

***The Coalitions Presidents Make: Presidential Power and Its Limits in Democratic Indonesia.* By Marcus Mietzner. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2023. Softcover: 285pp.**

In May 1998, President Suharto's 32-year strongman rule came to an end. Months earlier, he had been re-elected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR)—comprising elected parliamentarians and appointees from so-called functional groups, including the military—but the fallout of the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis led to political instability and massive student demonstrations. Suharto fell and was replaced by his vice president, B. J. Habibie, who agreed to bring forward the next election to the following year. Habibie served just over a year in office; his presidential bid was snuffed out after the MPR opposed a speech he gave about political accountability. Instead, the newly constituted MPR, now primarily composed of elected lawmakers from recently established political parties, elected Abdurrahman Wahid as president in October 1999, while Megawati Soekarnoputri became vice president. Wahid did not last long. He was impeached in July 2001, and Megawati completed the presidential term.

In 1990, the academic Juan Linz, an expert on democracy or authoritarianism, published an influential article titled “The Perils of Presidentialism”. As Marcus Mietzner paraphrases it, Linz argued that “a multi-party system was a particularly poor fit for a presidential rule” (pp. 1–2). Because a separation between the legislature and executive produces gridlock in governance, presidents without a controlling majority in parliament are vulnerable to impeachment. The rapid rise and fall of Indonesian presidents in the early years of the democratic transition period (*reformasi*) would seem to prove Linz's point. However, since 2004, Indonesia has enjoyed very stable presidencies, thus disproving Linz's thesis. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14), Indonesia's first directly elected president, completed the maximum two terms. His successor, Joko Widodo (2014–24), is set to leave office with very high approval ratings.

Mietzner's meticulously researched book unravels “two interrelated puzzles” associated with Indonesia's post-authoritarian journey. The first relates to the remarkable turnaround “from an unstable presidential regime in the early post-Suharto period into one of the world's most resilient”. The second explores “the link

between the increased stability of competitive presidential systems and eroding democratic substance” (p. 3).

Indonesia has often had minority presidents who face a parliament composed mainly of opposition parties. To understand how these minority presidents establish well-functioning administrations, Mietzner draws on the concept of “coalitional presidentialism”, in which coalition-building is not just an emergency fix but a productive strategy. Indeed, they seek to co-opt potential partners through fear and favour.

Some scholars focus on how presidents build coalitions with political parties in the legislature. For instance, Yudhoyono and Widodo built broad-based rainbow coalitions by appointing representatives from numerous parties to their cabinets to avert impeachment threats and ensure consistent parliamentary support for their policies. Under Yudhoyono and Widodo, there were complaints that Indonesia had created a semi-parliamentary or semi-presidential system. However, *The Coalitions Presidents Make* goes further and explores how Yudhoyono and Widodo also co-opted key state institutions and influential non-state actors.

For instance, they incorporated parliament’s various committees and the military—which remains very powerful and politically influential—into their coalitions. Mietzner highlights the importance of the police, which was separated from the military at the start of the *reformasi* process. Because the police have the authority to begin or end criminal proceedings, presidents have increasingly used it to coerce political support or silence critics. The state bureaucracy is another vital institution whose loyalty a president must secure. Without it, they might be able to pass legislation, but they will find it difficult to convince the civil service to implement their directives. Because of extensive decentralization after the fall of the Suharto regime, a president must also ensure support from local governments. Since presidential elections are expensive, Indonesia’s oligarchs must be brought into the fold. Moreover, Mietzner highlights the importance of the various Muslim organizations, whose support is necessary for anyone seeking political office in Indonesia.

Although this strategy of coalitional presidentialism has made Indonesia’s presidential system stable, Mietzner highlights the downsides, namely Indonesia’s democratic decline that started during Yudhoyono’s second term in office. This continued under Widodo, who sought to build an even larger coalition than his

predecessor. Around 82 per cent of all parliamentarians joined Widodo's coalition, eliminating any checks and balances from the legislature. Another consequence of ever-larger coalitions is that presidents have been forced to stultify or reverse their proposed reforms to appease their partners.

It remains to be seen whether Prabowo Subianto, who will be inaugurated as the next president in October 2024, will strengthen coalitional presidentialism, risking further democratic decline, or will try to revive the spirit of *reformasi* and restore democratic accountability.

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