A Tale of Two Leaders
Narendra Modi and Joko Widodo

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A rarely made, yet revealing, comparison is that between maritime neighbors India and Indonesia. As populous and pluralist democracies, the two nations face similar challenges: cleaning up politics and public life, harnessing their demographic dividend to productive use, fixing creaking infrastructure, and maintaining national ideals of respecting religious freedom.

These myriad parallels were brought into relief by the nearly contemporaneous elections, in mid-2014, of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Indonesian President Joko Widodo. These elections disrupted established political structures by supplanting dynasts—a prominent feature of the region’s electoral landscape—with a new breed of popular leader. Modi and Widodo are outsiders to the traditional sources of political power in their countries. Modi, a veteran politician, rose from the lower rungs of India’s caste and class hierarchies, while Widodo was the son of a carpenter before he became the mayor of Solo, a mid-sized city in central Java.

Both Modi and Widodo faced opponents who were embodiments of the political establishment: Rahul Gandhi, scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family which has led India’s Congress Party since Indian independence, and Prabowo Subianto, a military general and former son-in-law of the Indonesian dictator, Suharto.

The two candidates enjoyed strong grassroots support that sprung, in part, from their anti-corruption crusades and promises of a break from the venal, nepotistic politics of the past. In India, two terms of Congress Party rule under a seemingly lame-duck prime minister, Manmohan Singh, were wracked by large-scale corruption scandals that elicited major civil society protests. In Indonesia, where Suharto-era oligarchs had maintained a stranglehold on power even after the downfall of the dictactor in 1998, members of all the major political parties were accused of graft by an anti-corruption commission.

The calls for change that were the rallying cry of both Modi’s and Widodo’s campaigns were welcomed not only by their electorates, but also by voices around the world.
Foreign media portrayed them as reformers whose elevation to top posts would benefit social equity, businesses, foreign investors, and “democracy” all at once.¹

The sky-high tide of contradictory expectations that attended their elections set Modi and Widodo up to disappoint—and they have. More than a year into their terms, both the Indian Prime Minister and Indonesian President have lost much of their pre-electoral sheen. They preside over stuttering economies and have found it difficult to make bold reforms.

However, the superficial similarities between them should not obscure trenchant differences in temperament, political circumstances, and policy inclinations that could lead to divergent legacies and outcomes for the countries they lead. That the outcomes, so far, are not so different speaks more to the similarities between the countries—the national and global circumstances they face—than to their leaders.

**Leadership Styles in National Context**

Modi is a controlling and combative leader, while Widodo is consensual and conciliatory. In his reign as chief minister of the state of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, the Indian prime minister acquired a reputation for governing with a firm hand, as he pursued an aggressive, pro-business agenda. Since taking charge of the country, he has ensured a concentration of powers in the prime minister’s office (PMO). Cabinet ministers, for example, are left with little elbowroom and must first secure the PMO’s approval before appointing key staff.

Modi was widely described in the Indian media as running a presidential-style campaign for his election, even though India has a parliamentary system of government.² His projection of power is physical. During the campaign, he crisscrossed the country attending thousands of events and used 3D holograms to project his image in places where he could not be present.³ Modi famously remarked that it took a man with a “fifty-six-inch chest,” a reference to his own broad torso, to bring development to the relatively backward parts of India.⁴ When he met with U.S. President Barack Obama in January 2015, Modi wore a suit with pinstripes that spelled out his own name in tiny gold lettering. Because of these tendencies, critics accuse Modi of megalomania.⁵

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In contrast, Widodo is physically slight and unassuming in manner. He tends to eschew the tangible trappings of power like fancy cars and security details. He flew to attend his son’s high school graduation ceremony in Singapore last year in economy class—reasoning that the presidential jet was for official trips only—and lined up for check-in at the airport like any ordinary passenger. As governor of Jakarta (a post he held from 2012 until his election as president), he often walked around public markets to hear people’s concerns first hand, and was known for unexpectedly joining popular city events like rock concerts and marathons.

