputy governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ('Ahok', a Protestant of Chinese origin), online smear campaigns [claimed](#) that Jokowi himself was descended from Chinese Christians. In the end, such rumours may have reduced Jokowi's lead, but did not stop him winning. However, in 2017 Ahok, who succeeded Jokowi as Jakarta governor, was accused of insulting Muslims. This led to mass anti-Ahok protests by Islamists, a shock defeat in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election to a Prabowo ally, Anies Baswedan, and a two-year prison sentence for blasphemy. Ahok's [downfall](#) was a warning to Jokowi not to overlook the growing political influence of Islamic fundamentalism in a country that is 87 % Muslim.

In 2019, internet [trolls](#) resumed their attacks against Jokowi, this time with dire warnings of plans to ban the Muslim call to prayer and legalise gay marriage. Jokowi's choice of senior cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, as his vice-presidential running mate seems calculated to dispel such doubts about his Islamic credentials, but will disappoint liberal supporters, who may recall Ma'ruf's backing for the 2017 anti-Ahok [rallies](#) and for a 2005 fatwa [rejecting](#) 'liberalism, pluralism and secularism'. Prabowo, who also backed the Islamist protests, is playing the [religious card](#) too; both he and running mate [Sandiaga Uno](#) have been keen to present themselves to voters as [pious Muslims](#). At the same time, to avoid alienating non-Muslim voters, he has emphasised his commitment to religious [harmony](#).

Parliamentary elections

In the past, Indonesian electoral law required a gap of at least three months between presidential and parliamentary elections. However, in 2013 the law was changed, allowing the two to be held simultaneously for the first time in 2019. Among the [reasons](#) cited for this change was the need to save money, and to create a stronger link between presidential candidates and the parliamentary parties backing them. It seems likely, however, that an additional effect will be to boost the presidential candidates' two parties at the expense of the remainder. A January 2019 opinion [poll](#) suggests that the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P, for Jokowi) and the Great Indonesia Movement (for Prabowo) will both more than double their share of the vote, with Jokowi's PDI-P achieving an unprecedented 40.5 %. At the same time, three of the smaller parties are expected to fall below the 4 % threshold for parliamentary seats. At present, there are 10 [parties](#) in the parliament, with no party holding more than one-sixth of seats; six are backing Jokowi, with the remaining four throwing their weight behind Prabowo.

A transparent and credible vote?

Under former dictator, [General Suharto](#), elections were carefully stage-managed, but since his 1998 downfall they have become more competitive. Observers [described](#) the 2014 presidential election as mostly free and fair. However, losing candidate Prabowo [contested](#) the results on the grounds of large-scale electoral fraud. In 2019, his campaign has again called voter lists into question, [alleging](#) that inaccuracies could affect up to 17 million voters. Other [concerns](#) include vote buying (especially prevalent in local elections), online [disinformation](#) targeted at both candidates, and the fact that millions will be unable to vote due to lacking the required identity documents. However, given the comfortable lead predicted for Jokowi and his parliamentary coalition, irregularities are not expected to significantly influence the results.

Expected outcomes of the elections

Jokowi's approval rating has risen during his presidency, and is now at a record high of [59.5 %](#). All opinion polls to date give a clear lead to Jokowi, with a gap between the candidates of up to 20 %. Prabowo is a seasoned campaigner, and the precedent of the 2014 election suggests that he may narrow the gap as the day of the vote comes closer, but the odds are that Jokowi will win a second term. Polls also forecast that pro-Jokowi parties will retain a strong parliamentary majority. Jokowi's [manifesto](#) suggests that a second presidency would offer continuity, with no proposals for major changes.

European Parliament position: EP resolutions of [January](#) and [June](#) 2017 note that the EU and Indonesia share democratic values, but express numerous human rights concerns, for example, in relation to the LGBT minority, the Ahok blasphemy case, and Papuan separatism. The EP is not sending observers to the April 2019 election.

