

Indonesia's elections and what they mean for Australia's Development Partnership Plans



Photo Credit: [Prabowo Subianto/Facebook](#)

by Sandra Hamid

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Results of the 14 February elections in Indonesia suggest that voters chose to be led by the current Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto and his Vice President, the sitting President's son. Two presidential contenders, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo, have **challenged the results**, with their cases to "save the future of Indonesia's democracy" presently ongoing in the Constitutional Court. While the pending court case is important, many anticipate that the outcome is unlikely to change. Indonesia's next chapter is about to begin, and it is time for international agencies to reflect on how they align their development agendas with the priorities of the Indonesian people to ensure that support is strategically placed where it's needed and welcomed by the next administration.

The 2024 elections raised important questions for those interested in the democratic trajectory of the world's third-largest democracy. In the weeks leading up to voting day, democracy activists and the media questioned the integrity of the election, particularly highlighting the **interference from the current administration** in the process. An **interim statement** from the Asian Network for Free Elections expressed concern about declining democratic norms and values, while **questions were raised** in the UN Human Rights Committee meeting about the pre-elections process.

Even before the dust settles, many have started to ponder how the preferences of 58.6% of Indonesians align with the agenda set in 1998 after the country ousted its autocratic President, Soeharto, who had been in power for 32 years. This was Prabowo's third attempt to win the top job in the country, and although he presented himself as a cuddly grandfather figure, the Prabowo who received the most votes in 2024 was the same politician who lost in 2014 and 2019.

The former son-in-law of Soeharto, Prabowo **reportedly played** a substantial role in the kidnapping of students and pro-democracy activists during the final years of

New Order rule. In the previous elections, his opponent was Joko Widodo, viewed favourably as an outsider to Jakarta's politics. Widodo's victory in 2014 was widely seen as a reflection of Indonesians' desire to part ways with the old establishment. But in 2024, President Jokowi threw his support behind Prabowo and his own son, effectively reintroducing that establishment and paving the way for his own lineage to rule.

The President's son has come under scrutiny, particularly concerning the rule of law and political norms. Initially ineligible to run, he only gained the opportunity to do so after his uncle, the President's brother-in-law and Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court, granted permission for his candidacy. The conduct of the Chief Justice was later deemed unethical by the Ethics Council of the Constitutional Court. Nonetheless, the Court's decision remains unchanged.

The outcome of the 2024 presidential election signals that Prabowo's human rights record and the unethical process through which his running mate was nominated were not significant factors for Indonesian voters. What implications does this have for the human rights, democracy, and good governance agenda?

Civil society is looking inward to answer this question, and outward to better understand Indonesian voters. Critics of democracy activists have accused them of misinterpreting the sentiments of the people, suggesting that democracy and human rights are not important for "the little people", a term in Indonesian vernacular for average voters. They argue that social welfare is a more pressing issue. The populist agenda promoted by Prabowo – including policies such as providing free lunches for students – was perceived to be more appealing. It might be true that on voting day Indonesians, like many voters across the globe, leaned towards a populist agenda and appeared to show little concern for human rights and good governance. However, it is also true that democracy remains the preferred system of government for Indonesians. How then, do civil society organisations and democracy activists work with such a disjuncture, and what could be the role of international donors in supporting their reform agenda?

Supporting civil society stands as a key cornerstone of the Australian Government's 2023 international development policy. Designed to respond to challenges in crucial sectors brought about by climate change, demographic shifts and social trends, technological advances, and economic pressures, the policy acknowledges the shrinking of civic space globally, including in Indonesia. Nonetheless, civil society organisations bring vital relationships and knowledge crucial to delivering development programs.

While the policy articulates Australia's response to global challenges, the

preparation of country-specific Development Partnership Plans (DPPs) is currently underway. In Indonesia, this process would benefit from consideration of a recent Development Intelligence Lab [Pulse Check](#) survey on Indonesians' view of the new development policy. The survey presented questions to Indonesian experts, including civil society leaders, business community, and academics, on where support should be directed.

Governance emerged as the top priority. Those surveyed underlined that in Indonesia, Australia's assistance on governance should include tackling corruption and ensuring the sound rule of law, as these are essential for sustained, inclusive development and an effective state. Inclusive development aims to reduce the growth of economic inequality, while an effective state is a prerequisite for ensuring that "the little people" have access to services.

Some may argue that the issues identified as top priorities by those surveyed – such as addressing corruption, preserving civic space, and strengthening democratic leadership – are inconsistent with the preferences of Indonesian voters as reflected in their ballots. This is incorrect. From my perspective, there is no disjuncture between the aspirations of the voters, Pulse Check respondents, and Indonesian civil society more broadly. Promoting good governance and the rule of law does not contradict the "will of the people"; it contributes to building the social infrastructure through which democracy can actually deliver for the voters.

As the Indonesian DPP progresses, it will be important to observe how the Australian Government takes feedback from Indonesian experts, as presented by the Lab. A reading of the development policy shows that Australia is very alive to political sensitivities in the region. The policy rightly privileges collaborative efforts to chart the way forward, which will help build trust with the new administration in Indonesia. While it is of course mandatory for the Australian Government to engage primarily with the new Indonesian Government on the DPP, the Lab's findings underscore the importance of engaging non-state actors as well. The incoming administrations and non-state actors often share the same reform agenda, and Australia can play a crucial role in connecting them.

However, should there be an absence of shared objectives between the two, Australia will have to carefully navigate the terrain. The shape of this terrain will become clearer as Indonesia embarks on its new chapter following the inauguration of the new administration in October 2024.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/indonesias-elections-and-australias-dpps/>