

Political crisis in Jakarta over national police chief

By John Roberts
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As Indonesian President Joko Widodo finished his first 100 days in office, he has found himself in a vitriolic conflict over his nomination for the post of national police chief. The public wrangling is not so far with the parliamentary opposition, but with his own party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), and its leader and former president, Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Widodo announced the appointment of Police General Budi Gunawan to the powerful position of national police chief on January 9. The decision was clearly in line with Megawati's wishes as Budi is politically close to her having served as her adjutant during her terms as vice president and president between 1999 and 2004.

Budi's appointment was formally approved by the National Police Commission. However, within days, the country's anti-corruption watchdog—the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)—announced that Budi had been under investigation since July over suspicious bank accounts and money laundering. He has denied the charges and launched a court case to clear his name.

The Indonesian parliament endorsed Budi as national police chief on January 16 despite the corruption allegation and growing public criticism of the appointment. The lower house of parliament is dominated by a coalition led by former Suharto-era general Prabowo Subianto, who was Widodo's main rival in last year's bitterly contested presidential election. A number of media pundits have speculated that Prabowo was seeking to encourage a split between Widodo and Megawati.

The following day, Widodo temporarily suspended Budi's appointment and established an 11-member panel to advise him on the question. Widodo faces a dilemma. If he proceeds with the appointment, his

efforts to promote himself as an outsider intent on rooting out corruption in the widely despised Jakarta establishment will be tarnished. However, if he refuses to install Budi, he risks a widening rift with Megawati and the PDI-P undermining his political base of support.

The crisis has been compounded by what amounts to a contest of police against the KPK. On January 23, police arrested deputy KPK commissioner Bambang Widjojanto on a dubious charge of allegedly ordering a witness to commit perjury in a Constitutional Court case in 2010. Bambang subsequently resigned from the commission. The police then launched investigations against three more of the five-member commission. The allegations against the KPK officials appear to have originated from within the PDI-P or persons associated with the party.

The police, which functioned for three decades as one of the arms of repression of the Suharto dictatorship, are notorious for corruption and hostile to any attempt to curb their powers and hold them accountable. The KPK was established by Widodo's predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2002 in order to give some credibility to his claims to be fighting corruption. It has made no serious inroads into Indonesia's ubiquitous corruption but its cases have previously brought it into conflict with the police.

Widodo is yet to make any decision on Budi's appointment and initially at least attempted to keep out of the confrontation between the police and the KPK, saying only that they were both important state institutions. The president's 11-person panel recommended on January 28 that Budi be dumped. A week later, Widodo left for state visits to Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines and only arrived back in Jakarta on Monday.

Megawati and her close PDI-P supporters have reacted furiously to Widodo's handling of the affair. The *Jakarta Post* reported on January 27 that Megawati had gathered her "inner circle" at her official residence in Central Jakarta and demanded they fight for the installation of Budi. She told the gathering that PDI-P parliamentarians might have to withdraw their support for the Widodo presidency.

On February 3, Megawati personally attended a meeting of leaders of the pro-government coalition parties. According to Widodo's vice president Jusuf Kalla, the fate of Budi was discussed with a proposal to demand his immediate installation as police chief. Megawati has also given the green light for open political attacks on Widodo.

Most prominent is senior PDI-P parliamentarian Effendi Simbolon, who has threatened to impeach Widodo for failing to proceed with an appointment that has been approved by parliament. At this stage, an impeachment appears highly unlikely unless the Prabowo coalition were to support it.

The *Jakarta Globe* on February 2 reported that Effendi had accused three of Widodo's close aides of isolating the president from the PDI-P. The newspaper reported that some of the president's critics have blamed the same inner circle for undermining the PDI-P by pushing Widodo to carry out highly unpopular pro-market measures. Widodo's ending of fuel price subsidies last year triggered widespread public opposition.

As the criticisms of economic policy demonstrate, the political instability in Jakarta is bound up with broader issues than Budi's appointment as national police chief. The Indonesian economy is slowing with the latest figures showing a growth rate of 5.02 percent for 2014, the lowest level in five years and well below the government's targets. Declining economic fortunes are contributing to the political factional infighting.

Widodo has secured some support from unusual quarters. On January 28, Prabowo met with Widodo for closed door talks. Prabowo later declared that any decision Widodo made in relation to the national police chief would be in the national interest. The opposition coalition stands to gain from the crisis whatever the outcome.

Last Friday the largest demonstration yet in support of the KPK took place outside its offices when it was

rumoured that police were about to raid the KPK building as part of their hunt for evidence against its commissioners. This week Widodo ordered the national police to investigate death threats made against KPK officials.

Widodo has already been criticised by human rights organisations for not immediately dumping Budi and failing to adequately protect the KPK. Civil Society Coalition member Usman Hamid told the *Jakarta Post*: "In our opinion, there has never been a case where the credibility of a president has dropped to the level that he is at right now. His sluggishness in making any decision has turned all state institutions into laughing stocks."

According to a Reuters report today, Widodo intends to choose another candidate for national police chief. "Budi Gunawan will not be police chief, the president has already decided," one senior presidential palace official told the newsagency.

Whether that is the case or not, the affair has not only exposed Widodo's political vulnerability as well as his posturing during the election campaign as a "man of the people" and anti-corruption fighter. Powerful political forces including Megawati and Prabowo plucked Widodo from obscurity and fashioned him into a convenient tool for interests of the country's wealthy elites.

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