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Is Prabowo's 100-Minister cabinet a step towards autocracy?

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IN BRIEF

Prabowo Subianto has packed over 100 individuals into his presidential cabinet, marking a swift and aggressive consolidation of power. His strategy lies in neutralising opposition and surrounding himself with trusted confidants. But Prabowo's expansive cabinet risks undermining Indonesia's democratic trajectory, fostering a culture based on loyalty over competence and potentially endangering crucial checks and balances needed for democratic governance.

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As he began his presidency, Prabowo Subianto's 'Red and White Cabinet' reveals a swift and aggressive consolidation of power, positioning himself as the dominant political force in the country. With over 100 individuals in top government roles — a '100-minister cabinet' — Prabowo leverages this structure to entrench loyalty, neutralise opposition and tighten his grip on Indonesia's political and government institutions, paving a potential pathway towards autocracy.

Indonesia has not seen a 100-minister cabinet since former president Sukarno. Sukarno's autocratic 'Guided Democracy' prompted a sprawling cabinet to consolidate power, but this political move could not prevent his ultimate downfall. Due to this unsuccessful precedent, Prabowo's strategy raises concerns of repeating autocratic tendencies under the guise of inclusivity and stability.



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With no party commanding a majority, the House of Representative's (DPR) eight factions reflect a fragmented electorate, requiring alliances to

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candidate won the Jakarta gubernatorial election.

Strategic appointments were key to this consolidation. Leaders of major coalition partners were rewarded with powerful coordinating ministerial roles. Portfolios accorded to parties also reflect their strength in parliament. The Golkar Party — the DPR's second-largest faction — was granted numerous portfolios, including prestigious ministries.

Indonesia's vast sociocultural diversity requires adequate representation in the government. Prabowo's cabinet mirrors the nation's mosaic population, with individuals from major religious communities, ethnic groups and regional constituencies. This includes figures from Aceh, Papua, Minahasa, Bali and Chinese-Indonesian communities. Prominent Muslim organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are also well represented, reflecting their enduring influence and ensuring cultural and institutional affiliations are leveraged for political stability. While this inclusivity may be superficial, it bolsters legitimacy and facilitates patronage.

The cabinet recognises the growing role of campaign teams, volunteers and financial backers in Indonesian politics. These groups have been rewarded with ministerial roles to secure their ongoing support. Extra-political party groups could be instrumental in mobilising support in countering oppositions.

Prabowo's reliance on technocrats for crucial portfolios reflects a recognition of Indonesia's complex policy challenges. The economic team, crucial for balancing stability and growth, includes experts like Sri Mulyani Indrawati (finance), Rachmat Pambudy (planning) and Budi Gunadi Sadikin (health). Businessmen-politicians Erick Thohir and Rosan Roeslani manage state enterprises and investments, reflecting strong private-sector ties. Prabowo — like Suharto before — recognises that economic stewardship is pivotal for political success.

Prabowo's inner circle — his so-called 'kitchen cabinet' — is composed of trusted confidants and operatives. Prasetyo Hadi, the Minister for the State Secretariat, is a long-time Gerindra party loyalist who oversaw Prabowo's vast forestry business interests. Sugiono, Prabowo's former long-time aide, is Minister of Foreign Affairs. And Thomas Djiwandono, the President's nephew and Gerindra's treasurer, is Vice-Minister of Finance. While not holding any formal government title, Prabowo's brother — Hashim Djojohadikusumo — wields immense influence over policies and decisions in ways reminiscent of the informal role the first family played in governance during the Suharto era.

The armed forces and security, a personal domain of the president, are managed by trusted comrades such as Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin in Defence and Muhammad Herindra at the State Intelligence Agency. Retired police generals, Budi Gunawan and Tito Karnavian, handle political and security affairs as well as home affairs. Numerous retired flag officers hold strategic posts. Leaders in Indonesia's National Armed Forces and the national police operate under assignments orchestrated by Prabowo to align with his priorities. This deep military involvement consolidates power around the presidency and could weaken civilian oversight — reminiscent of Suharto's time — raising concerns about a drift towards autocratic control.

Prabowo's 100-minister cabinet represents an audacious experiment in governance. Its meticulous construction reflects a balancing act — accommodating political allies, addressing sociocultural sensitivities and ensuring technocratic competence.

But accommodating too many interests might prioritise political expediency over effective governance. More significantly, the massive consolidation of power risks further undermining Indonesia's democratic trajectory. By subsuming opposition voices and distributing patronage broadly, the cabinet erodes the checks and balances essential for a healthy democracy. Overrepresentation of loyalists and political allies undermines the independence of state institutions, fostering a governance culture centred on loyalty over competence. This shift mirrors global patterns where power centralisation has paved the way for autocratic regimes.

The early stages of Prabowo's tenure underscores a troubling trajectory towards centralisation, cloaked under the guise of coalition-building in a fragmented democracy. His 100-minister cabinet, while presenting itself as a testament to political ingenuity, risks dismantling Indonesia's democratic foundations. This ambitious structure consolidates power by rewarding loyalty over dissent, marginalising critical voices and embedding a culture of patronage at the highest levels of government. Far from promoting stability, this experiment may erode the delicate balance of power, setting a precedent that endangers the checks and balances crucial for democratic governance.

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