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Is Jokowi Indonesia's future?

It is a measure of the paucity of political leadership in Indonesia that just 18 months away from presidential elections, popular momentum seems to be rapidly building behind a relatively recent resident of Jakarta who previously was a provincial furniture manufacturer and then mayor of a small city in Central Java.

The man universally known as Jokowi, a nickname derived from his full name Joko Widodo, left his job as mayor of Solo and was elected governor of Jakarta last September, upending powerbrokers and conventional political wisdom in the process.

In the last week, while President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono took the rather extraordinary step of becoming the chairman of his own faltering, divided and scandal-marred Democratic Party, the idea of a Jokowi presidential bid has only seemed more attractive. Why, after all, is a sitting two-term president, with less than two years left in office and a host of accomplishments behind him, not tending full time to government – especially with a rising trade deficit and a falling rupiah – and instead mucking about in messy party politics? There must be a better way.

A survey of presidential preferences released last month by Publica Research and Consultancy had Jokowi,

aligned with the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) that backed him for governor, leading the pack, with 16 per cent of respondents naming him their choice for president. The No. 2 was another insurgent figure, the controversial Suharto-era retired Gen. Prabowo Subianto, who has been the front runner in most surveys until recently.

This is the result of a serious miscalculation by both the Democratic Party and coal tycoon Aburizal Bakrie's Golkar Party, both of which backed the incumbent candidate for governor of Jakarta, Fauzi Bowo. "Jokowi changes everything," one key Aburizal advisor told me at the time. "And we were too stupid to understand what was happening."

It is far too early to tell if Jokowi can manage Jakarta's chaos any more effectively than the lackluster Fauzi, who rose to prominence by being a consummate insider. Jokowi's allure largely stems from the fact that he is not associated in the public mind with a political system riddled with corruption, dominated by Suharto-era dinosaurs and seemingly immune to change. The House of Representatives is inefficient and shady, policies are forged in a murky crucible of money and vested interests and the entire system remains opaque. It is often left

to the undermanned Corruption Eradication Commission to point out the flaws with publicly popular indictments and convictions that come long after the fact.

Yudhoyono swept to power in 2004 as the clean and quiet former general who surrounded himself with young reformers. Now several of those bright young stars are in prison on corruption charges, where other colleagues will no doubt soon join them. To manage the damage, the president himself has to tend to the rebuilding of his party.

With many Indonesians growing wealthier, more sophisticated and better educated off the back of impressive economic growth, the old politics are sickening and Jokowi, with his trademark red-and-blue checked shirts, humble looks and straight talk, seems a breath of fresh air. It is not uncommon to hear office workers and young executives in Jakarta dreamily speculating on President Jokowi.

But should a virtually untried young politician – Jokowi is in his 40s – be propelled towards the presidency of this huge and complex country after less than a year trying to run Jakarta? The city itself, with its welter of competing interests, deep infrastructure deficits and complex jurisdictional structures, seems virtually unmanageable.

Jokowi has so far set a good tone, getting civil servants to actually show up for work and launching numerous small projects that may bring more green space to the city and clear some street vendors off the sidewalks, but the two most pressing issues are horrendous traffic and water management, most urgently annual flooding that again devastated parts of the city in January.

Already Jokowi is bumping up against the realities of getting anything big done. He has announced several deadlines for the start of work on an ambitious – and decades delayed – Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) rail system to be financed with US\$1.27 billion in soft loans from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Another long delayed effort is a World Bank-funded project to dredge waterways that was first proposed after disastrous floods in 2007.

In both cases, JICA and the Bank have been accused of dragging their feet with too many conditions and terms. In



Jakarta Governor Jokowi (C) speaks to journalists as he examines floods in Jakarta on Jan 17. – AFP

the last week, Jokowi publicly chided both agencies, telling JICA he wants an answer on the latest round of evaluations within two weeks, not the three-month timetable the agency proposed. He told the Bank he would walk away from their US\$1.4 billion loan if they did not get moving.

This no doubt plays well in the media but it may not be effective governance.

The Bank and JICA are moving slowly, at least in part, out of concern over corruption, which is a hydra-headed beast, and other aspects of these massive projects. The Bank is deeply worried, for example, about how thousands of squatters living on riverbanks will be resettled once dredging begins.

Does the governor appreciate the complexities? When he was mayor of Solo he got major players – from market vendors to Islamic militants – to sit down and thrash out problems. It worked in a city of half a million people. There is precious little plain talk in Indonesia, but it may not be enough to justify moving Jokowi into the ultimate prime time political spotlight.

A senior and well-regarded official told me that he sought out Jokowi recently because he wanted to take the measure of the man, whom he had only met in passing. He said he found the governor engaging enough, but when he probed aspects of policy and economics, he came away worried. “Clueless, he is pretty clueless,” the official said. “We may be about to make a very big mistake if he becomes president.”

The man could be right, but the political system will have to deliver a proper alternative or President Jokowi might indeed be the future.