Modi’s track record suggested he was an economic reformer with capitalist instincts. A known admirer of the Chinese-style of development (he visited China four times as chief minister), his reputation was built in Gujarat where he attracted substantial investments in large manufacturing and power projects. He introduced business-friendly policies aimed at cutting red tape and making land acquisition easier than in other parts of the country. For example, he instituted a “single window” system to facilitate government approvals for corporate projects, which were also a distinguishing feature of China’s Special Economic Zones. He also reduced political interference in public sector companies, enabling many loss-making enterprises like Gujarat State Fertilizers and Chemicals Ltd. to return to profitability. Under Modi, Gujarat enjoyed a double-digit economic growth rate that made the state a favorite with investors.

Unlike the Congress Party’s redistributive economic policies that had dominated independent India’s policy landscape for decades, Modi’s Gujarat model had a distinctive Deng Xiaoping-like quality to it, with an emphasis on trickle-down growth. As one article in the Financial Times described it, Modi’s focus in Gujarat was on increasing the size of the economic pie rather than trying to slice it up fairly.

It is likely that a sizeable chunk of those who voted for Modi as prime minister did so believing that he would scale up his Gujarat model nationwide, bringing about widespread economic development and modernization. Even significant sections of the Muslim community (approximately 14 percent of the Indian population), who have traditionally voted against the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), supported Modi in the election.

Widodo’s reputation derives from his two-term stint as mayor of Solo, during which he was able to transform a crime-ridden city into a center for regional arts and culture. As mayor, he demonstrated strong mediation skills and a consultative approach when he relocated street vendors away from a park in the city center. The vendors had built up a squalid, semi-permanent marketplace that caused major traffic snarls. Spurning

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6 “Indonesian President Flies Economy to Son’s Graduation,” BBC, November 22, 2014.
heavy-handed tactics, Widodo held over fifty-five informal meetings with the street sellers, on occasion squatting on his haunches to talk with them, in order to find a mutually acceptable solution.  

The street vendors eventually agreed to move to an alternative location in exchange for financial incentives as well as the establishment of public transportation links to this new venue. As Jakarta governor, Widodo employed a similar (albeit less successful) approach in encouraging about 500 smallholders at the city’s crowded Tanah Abang market to move it off of the streets.

The Indonesian president’s hallmark approach is therefore patience and dialogue with an aim to develop conciliatory solutions through compromise. Before his election to the top post, the chief beneficiaries of his policies were small and medium enterprises, rather than the kind of big business houses who have been amongst the mainstay of Modi’s support.

Negotiating Pluralism

One of the most significant differences between the Indian and Indonesian leaders is their stance towards their country’s minority communities. Both nations have a high degree of religious pluralism. India is a Hindu-majority country, but the population is comprised of almost as many Muslims as that of Pakistan—175 million—in addition to substantial numbers of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. In Indonesia, around 88 percent of the country’s 250 million-strong population identifies as Muslim, making it home to the largest Islamic population in the world. The state, however, recognizes five other official religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Confucianism. When Widodo ran for governor of Jakarta, he chose Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian, as his running mate. This choice was made more significant by the facts that Basuki is of Chinese descent and that Indonesia has a long history of racially motivated discrimination against its ethnic Chinese community.

During the Presidential campaign, Widodo’s main rival, Subianto, openly played the “Muslim” card, garnering support from the majority of Islamic parties and laying claim to the mantle of “true” Muslim. A misinformation campaign against Widodo insinuated that he was a Chinese Christian, rather than a Javanese Muslim. Nonetheless, the former Jakarta governor remained steadfast in his vocal espousal of pluralism.

