Foreign policy implications of Jakarta’s election

The Jakarta gubernatorial election is now mercifully over, although Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama remains behind bars under trumped-up charges. But politically driven sectarian mobilization and attacks against minorities will have long-lasting consequences.

Aside from the social and political implications others have noted, the Jakarta election also affects Indonesia’s foreign policy.

First, the sectarian mobilization and the criminalization of politics before, during and after the campaign could undermine Indonesia’s regional and global standing. They certainly bring into question Indonesia’s credentials of combining democratic stability with a moderate and tolerant brand of Islam.

This model of a “democratic, moderate Islam” has been among Indonesia’s sources of soft power, which Joseph Nye defines as a country’s ability to obtain international political outcomes because other countries want to follow it, admire its values and emulate its example. Certainly, Jakarta’s success with the ASEAN Political Security Community project, for example, or the Bali Democracy Forum, rested on these soft power assumptions built around the model.

Indeed, studies examining Indonesia’s rising regional and global profile under the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration (2004 to 2014) underlined the importance of continuing the country’s democratic consolidation process while containing sectarian and centrifugal forces that almost tore it apart following the end of authoritarian rule.

That those same destructive forces are now manipulated in such a high-profile and crass manner in perhaps one of the most consequential local elections will leave a scorching impression among our regional neighbors and global friends.

Some might argue that their concerns are inappropriate as the election is part of Indonesia’s “internal affairs.” Given Indonesia’s economic promise and geopolitical significance, others might say, “Who cares what the world thinks of a single local election?”

But one should not forget that Indonesia’s standing as a responsible regional leader has been one of the prerequisites for broader economic and financial engagements, including foreign investments. In other words, the Jakarta election’s reputational cost for the country’s foreign policy is not merely abstract as it could shape our prosperity as well.

The Jakarta election, therefore, might have a repellent or “anti-soft power” effect of portraying Indonesia as the model the rest of the world should not follow when seeking to balance and align a democratic political system with religious tolerance. At the very least, we might expect the next Bali Democracy Forum, or World Culture Forum, to be as hollow as our next speech claiming Indonesia’s “middle-path” Islam should be a global beacon.

Second, beyond the soft power effect, sectarian mobilization, mob politics and thuggery, as well as the political manipulation of religious extremists, have also led to serious questions in the region about the democratic durability of the Indonesian state.

Some are worried that Indonesia could either become a failed state, an Islamic one, or both. In the words of one senior former regional official, Indonesia might be “lurching into the sort of extreme religious nationalism that we’re seeing elsewhere in the world.”

While fears of Indonesia becoming an Islamic state are not yet warranted, perception is often more powerful in international politics than nuanced domestic realities. The Jakarta election, in that sense, was sufficiently worrisome that it generated uncertainty over Indonesia’s strategic trajectory.

Given the strategic vacuum unfolding in the Indo-Pacific, with the United States seemingly self-abdicating its role while China is seemingly unsure of its great power responsibilities, the primacy of domestic politics does not serve Indonesia’s strategic position well. After all, as a regional leader, Indonesia cannot afford to inject another dose of strategic uncertainty.

Finally, beyond regional uncertainty, the Jakarta election also has implications for Indonesia’s strategic bilateral relationships with possibly wide-ranging effects. The revived anti-Chinese-Indonesian rhetoric, for example, raised questions in China about the viability and political risk of expanding trade, businesses and investment opportunities in Indonesia.

This concern complicates the already intricate balancing act in which Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s administration has been engaging — between ensuring support for infrastructure projects and being painted as or associated with “communism” and “foreign interests.”

Furthermore, the rise of religious extremists as “veto players” in national politics have also led to concerns in Washington, Canberra, Singapore and elsewhere about Jakarta’s capacity and political will to tackle the growing threat of the Islamic State (IS) movement. After all, some counterterrorism measures could be portrayed by extremist groups as “anti-Islam,” which puts Jokowi in a more difficult position domestically at a time when Indonesia needs unwavering support from and strong cooperation with our regional partners and friends.

Taken as a whole, the Jakarta election has done more harm than good for Indonesia’s foreign policy. While Jokowi may continue his devil-may-care-attitude over foreign policy, at some point, he needs to realize that foreign policy has a way of disrupting domestic politics, too.

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