

Prabowo Subianto's Apparent Election in Indonesia: Considerations for Congress

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On February 14, 2024, Indonesians voted in presidential, parliamentary, and local elections—the world's largest one-day democratic exercise. Early results suggest Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, ex-son-in-law of Indonesia's former authoritarian president Suharto and an alleged human rights violator, [has won Indonesia's presidency](#). If these [unofficial results](#) hold, he would be sworn in, in October, for a five-year term.

Background

With over 279 million citizens, Indonesia is the most populous country in Southeast Asia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, the world's third-largest democracy, and a leader in regional organizations. It is the world's 16th-largest economy and a major producer of natural gas, oil, and critical minerals. It straddles vital sea lanes and borders the Strait of Malacca as well as the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

The U.S.-Indonesia relationship has broadened over the past two decades, as Indonesia has become a robust democracy and improved its record on human rights and accountability, and as the United States has focused on the Indo-Pacific as [vital to U.S. security and prosperity and looked to partners like Indonesia to help promote a “free and open” region](#). U.S.-Indonesia relations include close military and counterterrorism cooperation, as well as economic, educational, environmental, and energy programs. The two governments elevated the [Comprehensive Partnership](#) they announced in 2010 to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in 2023, and conduct around 170 security engagements annually, including on maritime security and combatting terrorism. This represents a sharp change from the early 2000s, when U.S. policies enacted in response to Indonesian armed forces' involvement in human rights violations severely limited bilateral engagements.

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Implications for Issues Facing Congress

Prabowo's apparent election raises questions about Indonesia's political direction and U.S.-Indonesia relations. For Congress, it raises questions about how the United States will or should engage with a leader whom human rights groups have accused of human rights abuses, and who may have authoritarian leanings that could challenge U.S. interests in protecting democratic institutions, promoting religious tolerance and the rule of law, and trade and investment liberalization.

Prabowo's [economic rhetoric](#) is nationalistic, supporting efforts to boost domestic industry and value-added in key sectors such as agriculture and minerals, including by restricting exports and possibly weakening environmental protections. Some Members of Congress [have expressed concern](#) with reported Biden Administration efforts to pursue a critical minerals trade agreement with Indonesia, citing concerns about labor, safety, and human rights standards.

Congress also faces consideration of the appropriate levels of security assistance to Indonesia under Prabowo. In 1999, Congress suspended all International Military Education and Training programs with Indonesia after its military, particularly the special forces—which Prabowo headed at the time—and militia proxies killed over 1,000 in Timor-Leste. Prabowo has said in previous campaigns that [Indonesia doesn't need a democratic system](#). The United States barred him from entering for nearly two decades due to allegations of [human rights violations](#).

Who Is Prabowo Subianto?

Prabowo, age 72, has sought to lead Indonesia for decades, and reinvented himself several times as part of that effort. He was born into an elite, Muslim, Javanese family. His father served in the cabinets of both Indonesia's founder, President Sukarno (in office 1945-1967), and President Suharto (in office 1968-1998), and was a supporter of Suharto's "New Order," which sought to boost economic development by imposing political order, limiting public participation in politics, and establishing a strong political role for the military.

Prabowo married Suharto's second daughter (they divorced in 1998), and Suharto appointed him commander of the special forces and the Strategic Reserve Command. After widespread civil unrest—which [Prabowo worked to suppress](#)—led to Suharto's ouster and the restoration of democracy in 1998, Prabowo left the army and entered politics. After failing to win the nomination of Suharto's party for President in 2004, he formed a new party, the right-wing [Gerindra Party](#), and unsuccessfully ran again in 2009.

President Widodo was Indonesia's first elected president with neither a military nor an elite background. Prabowo ran against Widodo in 2014 and 2019, highlighting his military background in 2014, and in 2019 [highlighting his support for Islamist groups](#) protesting the participation of non-Muslims in politics. In this year's polls, Prabowo [projected a secular, reformist image](#) aimed at appealing to the term-limited Widodo's backers. Prabowo chose as his Vice President Widodo's eldest son.

Implications for Governance in Indonesia

Prabowo's history of rebranding himself to appeal to voters raises questions about how he intends to govern. His current partnership with Widodo suggests his [ruling coalition](#) may continue many of Widodo's policies, including efforts to attract foreign investment. Prabowo also [has made populist promises](#), including offering free milk and student lunches.

Some Indonesians [express concern](#) that Indonesia's democratic transformation—[generally considered to be a successful democratic model](#)—may face setbacks, given Prabowo's history and the fact that both he and his vice president emerged from political dynasties.

Implications for Indonesia's Foreign Policy and Regional Affairs

Prabowo's probable impact on Indonesia's foreign policy and human rights is unclear. Indonesia's foreign policy is guided by the country's role as a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, and successive Indonesian governments have resisted aligning too closely with the United States or others, including the People's Republic of China (PRC). While Indonesia has welcomed deeper cooperation with the United States, these developments have been gradual. Indonesia is a major destination for PRC investment, including in [critical minerals](#), but it has been vocal in its concerns about PRC assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea, particularly around Indonesia's potentially energy-rich Natuna Islands.

Prabowo, with his military background and reportedly temperamental nature, could be more vocal in asserting Indonesia's sovereignty. Although he helped deepen U.S.-Indonesia security relations during his five years as Defense Minister, including by signing a [Defense Cooperation Arrangement](#) in 2023, he may resist closer ties. He also could be more resistant to criticism of Indonesia's human rights, environmental record, or other government policies he perceives as linked to Indonesian sovereignty, such as government restrictions on [palm oil exports](#) and trade in [key sectors such as critical minerals](#).

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