

Jokowi on transforming Indonesia: Fulfilling the people's mandate

In a wide-ranging interview last month, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo spoke about his priorities and the motivations behind signature policies such as infrastructure building and labour law reforms. He also talked about how Jakarta manages Sino-US rivalry. Here's the transcript of the interview.

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Q Since our last meeting in 2013, you have won two presidential elections. When I travelled around with you in Jakarta in December 2013, one thing I remember very well was the enthusiastic support you received from ordinary Indonesians wherever you went. I would argue this is partly because you have demonstrated a clear commitment to poverty alleviation and providing access to education and health care for the poor and low-income groups. What drives you to help them?

A I'm an ordinary person. The interests of the people will always be my No. 1 priority. As President, my focus has been on two major issues.

First, as I think you know already, is infrastructure deployment. This was the main concern of my first term. Second, human resources development. This is the focus of my second term. I've tried to ensure both infrastructure and soft infrastructure can grow together in Indonesia. I also tried to shift from Java-centric development to make it more Indonesia-centric.

As you know, we have 17,000 islands, so development cannot only be focused on Java. I want to build things for both villages and cities, from the east to the west. I want all Indonesians to have equal access to healthcare and education. For example, we started this five years ago (Note: while displaying a card). This is what we call a "Kartu Indonesia Sehat", an Indonesia Healthcare Card. I gave this to 96 million people. And then we have what we call the "Kartu Indonesia Pintar", the "Indonesia Smart Card". We gave this to 10 million poor students. I want all Indonesians to prosper equally.

Q Another thing I remember when I saw you in December 2013 was an uncompleted highway we visited and how you subsequently completed it. Not many leaders have emphasised hard infrastructure like you have. Why is it so important to you?

A Without good infrastructure, it will be hard for Indonesian products to compete with other countries. Also, infrastructure must be developed to ensure that development reaches all corners of Indonesia. We must ensure sustainable economic growth. It's not only about building roads, ports and airports. It is about building the whole nation. Infrastructure to me also means building civilisation and culture. It means increasing national competitiveness. It means equity and social justice, uniting the Indonesian nation from Sabang to Merauke.

We are working to connect our economic hubs, thereby improving the people's economy, especially for farmers and fishermen. And investors have responded positively to our efforts. In the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings, Indonesia's standing has increased significantly from 120 in 2014, to 73 in 2019.

Also, for the first time since 1997, international rating agencies have acknowledged Indonesia's sovereign credit rating as



INFRASTRUCTURE Workers on a hydraulic mobile platform at a work site to build the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in West Java, Indonesia. For President Joko Widodo, infrastructure must be developed to ensure that development reaches all corners of Indonesia. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



ENVIRONMENT Students preparing to plant mangroves in Aceh province. Besides economic development, protecting the environment is also important, says Mr Jokowi. Development must be done in a sustainable manner so the future generations can enjoy both nature and development. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

"investment grade". This is very important, because we want to build the trust of both international investors and our own people.

Q Are you happy with the level of foreign investment that has come in?

A I am. But I always tell my ministers: you must bring more investment to Indonesia. To build industries and factories, to create jobs. The last point is very important.

Q You've not hesitated to look for new market opportunities. One new market opportunity that has emerged for Indonesia is the halal market. What are your thoughts on this?

A The halal market has huge global potential. As the largest Muslim majority country, Indonesia must not only be a consumer. We have the potential to be a supplier for the global halal market. That is why we are now preparing infrastructure to support our entry, including by setting up a bank for funding and capacity-building for halal products. Indonesia shariah banking services is progressing, both for our state-owned and private banks. And as the global Muslim population continues to grow, and Muslim-majority countries become more prosperous, there will be more demand for halal products. Indonesia must be ready for this.

Q There's always tension between promoting economic growth and taking care of the environment. How do you resolve this?

A Life is about balance. Economic development is important. But protecting the environment is also

equally important. Development must be done in a sustainable manner so that the future generations can enjoy both nature and development.

Indonesia also doesn't want to be stuck in rhetorical arguments when discussing environment or climate issues. We have chosen to work to fulfil our commitments. This will benefit the people of Indonesia and the world.

For example, we worked hard to reduce forest fires. In 2020, forest fires were brought down by 82 per cent compared to the previous year. We worked hard at this, without fanfare or rhetoric.

REDUCING FOREST FIRES

Q What is the one most important thing you did to reduce forest fires? What was the most important factor?

A Participation by the people and local government was crucial. We were able to coordinate their efforts with the central government. We want to plant and rehabilitate mangrove forests. Our target is 630,000 hectares. Mangrove forests can absorb four times the emissions as compared with normal forests. Indonesia has the largest mangrove forests. We have 3.36 million ha, the biggest in the world.

Q Your move to end the fuel subsidies on petrol as well as to reform labour laws were politically contentious. What gave you the courage to carry out these unpopular initiatives?

A I always put the interests of the people first. This often means making tough decisions. But these will improve things in the long run. Reform is not an option, but a necessity. I chose to reallocate the

funds saved from oil subsidies to support more profitable programmes, such as infrastructure development. This was a better choice in the long run because it will stimulate the economy and create more jobs.

