



Indonesians have accepted Joko Widodo (centre) as their **duly elected president** after last month's election. AP pic

Normality sets in

POST-ELECTIONS:

Indonesians have come to accept the results, for the demands and challenges that face the country are many

IN the days and weeks leading up to the presidential elections in Indonesia, and in its immediate aftermath, there was some speculation about how the country might once again be visited by the blight of communal violence and sectarian conflict.

Though some of these fears were not entirely unjustified — as evidenced by the sudden re-appearance of radical right-wing groups that were showing their support for one candidate in particular — they were alarmist in tone; and it turns out that they were also unwarranted.

Days and weeks have passed since, and despite the fact that the losing candidate has voiced his objection to the outcome of the result, it seems that a new normality is about to settle in the country. Immediately after the results were announced, foreign heads of state began to send their messages of congratulations to the newly-elected team of Joko Widodo (Jokowi)-Jusuf Kalla. It seems as if in the heated climate of international politics today, the governments of the world are quite happy and content with the fact that this was one election that did not lead to a massive eruption of violence in society afterwards.

For all intents and purposes, the Jokowi-Kalla team will be the presidential-vice-presidential team that will lead and govern Indonesia for the

years to come. Indonesians have come to accept that, and in many respects they have no alternatives but to do so for the pressing demands and challenges that face that country are many. Already overtures have been made to neighbouring countries and the leaders-to-be have sounded out the issues that they need to address: The role of China in Southeast Asia, Indonesia's logistical problems, dealing with public health and education, etc. These are issues that are real and practical in nature, where bluster and rhetoric will have little to add to the debate.

For Indonesians and other communities in the Asean region, however, the developments we see in the country now are of long-term significance. Indonesia once captured the world's headlines for all the wrong reasons, and was seen and cast as a state on the verge of economic collapse and political anarchy. That such a hotly-contested and divisive election campaign could have been waged without any significant threat to public order is already an accomplishment in itself; and it signals a positive step not only for Indonesia but for the rest of the region as well.

In the meantime the task of analysts at the moment is to seek and identify the salient features of the new normality that is slowly taking root in Indonesia, and some factors have already presented themselves as obvious:

For starters, the election campaign has shown that coalition politics is likely to remain the norm in Indonesia for years to come, and that the era of great one-party leadership is truly over. But this also means that flexibility and pragmatism will be the defining features of all Indonesian parties, and that the electorate (as well as the international community)

should come to expect that Indonesian party-politics will remain fluid and shifting in nature.

Secondly, it means that the possibility of independent politics — be it in terms of independent candidates or independent parties — is also over, for the political economy of Indonesian populist democracy today means that no candidate or party can afford to stand on its own. The financial burden of running parties and campaigns has grown so large and unwieldy, and the cost of failure too high, that we are not likely to hear independent political voices in Indonesia for a long time to come.

Thirdly, the elections have also shown that Indonesia's once-fiercely independent media has finally come under the purview and control of both business and political interests, with TV channels and newspapers openly partisan in their coverage and support. What saves the situation in Indonesia is the fact that there are many channels and newspapers to choose from; but it also means that independent critical voices in the media may grow dimmer and fainter in time to come.

This new normality will solidify and gel into the Indonesian republic that we will be watching in the years to come, and in many ways it marks the next stage of Indonesia's complex evolution. It is too early to suggest if this amounts to a new form of Asean populist democracy in praxis, and whether Indonesia has carved out a mode of modern political life of its own. But it does tell us that Indonesians have made their choice — for better or worse — and that Indonesia's future will be determined by the collective agency of Indonesians themselves.



Farish Noor is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and visiting fellow at ISIS Malaysia