However, Modi’s track record with regards to India’s minority communities is bleak. The Indian prime minister is accused of doing little to stop the 2002 religious riots that took place under his watch as chief minister in Gujarat, in which more than 1,000

people—mostly Muslims—were killed. Modi denies this and has been cleared of such allegations by the courts, yet many civil society groups continue to hold him responsible. Modi is also closely affiliated with the right-wing Hindu organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose objective is to make India a Hindu nation.\(^\text{12}\)

Another difference lies in the political circumstances under which the Indian and Indonesian leaders came to power. Under Modi, the BJP won a landslide victory that gave him a clear majority in the lower house of parliament. But Widodo rules as part of a coalition of political parties that does not have a majority in the Indonesian legislature. Moreover, the president’s authority is weak even within his own party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). It is PDI-P chairwoman Megawati Sukarnoputri who controls the party machinery, further constraining Widodo’s room to maneuver.

**Leadership Falls Flat**

In office, neither leader has lived up to expectations. A 50 percent fall in global crude oil prices last year helped ease the fallout of the decision made independently by both Modi and Widodo to cut expensive fuel subsidies. But the manner in which the saved funds will be redirected and spent remains unclear.

Despite figures indicating faster economic growth in India (which was as much the result of a change in the official methodology for calculating output as real growth), corporate results remained dismal through 2015.\(^\text{13}\) Modi has undertaken a few modest reforms, such as relaxing foreign investment rules for insurers, military contractors, and real estate companies. But he has proven surprisingly timid when it comes to big-ticket changes like easing restrictions on the process of land acquisition for infrastructure and industry, instead retreating in the face of sustained opposition. In another example of retreat, Modi cancelled his government’s railway budget proposal to raise suburban fares, following the inevitable protests of commuters.\(^\text{14}\) He has also been unable to push through key legislation to simplify the tax regime by imposing a unified goods and services tax for all of India’s states.

Rather than implementing the bold and decisive changes on the economic front that were expected of him, Modi’s tenure has so far been characterized by the kind of

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\(^{13}\) The new data was the result of India’s Statistics Ministry changing the base year against which calculations are made from 2005 to 2012, as well as switching from a factor cost calculation of GDP based on the costs of production to a market price calculation of GDP based on consumption. See Raymond Zhong, “India Changes GDP calculation Method,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2015.

incrementalism that was the hallmark of the preceding government. His inability to push through daring reforms is partly because the BJP remains in a minority in the upper house of the Indian legislature, the Rajya Sabha, which has blocked several key bills. Since Rajya Sabha members are elected by state assemblies, Modi has also kept a populist eye on the state elections, staying away from policy announcements that might cost the BJP votes in crucial regional assembly polls.\textsuperscript{15}

More predictably, perhaps, the Indonesian president has spent much of his first year in office being ineffective and indecisive. Despite passing a forward-looking budget that increased the allocation for infrastructure by 53 percent, only a fraction of Widodo’s 2015 infrastructure budget has actually been utilized. Bureaucratic wrangling, the lack of strong, strategic direction, and land acquisition issues help explain these delays. A year into Widodo’s term, Indonesia’s economic growth was languishing at a six-year low and the rupiah had fallen heavily.\textsuperscript{16}

Global market turmoil, coupled with China’s slowdown, has not helped Widodo’s cause. But a major problem has been the president’s lack of an autonomous political base. Widodo owes his nomination to the PDI-P, a party to which he is a newcomer. His cabinet is filled with party loyalists who owe him little personal fealty. Some have even undercut the president by announcing unilateral measures such as the abrupt cancellation of thousands of import licenses.

Widodo’s more surprising failure has been in fighting graft. Indonesia’s once powerful anti-corruption commission, the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (KPK), has weakened following a face off earlier this year with the powerful police faction. The showdown was triggered by Widodo’s nomination of a graft suspect as national police chief, purportedly under pressure from his political patron Megawati Sukarnoputri.\textsuperscript{17} Widodo eventually withdrew the nomination, but his popularity has been sliding ever since.