Another example is the Omnibus Law for Job Creation. When I asked Parliament to approve it, students protested against the Bill. But it was necessary. The Omnibus Law has amended over 70 overlapping regulations. It has made the business and investment process in Indonesia much simpler and faster. Without such a breakthrough, Indonesia won't be able to compete with other countries.

Q I know you've been a champion of Pancasila, Indonesia's state ideology. It is a strong pillar which enabled the founding fathers of Indonesia to keep the country together. But the challenge in many countries today, including Indonesia, is the rise of religious extremism. How have you met this challenge? How do you hope to safeguard Pancasila? How do you explain the relevance of Pancasila to the young people?

A Indonesia was born as a diverse nation. Our founding fathers understood this. Indonesia's diversity is a blessing and an asset that must be preserved. Therefore, Indonesia is fortunate to have Pancasila as its state ideology and to have religious organisations that accept diversity. The government, together with the people of Indonesia will maintain our diversity and respect it.

We always explain to the young the importance of Pancasila. We have 714 ethnic groups and 1,300 local languages. Every year, during our Independence Day

celebrations, I ask all Indonesians to wear local traditional costumes, from all the different ethnicities, so that the young know how diverse we are.

US-CHINA RIVALRY

Q The world is worried about the growing geopolitical contest between the United States and China. I've written a book, *Has China Won?* on the subject. All South-east Asia, including Indonesia, will be affected by this contest. Most countries in the world want to be good friends with both China and the US. What advice would you give to the leaders of the US and China on how they should respect the wishes and interests of other countries in this contest? How do you explain to them that we don't want to choose either China or the US?

A Both China and the US are two good friends of Indonesia. Indonesia wants a mutually beneficial partnership with the two countries based on international law. In addition to our economic partnership, Indonesia's relations with the two countries also aim to contribute to world peace and stability. Perhaps we cannot avoid competition. What we can do is to prevent a zero-sum game. We must promote win-win relations to create cooperation and collaboration, especially in challenging times such as the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The world is facing many difficult challenges besides the pandemic, from ensuring economic recovery to preventing climate change and achieving the sustainable development goals. My question is: Given today's challenging situation, is this the

right time for superpower rivalry? This is my message to all countries. For Indonesia, cooperation is the best option. We are ready to be a part of this.

Q I agree with you entirely. We should focus on common challenges like Covid-19 and climate change. But difficulties still arise. For instance, the US says that if you buy Huawei phones, you are no friend of theirs. How do you handle conundrums like this, such as Huawei or military cooperation?

A For Indonesia, it's not difficult. As I said, China and US are good friends of Indonesia. I haven't heard from the US about Huawei. As for China, they come to Indonesia, and they ask us to let them build industries and factories. Why hasn't the US come to invest in factories?

CHALLENGES FOR ASEAN

Q When Asean was founded in 1967, few expected it to survive and thrive. Instead, it has emerged as the second most successful regional organisation in the world, after the European Union. We all know that Indonesia is the largest and most populous Asean country. It has played a major role in Asean's success. In my book, *The Asean Miracle*, I wrote about how instead of trying to dominate Asean, it has successfully injected the cultures of "musyawarah" and "mufakat", of consultation and consensus, into the Asean Way. This is one of the key reasons for Asean success over the years. Right now, everyone says that Asean is facing a challenging time. What do you see as the key challenges facing Asean? How should Asean deal with them?

A Asean has contributed greatly to the development of stability, peace and prosperity in South-east Asia. Thanks to Asean, there are no open conflicts in the region, unlike elsewhere. It's also thanks to Asean that its countries have become centres for global economic growth. Building a community is not easy. It will be achieved only if all Asean nations hold fast to the principles of the Asean Charter. Asean has no option other than staying solid and united. If Asean can maintain its unity, then Asean will maintain its centrality.

By maintaining its centrality, Asean will continue to play its role as the locomotive for peace and stability in the region.

Going forward, the challenges will not grow smaller. Asean must be able to fulfil the wishes of its people. It must also be able to respond to the changing path of the world faster. It must work hard to maintain its relevance, including looking to the Indo-Pacific as a vehicle to respond to major power rivalry. Asean must be able to engage its partners to build a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region together.

Q The Asean vision of the Indo-Pacific is inclusive. There is an American version of the Indo-Pacific which wants to exclude China. "Indo-Pacific" itself is an unusual word. What other key messages would you like to convey to the world?

A In Indonesia, we have what we call "consensus democracy". Democracy in Indonesia is not like democracy in the US or Europe. It is different. When we have different opinions, we talk together and find a solution together.

Q The early history of Indonesia was shaped by two long-serving Presidents, Sukarno and Suharto. Sukarno was known for his skilful nation-building efforts. Suharto was known for his record of economic development. When future historians write about President Joko Widodo, what will they highlight as your legacy? What would you like your presidency to be remembered for?

A You need to ask the people of Indonesia about all that. I'm only fulfilling the mandate they gave me.

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