

This Week in Asia/ Politics

Indonesia election 2024: is Prabowo Subianto poised for a first-round win? Survey numbers suggest so but voter turnout critical

The ex-general and long-time presidential hopeful could win Indonesia's top job without the need for a second round of voting, according to the polls. With Jokowi's eldest son as his running mate, he has the outgoing president's barely concealed support. But the seeds of discontent have been sown.



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Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto greets supporters during a campaign rally in Malang, East Java, earlier this month. Photo: AP

Like [nyepi](#) in tourist hotspot Bali where natives enter into contemplative silence, Indonesia is having three days of quiet before Wednesday's presidential and legislative polls, with surveys showing Prabowo Subianto in the lead.

As more than 204 million eligible voters cast their ballots in one of the world's biggest elections on February 14, Prabowo and running mate, [Gibran Rakabuming Raka](#), have been aggressively pushing for a single round of balloting, arguing that a second would prove divisive.

The 75 days of campaigning have been a roller-coaster ride for Prabowo and the other two pairs of candidates: former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan and his vice-presidential candidate Muhaimin Iskandar; and former Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo and partner Mahfud MD.



Anies Baswedan (centre, left) and Muhaimin Iskandar (centre, right) greet supporters during their final campaign rally on Saturday at the Jakarta International Stadium. Photo: AFP

A presidential candidate in the 2014 and 2019 elections who lost out to incumbent [Joko Widodo](#) and was later co-opted as defence minister, Prabowo is making his third bid for the top job. This time, in a move redolent with irony and laden with Widodo's desire to retain his legacy, Prabowo has the outgoing president's barely concealed support.

Gibran, Widodo's eldest son, made it onto Prabowo's ticket as vice-presidential sidekick after the Constitutional Court [ruled the 36-year-old could run](#), despite the minimum age being 40. The court was led by Widodo's brother-in-law.

Posters of Prabowo and Widodo – since taken down during the quiet phase – could be seen plastered all over key provinces, all but signalling the president's endorsement. Widodo, or Jokowi, as he is widely known, belongs to the ruling Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P).

Who are the 3 candidates vying to be Indonesia's next president?

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The PDI-P is fielding its own candidates, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud, who have not received even a nod of support from Jokowi and have become more critical of some of his policies. Ganjar has also declared he can win without the popular president's support.

Yet all three pairs of candidates are viewed largely as centrists and in an election where the main issues have been on the cost of living and youth employment, few areas of ideological differences have emerged. Rather, the focus has been on the power of personalities.

On paper, at least two surveys show Prabowo and Gibran as front runners, surpassing the 50 per cent of the vote needed to emerge as winners on Wednesday. If no one receives this share, the top two candidates will face off in a second round of voting on June 26.

The results released by pollster Indikator on February 9 showed Prabowo ahead at 51.8 per cent of the votes, while rivals Anies received 24.1 per cent and Ganjar obtained 19.6 per cent. The margin of error was 2.9 per cent.

Can Indonesia's Ganjar force a run-off as bid for 'total victory' dries up?



4 Feb 2024

Another survey by Lembaga Survei Indonesia showed Prabowo at 51.9 per cent, with Anies at 23.3 per cent and Ganjar at 20.3 per cent. The margin of error was also 2.9 per cent.

Much will depend on voter turnout, analysts have said. The country regularly enjoys about 80 per cent turnout and election day is a public holiday.

How effectively the candidates and their party machinery can mobilise voters on polling day will be critical, with Ganjar's PDI-P seen as having an advantage given its formidable party machinery in critical provinces like Central and West Java. PDI-P also holds the largest number of seats currently in the legislature, underscoring its large voter base.



Indonesia's 2024 election: will Indonesia vote in a political dynasty?

Seeds of discontent

Campaign insiders expressed confidence Prabowo would make further gains in the coming days as voters who prefer continuity come around to his side. His campaign has been premised on [pressing ahead with Jokowi's policies](#), including a massive social assistance programme for the poor and the building of a new capital in [Nusantara](#) in East Kalimantan.

But hitching his campaign to Jokowi, who enjoying popularity ratings above 70 per cent, has not been risk-free.

The president has faced accusations of bias and even though he has not officially endorsed anyone, Jokowi is seen as clearly siding with his son and Prabowo.

Since the controversial ruling that allowed Jokowi's son to run, his brother-in-law has been demoted from his position as chief justice of the Constitutional Court. Both the court and the General Elections Commission, or KPU, have been found guilty of ethical violations.



**A lot of these student movements do not want to see
Prabowo win**
Alexander R. Arifianto, analyst

The scandal sowed the seeds of a new movement that has taken hold and cannot be ignored: a steadily growing chorus of student and intellectual groups calling for democracy to be upheld amid mounting accusations of nepotism and weakened institutions.

“We have a growing student movement in dozens of Indonesian universities over the past week or so. How are they going to respond? A lot of these student movements do not want to see Prabowo win,” said Alexander R. Arifianto, a senior fellow with the Indonesia programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Prabowo and Gibran have been quick to claim the youth vote as theirs, going by attendance at their rallies. Some 52 per cent of registered voters this year are aged below 40, with one-third of them younger than 30.

Whether the burgeoning student movement in opposition to Prabowo will translate into an actual force to be reckoned with remains to be seen.

‘Not fair, not free’: students slam Jokowi’s lack of neutrality in election

10 Feb 2024



But Jokowi has not helped matters by declaring that the president is legally allowed to campaign and take sides during an election. After the outburst of defiance was greeted with opprobrium, especially from intellectuals and academics, he dialled down the rhetoric.

