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Opinion

Indonesia and Jokowi: Right place, right time

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The political transition under way as a result of Mr Joko Widodo's election victory in July is breaking new political ground in Indonesia and showing just how far the country has developed as a democracy in 17 years.

One month into his tenure, the Jakarta establishment is still trying to digest the fact that Mr Joko - known popularly as Jokowi - a complete outsider who doesn't own a house or have friends or family in the capital, won the presidential election.

The political and business elite is coming to terms with a president who doesn't know who the main players are, nor care what they think as he sets out to serve the people who elected him.

So far, people mostly like what they have seen of the Jokowi administration. They admire his earnest, direct style. He rarely speaks more than a few sentences and manages to convey what he means using simple language.

During his 13-minute presentation to the Apec CEO conference in Beijing, he used PowerPoint slides with pictures to say that building infrastructure is his government's priority and this presents opportunities for investors. Nothing more, nor less.

People also appreciate that while his Cabinet is mostly inexperienced and untried, he has established himself as a firm manager, calling up ministers and delegating rather than trying to manage everything centrally. He tends to listen to people and make a great show of taking on board what they say, a striking contrast to his predecessor, who liked to lecture his ministers without really giving them a chance to speak.

There is also appreciation for the new directions he is setting for policy: seeking to streamline public services on the domestic front and laying out a foreign policy that better serves people's welfare and economic interests.

With his background as a small-business owner and city mayor, Mr Joko is expected to make hard-nosed decisions about how to manage the costs of imports and trim off the fat on which corrupt monopolies have thrived for years - especially in the oil sector.

None of this is revolutionary. Some of it is rather mundane, as befits a man who is apparently not excited by the trappings of power or office - at least not yet. A close confidante says that during the campaign, when he felt stressed, Mr Joko appreciated seeing how his furniture factory in Solo was doing - whether quality was being maintained, or the workers were happy.

He is here to serve the people, he likes to tell aides, who worry about the fact that the opposition camp controls Parliament and his is effectively a minority government. If the people reject him, he can always leave and return to his furniture business.

At this point, Mr Joko could probably blow bubbles and the adoring Indonesian public would applaud, but the question is, as always with such transitions, whether expectations are realistic and where Indonesia is headed in the next two years, once the administration settles down.

Politics will settle down, but the legacy of a bruising, competitive campaign will be a more effective opposition in Parliament and less of an easy ride for Mr Joko and his ministers. Popular as he is, Indonesia's democracy is throwing up a bumptious and aggressive culture of political contest, one that will generate the kinds of rowdy scenes we have seen in Taiwanese and Turkish legislatures.

Mr Joko's own political base remains fractured. Most of his Cabinet choices reflect the rather conservative influence of Ms Megawati Sukarnoputri, the former president whose party he belongs to. Ms Megawati blocked most of his own preferences, and has forced him to relegate friends and advisers from his days as Mayor of Solo to informal roles.

As President, he is surrounded by those who owe allegiance to others, and lacks the kind of advice only close confidants can provide.

The impact of Mr Joko's style and novel ideas on policy may progressively meet resistance. Concern about conservative barriers to change has focused on the country's 400,000-strong armed forces, but the army's influence has been effectively eroded over the past decade through reforms and accommodation.

The real obstacle to sweeping change is Indonesia's more than four million bureaucrats. They will not take kindly to the streamlining of public services that deprive them of augmented income and graft at all levels.

The President will need to continue his predecessor's focus on bureaucratic reform and anti-corruption measures that are slowly starting to change behaviour, but not very much.

Fears of the spread of religious intolerance spilling over into conflict that was widely predicted in the last two years have largely abated. These concerns spiked during the election campaign when Mr Joko's

competitor, Mr Prabowo Subianto, used rumours and slander to stir up Muslim sentiment against him. But as the political climate has settled, the tensions so evident a year ago appear to have evaporated.

This does not mean that ethnic and religious tensions have been resolved. Conflicts in Indonesian society are generally stoked and stirred by elite-level competition and conflict. Despite the deadlock in Parliament, the outcome of the election has reduced the level of contestation considerably.

The main influence on Mr Joko's foreign policy thinking has been the need to focus Indonesia's diplomatic energies on its own interests, rather than those of the wider region and the world.

This will mean a determined effort to prevent the theft of Indonesian fish stocks; more attention to the treatment of overseas workers; aggressive commercial diplomacy and resisting the constraints of international trade agreements. Much as this approach will be popular at home, it could generate friction and frustration in the region.

Mr Joko has little time for the details of diplomacy in the South China Sea or the challenges of promoting human rights. By all accounts, his absorptive capacity on international issues is limited.

The real test for him will be his ability to lead Indonesia in an era characterised by more freedom and security than its citizens have enjoyed in 70 years as a nation. This means that while less concerned about the quantitative aspects of nationhood - food security, access to welfare and basic education - Indonesians are increasingly paying attention to the quality of their lives.

Mr Joko is rightly focused on services, and has promised to serve the people. However, like other maturing democracies, there will be trade-offs. The first of these, a significant increase in fuel prices barely a month after he took office, appears to have been met with general approval.

Indonesia is a country that seems genuinely comfortable in its space right now. For the first time in 70 years of nationhood, people are generally content, regional separatist sentiment has all but disappeared (with the exception of Papua), while communal religious and ethnic tension has largely abated.

Seventeen years ago, as the country embarked on a messy democratic transition, the fear was that centrifugal forces would tear the republic apart.

But in striking contrast to other sizeable maturing democracies, Indonesia is no Mexico beset by chronic criminal violence, has escaped the blight of protracted internal conflict that afflicts Colombia, and does not struggle any more with the relationship between Islam and the state that is convulsing Turkish society.

Indonesia is lucky to have Mr Joko, and he is lucky to have Indonesia today. The next five years are ones of remarkable promise.

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