

***Man of Contradictions: Joko Widodo and the Struggle to Remake Indonesia.* By Ben Bland. Victoria, Australia: Penguin Random House, 2020. Softcover: 160pp.**

Joko “Jokowi” Widodo surprised the world when he won the Indonesian presidential election in 2014. Few people predicted that the former furniture-maker from Solo, who was then the governor of Jakarta, would become the president of a country of 250 million people and the biggest market in Southeast Asia. *TIME* magazine in October 2014 featured him on the front cover, calling him “A New Hope”.

Jokowi started bold and was seen by many Indonesians themselves as a new hope for the country. He pledged to strengthen democracy, grow the economy and advance human rights. But although Jokowi won a second term in 2019, he has failed to deliver on many of his promises. Jokowi’s rather poor leadership in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic—which has reversed many of Indonesia’s developmental achievements—further damaged his reputation. Yet, many ordinary Indonesians seem to maintain a high level of trust in him.

Ben Bland’s *Man of Contradictions* tells Jokowi’s story, analyses his personality and recounts his journey from a furniture-maker in Solo to the Presidential Palace in just nine years. In Bland’s view, the longer Jokowi stays in the Palace, the more problematic his leadership becomes. As the author observes, “the man who pitched himself as an outsider had become deeply embedded in elite politics. A leader once admired for his clean reputation had weakened the nation’s highly popular anti-corruption agency [...]. And his persistent calls for economic transformation had been hamstrung by a lack of focus” (p. 5).

Bland views Jokowi as an inherently contradictory politician. He has incoherent visions and a limited understanding of the complex machinery of government (p. 141); acts more like a king than a president (p. 143); and while he has pledged to advance democracy, his approach is reminiscent of Suharto’s authoritarianism (p. 97). Such contradictions are conspicuous. Bland concludes that people may see Jokowi “as many different things: an economic liberal, a political reformer, a defender of pluralism and, eventually, a neo-authoritarian. But Jokowi has approached politics from a more straightforward perspective, that of the furniture maker” (p. 14).

The last point seems to be Bland’s central message: that if we want to understand Jokowi’s contradictions as a politician, we must

“understand Jokowi the furniture maker” (p. 12). However, to me, this argument is too simplistic.

I started, and remain, a scholar, but I had the opportunity to work for seven years in the Palace under President Yudhoyono (2012–14) and President Jokowi (2015–19). As a first-hand witness to the political dynamics of the two administrations, I would argue that there is a stark difference between the paradigms of political reality and scholarly idealism.

Modern science is driven by the search for consistency towards what is ideal. If a reality does not follow this consistency logic, or what is ideal, it is deemed flawed. On the contrary, political processes operate within the logic of reality, not idealism. They are inherently situational and often, if not always, ambiguous. Hence, this normally leads to “contradictions” from some observers’ viewpoint.

Jokowi is a man of real-world politics. Analysts like Bland would easily see him as a contradiction because they examine Jokowi’s political reality from a scholarly viewpoint, demanding consistency. In politics, however, decisions are shaped by complex and sometimes contradictory realities, and problems are addressed mainly through settlements, not ideal and permanent solutions that rarely exist in the real world.

Jokowi’s key strategy is to focus on economic development and infrastructure as a measure to address poverty, unemployment and inequality. Yet, as a politician, he has to deal with hard choices with both positive and negative impacts. His policy options are limited and affected by economic and political constraints, even in choosing his ministers who “compete as much as they cooperate” (p. 70). In handling the COVID-19 pandemic, Jokowi’s original developmental mindset also led him to prioritize the economy over public health, resulting in ineffective policy choices to control the virus.

Yet, just like the way he navigates challenges and complex realities to promote his national development agenda, Jokowi also learned and adapted his policies to make his fight against the pandemic more effective. From the reallocation of US\$43 billion in state budget to re-prioritizing public health over the economy, he took actions to remedy his past mistakes. However, this can still be seen by some as yet another example of Jokowi’s contradictions.

The book tends to focus on Jokowi as the embodiment of the whole political power in Indonesia while ignoring the bureaucracy, which plays a no less important role in the making and implementation of national policies. There are ministers and politicians who pursue their own interests, beliefs and approaches. Decentralization and religious

conservatism add further complexities to political processes. And this is where Jokowi and his policies should be situated. Jokowi's perceived "contradictions" are an inevitable function of his efforts to navigate such complex political realities to address the various policy challenges he faces.

Politics is all about dealing with situations. It is therefore situational, not ideal, and results in mostly temporary settlements, rarely permanent solutions. Jokowi's "contradictions" fit well into that common pattern of politics, in Indonesia and elsewhere.

For those new to Indonesia, *Man of Contradictions* is a useful introduction to the country's politics and its most powerful politician. For those already familiar with Indonesian politics, it offers an interesting, though somewhat controversial, account of Jokowi's political career and statecraft. The book is therefore a timely contribution to the discussion of Indonesian contemporary politics so that we do not keep "getting Indonesia, and Jokowi, wrong" (p. 139).

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