

Beyond loyalty: restoring technocratic leadership in Indonesia's democracy

by Rifky Pratama Wicaksono

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A policeman in front of Indonesia Gelap protesters, 2025

Photo Credit: [Unsplash/Angiola Harry](#)

Indonesia is currently entering a new chapter under President Prabowo Subianto and the Merah Putih Cabinet. Yet, this chapter opens with a government structure that is increasingly complex, with new institutions being created and existing ones divided. These structural shifts affect organisational hierarchies, budget allocations and personnel assignments across government bodies.

The balance between political loyalty and professional competence in leadership appointments is important. However, the selection of cabinet and strategic institutional leaders has increasingly prioritised political alignment. These appointments are often explained as ways to streamline bureaucratic procedures, accelerate execution and ensure coalition stability. While political considerations are inevitable in any democracy, prioritizing allegiance over expertise risks reducing the effectiveness of institutions.

At the [regional](#) and [legislative levels](#), key positions are predominantly filled by figures aligned with the governing coalition. While such practices may be legally acceptable within a democratic framework, they raise deeper questions about governance quality. Leadership should serve to ensure effective policymaking, institutional integrity and sound public service delivery, not just political consolidation.

Emphasis on party allegiance in appointments risks diverting focus from the technical expertise needed to improve strategic sector performance. The selection of several leaders in key sectors raises questions about how well the equilibrium between qualification and political judgment is being maintained. The implications of this pattern go beyond isolated cases; it risks institutionalising a culture of patronage in critical areas of governance.

Moreover, recent responses to public criticism, such as the [discourse around the hashtag #KaburAjaDulu](#) (which translates as “Just escape first” and represents a collective expression of frustration among Indonesians, particularly youth, about domestic conditions and their desire to seek better opportunities abroad), have exposed gaps in policy communication and leadership readiness.

Indonesia’s development challenges are increasingly multidimensional, spanning digital transformation, the green economy transition, the public health system, education reform, long-term industrial strategy and law enforcement. Addressing these challenges involves leadership that possesses both charisma and professional capability, enabling the formulation and implementation of evidence-based policies. In this context, technocratic governance, characterised by merit, professionalism and analytical capacity, is essential.

Administrative appointments should reflect the [depth of experience](#), [sectoral expertise](#), and [strategic foresight](#) required for meaningful policy impact. Investing in structured civil service development, ensuring a transparent recruitment system, and nurturing leadership pipelines from local to national levels are essential components of this reform.

Historically, Indonesia has benefited from the contributions of figures whose expertise helped stabilise institutions and navigate policy complexities. The legacies of B.J. Habibie, Boediono, Ignasius Jonan, Basuki Hadimuljono, Retno Marsudi and Sri Mulyani demonstrate how specialised knowledge enhances national resilience. Their approach demonstrated the productive coexistence of technocracy and democratic legitimacy, showing how professionalism can benefit the national interest while upholding democratic values.

Yet, today competent experts must navigate increasingly politicised environments. In many instances, partisan dynamics now overshadow substantive considerations in shaping appointments and policy direction. This is a significant challenge — when decision-making and execution are dictated primarily by factional interests rather than evidence, institutions can drift from their core mandates. Over time, this trend could lead to the erosion of institutional memory, a weakening of continuity and a decrease in overall governance quality.

Indonesia cannot afford such erosion. Sustaining effective institutions requires adherence to meritocratic principles and long-term investment in internal capacity. International assessments offer relevant indicators of Indonesia’s position in terms of governance and performance. The [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#), for example, show that although Indonesia has made progress in aspects of regulatory quality and governance effectiveness, it still lags behind several regional peers like

Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.

Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit's [2024 Democracy Index](#) notes a decline in Indonesia's overall score (6.53 to 6.44), placing it in 59th rank, particularly in areas of the functioning of government. At the national level, [the State Civil Apparatus Commission \(KASN\)](#) reports persistent challenges in ensuring merit-based selection, especially in regional leadership roles, where transactional politics remain deeply entrenched.

Such findings are not simply diagnostic; they reflect structural barriers to building strong institutions. Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that [as institutional effectiveness weakens, trust in public institutions tends to decline](#), highlighting the significance of administrative integrity. If sustained over time, this practice could reshape institutional norms, making it increasingly difficult to uphold professional standards in governance.

Restoring a culture of merit-based governance does not mean rejecting politics; rather, it means [realigning political decision-making with professional excellence](#). Government leaders must recognise that loyalty and competence are not mutually exclusive, and that the former should not be used to compromise the latter. Enhancing institutional quality and capability development must become central to Indonesia's development trajectory, especially as the country aspires to become a key player in the global economy.

[Civic engagement and public discourse](#) must be leveraged to demand higher leadership standards, especially through social media. Civil society, academia and the independent media should collaborate to reconstruct a public culture that prioritises the substance of policies over mere political showmanship.

Indonesia is at a critical juncture. As the country moves toward its [Vision 2045](#) and aims to escape the [middle-income trap](#), the quality of its institutions will be a decisive factor. While political stability may lay the foundation, it is [institutional competence](#) that will ultimately determine the pace and extent of the nation's progress. Now is the time to reaffirm that in a democratic and developmental state, professional leadership is not just desirable but essential.

Disclosures:

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