Sana Jaffrey, a research fellow at Australian National University specialising in Indonesian politics, said there was a “mobilisation by Indonesian intellectuals, academics at great personal cost” to criticise the president and call for neutrality.

“And there was sort of great momentum to this and so he’s rolled it back saying it is allowed but I’m not going to do it. My sense is that it might have backfired and might have given a boost to people who are thinking of supporting other candidates,” she said.



Giantri Siti Safitiri (left) and her friends from university will be first-time voters in Indonesia’s February 2024 election. Photo: Vemmy Widowati

First-time voter and university student Giantri Siti Safitri, 18, is among them. She has decided to vote for Anies because of the improvements he brought to her hometown Jakarta as its governor and not for Prabowo “because there are ethical issues”.

“A lot of young people get their news and information from TikTok, and Prabowo is very popular there. But if you read a bit deeper, you can find out all the issues from his past,” she added, referring to his troubled time as a military chief, especially during the 1998 riots sparked by the Asian financial crisis.

Prabowo and the Jokowi question

A senior member of the Indonesian elite who has chaired state-owned enterprises and listed companies said one aspect of the campaign that appeared to be different from previous elections was the relative absence of a consumption spike. To him, this indicated that the election had been clean so far and represented a maturing of Indonesia's democracy. "Not as much money appears to be floating around," he said, on condition of anonymity.

But another member of the vast establishment said he would not be too quick to conclude it would remain this way. "There is a tradition of '*serang fajar*', where supporters have been known to give incentives, shall we say, to get voters to side with them and this is done in the morning or at dawn." *Serang fajar* translates as 'dawn attack'.

Insiders within Prabowo's camp know that he has only a thin margin of error and it is best if he stays on safe topics, an approach he took to heart during the live debates throughout the campaign. In the fifth and final round, Prabowo was subdued and the other two candidates did not pounce on him as mercilessly as they previously had.



Joko Widodo congratulates Prabowo Subianto in 2019 after the latter was sworn in as Indonesia's defence minister.

Photo: Antara Foto/Wahyu Putro A via Reuters

Reconciliation has been a recurrent theme in Indonesian politics over the decades with Prabowo himself, a presidential candidate who lost out to Jokowi in 2014 and 2019, becoming inducted into his cabinet as defence minister.

If Prabowo does manage to win on February 14, the question is whether he will co-opt erstwhile rivals into any government post, not an unusual arrangement going by past precedents. More intriguingly, attention will be paid to just how Prabowo will live up to whatever pact he and Jokowi had made to ensure policy continuity and keeping his legacy.

The most obvious point of influence will be via his son, Gibran. "But the Indonesian constitution does not give any equal power to the vice-president. So what falls under his purview is really sort of up to the president. He can be parked somewhere in an unimportant position," researcher Jaffrey said.

"Prabowo did not contest the presidency for three tries so that you do somebody else's bidding," she added.

Dedi Dinarto, lead Indonesia analyst at public policy advisory firm Global Counsel, said: "The post-election dynamics between Prabowo and Jokowi represent a different challenge altogether, with potential frictions arising due to the high level of pragmatism in Indonesian politics."

Jokowi under renewed fire for saying presidents 'can take sides' in election



25 Jan 2024

But even if Prabowo fails to claim outright victory on Wednesday, the consensus seems that it is his to lose. Can he hang onto his lead?

Anies appears to be slightly ahead of Ganjar in the surveys and is likely to be a formidable opponent, analysts say.

An articulate university professor who obtained his doctorate from the United States, Baswedan was once an education minister in Jokowi's first cabinet in 2014, but he lasted less than two years on the job before going after the Jakarta governorship.

Interviews by this Week in Asia over the past week found that the elite establishment appeared to be split between rooting for Prabowo given his front runner status and sticking with PDI-P and therefore Ganjar.



PDI-P candidate Ganjar Pranowo, centre, waves to supporters during a campaign rally in Medan, North Sumatra, late last month. Photo: AP

As a nationalist party, PDI-P has a long-standing hold on sections of the elite but a split between party elder, former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Jokowi has also led to a rupture down the ranks. Jokowi ran on the PDI-P ticket when he first rose to prominence as mayor of Solo and then into political stardom as president.

However, analysts and elite observers were quick to also point out that all three presidential candidates are centrist, even though Anies is associated with the more conservative elements of Indonesian society. And despite both he and Ganjar pushing for a vision of change, analysts believe all three favour developmental policies and are unlikely to depart dramatically from Jokowi's incrementalist approach.

The most high-profile legacy project of the current president is the relocation of the new capital to Nusantara, which Anies has said he will abandon if elected.

Indonesia's next president will uphold Jokowi's legacy. But will that be enough?

4 Feb 2024



"Realistically, none of the candidates are likely to diverge significantly from the policies of the Jokowi administration," Dedi said.

As to what this would entail, he and others predicted the maintenance of close economic ties with [China](#), and the promotion of value-added manufacturing through a form of economic nationalism that could manifest itself through export restrictions and adjustments to local requirements.

All three candidates are unlikely to compromise on Indonesia's non-aligned foreign policy principles. "The country will continue leveraging its non-alignment stance to engage with all nations, provided there are political and economic benefits to be gained," Dedi added.



Jakarta voter David says he will be voting for Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto because he likes his personality. Photo: Vemmy Widowati

But for voters like David, 50, these are distant concerns. A street cart food seller in Jakarta's Cikini area, he spoke for many backing Prabowo when he cited the minister's amiable personality.

"I like the guy," he said. "That's all it is. I like him more than the other candidates, and he has been trying to become president for some time, so this is his time."