



Indonesian presidential candidates **Joko Widodo (left)** and **Prabowo Subianto** in a final live debate on Saturday. The two have spelled out what they hope to see for the **future of Indonesia**, but their campaigns have rested on the **static notion** that there is a singular Indonesian republic to speak of in the first place.

The decisive moment

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:

Whichever way it goes, Indonesia will emerge a very different country in its wake

THIS week, Indonesians will be determining the fate of their country for the next five years. Unlike previous elections where there were more presidential contenders, this time round the fact that only two candidates are contesting head-to-head against each other have made the contest even more intense, bitter and at times confrontational.

As was said by many other analysts, whichever way the elections go, Indonesia will emerge a very different country in its wake.

The stakes at this election are high, perhaps higher than at any other election so far. For it comes a decade and a half after authoritarian rule and after a long process of internal introspection and revision of the country's history, politics and institutions.

It comes at a time when Indonesia's decentralisation process has led to the emergence of a poly-centred Indonesia where local provincial power can almost rival that of the capital; when local politics has also fed into local regional and communal-ethnic aspirations; and when Indonesia's younger

generation is poised on the verge of economic take-off, driven by middle-class aspirations.

If there is one area of Indonesia that I know rather well by now, it happens to be the university sector where I work and teach on a regular basis. Indonesia's higher education sector has progressed tremendously over the past 15 years, and it remains the country that I pin my hopes on when we discuss the topic of educational reform in the Asean region.

At the state Islamic Universities (UIN) that I have visited, worked with and lectured in, I have been impressed by the level of critical thinking, open discussion and desire for debate that I have not witnessed elsewhere in the developing post-colonial world.

Indonesia's educational reforms have gone a long way in opening up the minds of Indonesia's younger generation, and it is here, in the universities of the country, that the battle for hearts and minds has really been waged.

One hopes that the elections will result in a government that places value on such institutions, and which sees that Indonesia's political stability, maturity and future progress depends on the continued development and expansion of such sectors that are so crucial to the nation's well-being in the long run.

Another domain I have studied closely is the emergence of local provincial power centres across the country, as

Indonesia moved from a highly centralised and personalised form of rule to a more decentralised one. But this has also fuelled local ethnic sentiments at the provincial level, with other non-Javanese communities feeling more assertive in their demand for recognition and self-control, at times verging on demands for autonomy.

Should this trend continue, there is every likelihood that local power will

become more important that central power, evidenced through the rise of family-based oligarchies that now rule and dominate almost every province and kabupaten across Indonesia — a worrying sign for some as it signals the loss of central control and the potential emergence of states within states in Indonesia.

Bluster and rhetoric aside, these are some of the real structural and institutional issues that need to be addressed as Indonesians head to the presidential polls this Wednesday.

The two prospective candidates have spelled out what

they hope to see for the future of Indonesia, but their campaigns have rested on the static notion that there is a singular Indonesian republic to speak of in the first place. But Indonesia is moving in many different directions at the same time, and the complexity of this vast nation-state will not abate or diminish despite the inclusive language of its politicians vying for power.



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