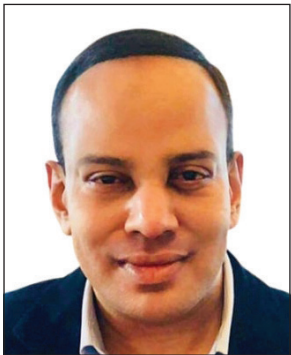


ASIAN VIEWPOINT

Indonesia at a crossroads

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



When the poet Robert Browning wrote “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp”, he meant that the purpose of a meaningful life is to strive for ultimate goals that lie beyond current abilities. However, if the poet’s words are applied to public life, there is a danger that the lure of reach exceeding grasp could translate into overambition. Browning’s enigmatic words may be applicable to President Prabowo Subianto one day as he seeks to reposition Indonesia by giving it a new regional reach that requires an expanded national grasp. That raises questions on both domestic and foreign fronts.

The reason for Prabowo’s overreach is rooted in his personality. He was born into a high-achieving family, which inculcated in him the values of the *Indic ksatria*, or warrior, caste. His experience of growing up overseas, however, included encounters with racism and discrimination. Combining his family’s expectations and his personal tribulations likely created his self-perception as a charismatic, tough leader who is uniquely qualified, if not destined, to lead Indonesia — but also a canny leader who needs to be a “chameleon” adept at tailoring his behaviour to conform to changing circumstances.

But circumstances can take unexpected turns. The Aug 28 riots cannot be understood only as a spontaneous incident. Two short-term factors were the direct triggers: parliamentarians’ high allowances that offended the public’s sense of economic justice and the death of an online motorcycle taxi driver who was hit by a police vehicle during the violence in Jakarta. However, there were structural factors at play also: Economic grievances, the legislature’s crisis of legitimacy and a perceived culture of impunity among the politically powerful.

On the economic front, a weak labour market, commodities-biased policies, and unequal access to public services have meant that a large proportion of the population lives in a state of perpetual economic insecurity. The increased evidence of elite misconduct in recent years also means that they have good reason to be angry at the political class.

Meanwhile, this political class is engaged in a damaging tussle for influence. The real reason behind the Cabinet reshuffle that followed the riots appears to be an attempt by President Prabowo to diminish the influence of his predecessor, Joko Widodo. Clearly, Prabowo no longer sees utility in their marriage of convenience in the 2024 election. The other political parties have not covered themselves in glory by not only hedging their bets by backing Prabowo but also demanding ever more patronage resources in return for their support. This power struggle is damaging for many reasons, including politically-motivated prosecutions of politicians and businesses, as well as abrupt changes in economic policy priorities.

Indonesia is at risk because of a toxic mixture of deepening social frustrations, a ruling elite that has debased itself by indulging in blatant patronage politics and poorly-managed economic pro-



Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia’s president, speaking at a United Nations conference on a Palestinian two-state solution on Sept 22

grammes that have promised a lot but delivered little. Prabowo has compounded problems that have been building up for many years through his management style and his questionable appointment of several Cabinet ministers and officials to oversee the economy.

All this said, a key question is whether the riots were spontaneous or organised. They were hybrid. Evidence shows that, in the initial stage, the masses took to the streets emotionally and spontaneously, with digital mobilisation facilitating their gatherings. However, in several cities, such as Makassar and Pontianak, attacks on state buildings took place systematically, with logistics in the form of tyres and petrol appearing to have been provided. In other words, elite actors working behind screens rode on the people’s spontaneity.

The military’s role

Another development leading to the riots that could have caught the President off guard is the degree of popular apprehension over the increasing role of the military in civilian life, which incidentally pits it against the police. Interestingly, the “17 + 8 People’s Demands” formulated during the unrest — the 17 being short-term measures and the eight being long-term reforms — begin with a call on President Prabowo to withdraw the military from civilian security and go on to demand that it return to the barracks, do not take over the police’s duties and do not enter civilian spaces “during the democracy crisis”.

Why this angst? It is because in August, Prabowo, a former general who was once son-in-law of the deposed dictator Suharto, created more than 20 regional commands for the army, navy and air force in the largest reorganisation since President Suharto’s time, when the military maintained an extensive territorial network that was active in every province. Prabowo’s massive restructuring of the Indonesian military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* or TNI) caused observers to warn not only about inefficiency in using the defence budget but also growing military intervention in civic spaces.

The reorganisation came in the wake of legal amendments early this year that expanded the TNI’s domestic role, creating alarm in civil society. Crucially, they allowed active military officers to take up key civilian positions without first retiring or resigning from service. Previously, they could serve only in 10 official institutions, mainly those related to security and defence. The amendments not only increased that number but controversially included the Attorney-General’s Office, surely a key civilian institution.

