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Prabowo and the UK

On the 20th October, Prabowo Subianto was sworn in as Indonesia's 8th President. Having won a convincing majority in the presidential election earlier in the year, the transition from now-former president Joko Widodo to Prabowo attests to the apparent strength of the electoral process since Indonesia transitioned to a democracy in the late 90s. But the election of Prabowo – a former general who has been accused of numerous human rights violations – poses a series of questions over the direction of Indonesian democracy, development, and the protection of civic and religious freedoms. As Southeast Asia's largest economy and most populous nation, these questions hold regional and international significance.

*To better understand what Prabowo's presidency may mean, the LSE has invited a number of academics and experts to provide their insight as part of a blog series examining what Prabowo's tenure may mean for Indonesia and the world. Here **Chris Chaplin** considers the challenges Prabowo holds for UK ambitions in the region.*

Incoming Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto poses a challenge to UK ambitions within Southeast Asia. Prabowo is a former general accused of **serious human rights violations**, and a staunch nationalist. Despite his resounding electoral victory, he has little regard for democratic process and frequently uses populist language to blame **foreign powers for meddling in Indonesia's economy** or for **sponsoring pro-democracy protests**. Such comments speak to Prabowo's sensitivity to perceived international slights and lack of interest in curbing Indonesia's ongoing democratic decline.

For strategic partners like the UK, there is the potential for real friction if their international political, environmental and governance initiatives run counter to Prabowo's nationalist agenda. But Prabowo is a far more complex statesman than his authoritarian gesturing suggests. He is eager to increase

Indonesia's global stature and at ease on the world stage – largely due to his elite international upbringing including in the UK. While undoubtedly a controversial figure, he is likely to be an engaged and experienced international partner, even if such a relationship raises serious questions relating to human rights, environmental protection, and democracy.

Prabowo the 'cosmopolitan' nationalist?

Prabowo's nationalist tendencies are not of an isolationist nature. Instead, they stem from his cosmopolitan upbringing. He is the son of Sumitro Djojohadikusmono, a Javanese aristocrat who was once a leading figure in the Indonesian Socialist Party (banned in 1960). Sumitro is widely seen to be a key architect of the authoritarian president Suharto's economic policy (1967 – 1998) and spent significant time abroad. Prabowo was brought up in Singapore, Hong Kong, Switzerland and the UK. In 1969, Prabowo graduated from the American School in London.

This international and elite upbringing served Prabowo well during his military career. As an officer in the Special Forces (*Kopassus*), his fluency in English allowed him to attend advanced tactical and counter-terrorist courses in the US and West Germany. By the time he became commander of Special Forces in 1995, he was already a regular in Jakarta's diplomatic and elite circles, in no small part due to his marriage to Suharto's daughter, Siti Hediati Hariyadi. As **now declassified documents reveal**, he had close diplomatic relations with senior Western officials.

It is not just Prabowo but his family and key allies who have deep international connections. Prabowo's son lives in Paris, while his brother Hashim Djojohadikusumo- who has bankrolled Prabowo's previous attempts to become president – lived in London for nine years with his three children, all of whom were educated in UK private schools. Prabowo is thus at ease in international circles and familiar with global politics. His intimacy with the UK further bodes well for a UK that is increasing its focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

Prabowo and UK Indo-Pacific ambitions

The UK's **Integrated Review Refresh of 2023** calls for a footing in the region, and the UK and Indonesia have already committed to a **strategic partnership** to increase political, security and defence cooperation. Prabowo is receptive to the **UK's commitment to strengthen this partnership**. As Defence Minister, he has met with the Commander of British Armed Forces to discuss greater bilateral defence cooperation. In 2021, he visited the UK to sign an agreement with the arms company Babcock International to **supply naval frigates to Indonesia**.

It is not just in the remit of defence that UK-Prabowo relations have strengthened. In April 2024, the president-elect met with former Prime Minister Tony Blair to discuss economic transformation

strategies. While Tony Blair is no longer in government, he is a member of the advisory council for the development of Indonesia's new capital city – a key policy of outgoing president Jokowi.

Yet Prabowo's presidency also holds challenges for UK ambitions in the region. For one, he will retain Indonesia's commitment to a non-aligned *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy and thus is unlikely to significantly shift away from closer relations with China or stand with the UK and its allies on global conflicts such as in Ukraine or the Middle East. Indeed, Prabowo visited President Putin in July, and he views Russia as a strategic ally and economic partner.

Prabowo's administration may also pose a challenge to UK environmental policy. Indonesia is the largest global supplier of nickel, palm oil and coal. The Indonesian government views resource extraction as vital to the country's economic development, despite the large-scale deforestation and displacement caused by such industries. In fact, recent plans to turn **2 million hectares of Papua into sugarcane plantation** show that there is little sign of policy revision or reversal on this front.

The Indonesian government is understandably protective of these industries and has taken issue with stricter international sustainability regulations. This stance has soured relations with the European Union, whose anti-deforestation regulations will come into effect at the end of this year. Prabowo has **publicly claimed EU regulations to be unfair and calling the EU out for double standards**. The UK may have left the EU, but the UK's Due Diligence Law on Forest-Risk Commodities may risk similar public rebuke from Prabowo depending on how it is implemented.

A final challenge Prabowo's presidency poses relates to his authoritarian tendencies. The former general may have rebranded himself as a '**cuddly grandpa**', but his speeches are filled with nostalgia for the Suharto era of dictatorship. To be clear, outgoing president Jokowi implemented a raft of anti-democratic policies of his own. But it is unlikely that Prabowo will reverse Indonesia's course of democratic backsliding. If anything, he is likely to accelerate this trajectory.

For sure, the UK has experienced its own **democratic backsliding**, ignoring **key human rights obligations both domestically and internationally**. But an authoritarian Prabowo nonetheless poses a challenge for UK-Indonesian relations. Prime Minister Kier Starmer was a human rights lawyer, and decisions such as handing over sovereignty to the Chagos islands point to a government more aware of its international duties. If this is truly the case, then the UK may struggle to balance its geopolitical and defence ambitions with Prabowo's anti-democratic inclinations.

**The views expressed in the blog are those of the author alone. They do not reflect the position of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, nor that of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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Dr Chris Chaplin is an Assistant Professorial Research Fellow at the Religion and Global Society Unit at the LSE. His research explores the convergence between global Islamic doctrines and local understandings of piety and faith, and how these come to inform civic values, concepts of religious and political solidarity, and social activism within Southeast Asia. He has authored a number of articles and op-eds on these topics, and most recently published the book *Salafism and the State: Islamic Activism and National Identity in Indonesia* (2021).

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