In India, Modi seems to have tackled corruption more effectively. Under his watch, no large-scale scams of the kind that contributed to the downfall of the Congress coalition have come to light. However, the Indian prime minister has not fared well when it comes to upholding India’s secular ethos, where all religious communities are constitutionally equal. Several of the country’s top posts in educational and cultural institutions have been stacked with supporters of the RSS, the Hindu right-wing organization, of which Modi is himself a former member. Attacks against Muslims, including murder, by Hindu mobs on suspicion of their possession or consumption of beef are on the

\textsuperscript{15} “Among several of the factors that forced Modi to withdraw the land bill was a fear of defeat in local elections. See Anita Katyal, “Among the factors that forced Modi to withdraw land bill: fear of defeat in Bihar polls,” Scroll.in, August 5, 2015.


\textsuperscript{17} Wilda Asmirini, “Indonesian parliament approves new police chief after graft scandal,” Reuters, April 16, 2015.
In October 2015, dozens of prominent writers protested what they described as an atmosphere of intolerance under the current government by returning prestigious literary awards presented by the state. The writers’ demonstrations began in response to the murder of M.M. Kalburgi, a well-known scholar who was shot dead in August by suspected Hindu fanatics.

Modi has always had a dual appeal. To different constituencies he has variously represented economic development and religious or social conservatism. Some analysts predicted that once elected Modi would focus on the former, given the electoral divisiveness of the latter. However, it is Modi’s economic policies that have fallen short of expectations, while his commitment to Hindutva (the anti-secular ideology that claims India as country exclusively for Hindus) appears steadfast. In the run-up to November’s elections in the state of Bihar, for example, the BJP openly campaigned on communal issues like beef eating, which has a long history of fanning tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Modi himself told voters that the secular alliance standing against the BJP (which ultimately won in the election) would reduce affirmative action benefits for lower caste Hindus and tribes in favor of “a particular community”—a plain reference to Muslims.

Maintaining their rich and multiple diversities is arguably the greatest achievement of both India and Indonesia. The Indonesian national motto, “multiple but one,” is in essence identical to the Indian catch phrase of “unity in diversity,” and underscores their mutual accomplishment in having woven a unified tapestry out of the fractured ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality of their societies. But ensuring the rights of minorities remains a fraught undertaking for both countries—an endeavor at which Widodo has had more success than Modi.

The Road Ahead

Given the range of interests and political actors that Widodo needs to reconcile, his soft and consensual style, while open to charges of weakness, is a hidden strength. A bridge-builder in such a polity may be more successful in the long run than a centralising strongman. In India, too, there are sharp limits to how a unilateral approach to governance can succeed. The unprecedented support that swept the prime minister to power in 2014, termed the “Modi wave,” is already showing signs of weakening, particularly given that BJP roundly lost the state elections in Delhi and Bihar earlier this year.

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18 Cow slaughter is illegal in many Indian states.
19 James Traub, “Is Modi’s India Safe for Muslims?,” Foreign Policy, August 18, 2015.
There are also some belated indications of the success of the Indonesian president’s approach. In September, a major opposition party, the National Mandate Party, announced it would join the ruling coalition, giving Widodo an additional forty-eight seats in parliament. A cabinet reshuffle in August further strengthened his hand.\textsuperscript{21} Widodo was able to replace certain ministers who had been foisted upon him as political compromises with technocrats and loyalists.

Both the Indian and Indonesian leaders are elected for five-year terms. Consequently, these are still the early days. Widodo may develop stronger control over his government, while Modi may rein in the right-wing fringe amongst his supporters and refocus his agenda on economic development.

India and Indonesia are at an inflection point where tough decisions made by their leaders could translate into long-delayed structural reforms, thereby realizing the potential for much stronger growth than actualized so far. Given the similarity of their challenges, the policies of these temperamentally and ideologically divergent leaders provide an interesting case study. Which country will successfully catapult to the next level of development, and which will fail? What kinds of compromises will prove necessary and which trade-offs will prove disastrous? The answers to these questions will yield significant insights in the coming years.

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\textsuperscript{21} Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Does Indonesia’s Cabinet Reshuffle Mean?,” \textit{The Diplomat}, August 13, 2015.