The expansion revived memories of unhappy times during Suharto’s New Order regime,

when military officers occupied sensitive government positions under the *dwifungsi* (or dual function) doctrine. That practice was abolished as a result of reforms in 1998, when Suharto was overthrown by the collapse of Indonesia’s political economy in the Asian economic crisis. *Dwifungsi*’s possible reincarnation has created insistent concerns that military interference in civil affairs will repeat an era of abuses and impunity. The move has also interrupted the trust that the public has invested in the armed forces since reforms in 1998 that separated military and police functions and removed the military from political and business affairs.

Clearly, Indonesians have no interest in returning to a recent era of their national history when the military’s mandate of ensuring external security translated into the unwanted provision of internal insecurity, a condition marked by the suppression of political dissent and the corrosion of the civic sphere.

Foreign front

In the Suharto period, Indonesia fitted into a postcolonial paradigm in which states manufacture internal threats to justify militarisation that serves the needs of regime survival masquerading as order. In that paradigm, national security becomes an instrument of social control and not the defence of sovereignty, which should be its real purpose. As an observer in another Southeast Asian country put it once in the context of periodic coups, the military had turned from being a bastion of external security into becoming a source of internal insecurity.

The question is whether today’s Indonesia will conjure up threats whose negation requires the militarisation of public life. Also, will it expand its reach in Southeast Asia through an astonishing military acquisitions programme?

A report in April this year put it thus: “Jakarta’s order book is eye-catching. At the top of the list are 42 Rafale multi-role combat aircraft (the country’s largest ever arms purchase), two Scorpene submarines, offshore patrol vessels from Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri, five Super Hercules transport aircraft, two A400M transport and aerial refuelling aircraft, anti-ship missiles and a new radar system for the archipelago.” There are also contracts for 48 Turkish KAN fighter jets, plans to buy US F-15EX jets and the potential acquisition of Chinese J-10 aircraft, as well as other naval and air assets. Indonesia has also become the first Southeast Asian nation to deploy a modern tactical ballistic missile system that will enhance its short-range battlefield capabilities: the KHAN missile that has a range of up to 280km. These are impressive acquisitions, to say the least.

Now, Indonesia is the region’s largest country by virtue of its geographical size, population, economy and military power. According to the 2025 *Global Firepower* ranking, Indonesia has the most powerful military in Southeast Asia and comes in 13th among more than 145 countries evaluated globally. The TNI is described as a perennial Top 15 defence power which keeps the country well ahead of its regional peers because of its large manpower base, diverse arsenal and growing modernisation programmes. Indonesia is by no means a militarily threatened country in Southeast Asia.

Prabowo appears to think otherwise. When he said recently that a “big nation like us needs a strong military”, he forgot to add that Indonesia already has that military. Indonesia’s closest peer is Vietnam, ranked in the 2025 *Global Firepower* report as the world’s 23rd most powerful military force and second in Southeast Asia. What is noteworthy is the difference between the global credentials of Indonesia (13th) and Vietnam (23rd).

Still, Indonesia seeks to reposition itself regionally by invoking wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which have no conceivable impact on the archipelagic nation’s strategic position in Southeast Asia. As for Asia at large, no degree of Indonesian militarisation is likely to make a significant difference to the balance of power between the United States and China, no matter to which side Indonesia ultimately tilts.

So, then, what is Jakarta’s objective? Is it to assert Indonesian primacy over maritime Southeast Asia, its natural geographical orbit? If so, the entire region would have to prepare for an arms race that would involve Vietnam, which has its own historical claims to the leadership of continental Southeast Asia.

I am not doubting Indonesia’s peaceful goals, but the first lesson provided by the strategic calculus of world affairs is that capabilities produce intentions. As military capabilities grow, political intentions change. They have to. What results is the security dilemma: Any increase in the net security of a country produces fears of decreasing security in other countries, particularly weaker neighbours. And what follows is an arms race, where affected nations try to catch up with the capabilities of the country that disturbed the previous equilibrium.

Prabowo is powerful enough to take Indonesia on a different path — back to the future. President Suharto had many faults, but not a lack of patriotism. He could have continued with his predecessor, President Sukarno’s revanchist policies, which included, prominently, the declaration of *konfrontasi* (confrontation) against Malaysia and Singapore. President Suharto did not do so. Instead, he reversed the course of Southeast Asian history by making Indonesia embark on a new path that rejected regional hegemony and instead promoted the common interests of Southeast Asia through Asean.

At least in foreign policy, Prabowo would do well to emulate Suharto’s vision of Indonesia as a natural regional leader, which does not have to increase and display its military might because it is a natural leader after all.

The choice is Prabowo’s. The results will be felt by all. ■

The writer is the founder and CEO of Pereira International, a Singapore-based political and strategic consultancy. An award-winning journalist and a graduate alumnus of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, he is also a member of the Board of International Councillors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC