

Book Review: Mietzner, M. (2026). *Ruling Indonesia. Jokowi's Presidency in an Age of Democratic Crisis and Great Power Competition*.

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Marcus Mietzner is Professor at the Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, and for more than two decades one of the most consistently cited analysts of post-Suharto Indonesian politics. His earlier monographs traced the military's withdrawal from formal politics (Mietzner, 2008), the unexpected resilience of Indonesia's political parties (Mietzner, 2013), and the coalitional bargaining through which presidents since 2004 have converted fragmented legislatures into governing majorities (Mietzner, 2023). *Ruling Indonesia* extends that last argument from the institution to the incumbent, asking what one president actually did with the coalitional machinery Mietzner had previously mapped. The book also enters an increasingly crowded field. Ben Bland's *Man of Contradictions* (2020) offered the first English-language portrait of Jokowi, but was written at mid-term and in a journalistic register; Power and Warburton's *Democracy in Indonesia* (2020) diagnosed democratic regression institution by institution without placing the president at the center of the explanation; and Warburton (2023) approached the same decade from the direction of resource politics and business power. Mietzner's distinctive contribution is to hold the full ten-year arc together around a single causal claim – that Jokowi's developmentalism explains both the achievements and the democratic damage – and to do so with a level of interview access none of these earlier studies enjoyed.

The book provides a comprehensive and analytically nuanced account of President Joko Widodo's decade in office from 2014 to 2024. It draws on extensive interviews conducted across multiple formal and informal settings. The interviews with Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, were conducted between July 2023 and July 2024. Mietzner closely followed Jokowi's schedule, attending events at the Merdeka Palace, Bogor Palace, Solo, Samarinda, and the proposed new capital, Nusantara. These experiences enabled Mietzner not only to pose in-depth questions but also to directly observe Jokowi's interactions with aides, ministers, and the public (p. xx). The study is further enriched by interviews with cabinet members, economists, political analysts, and democracy activists, ensuring a well-rounded perspective. Methodologically, the book stands out for its narrative-driven style, presenting complex political developments through clear and engaging prose. This approach contrasts with conventional academic writing,

which often relies on rigid structures and highly formalized language, making Mietzner's work more accessible.

Even in this approachable style, the book reveals intellectual depth through chapters that are strongly analytical. This depth is reinforced by the use of empirical data, including political indices and surveys. Mietzner also draws on over two decades of experience analyzing Indonesian politics. Importantly, despite his access to Jokowi, Mietzner clarifies that the book is neither a political biography nor a hagiography. Instead, maintaining a critical distance and scholarly autonomy he objectively examines Jokowi's political trajectory (p. xviii). Mietzner frames the work as a hybrid narrative accessible to a wide readership. He contends that Jokowi's presidency resists interpretation through a single disciplinary perspective, as it integrates political maneuvering, economic policy, foreign relations, and individual leadership traits. In the preface, Mietzner also highlights methodological challenges, particularly when interviewing elite figures like Jokowi, whose strategic and occasionally evasive responses require verification, prompting systematic cross-checking and contextual analysis.

The book is structured into seven chapters, framed by an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue, with each chapter examining a key dimension of Jokowi's presidency. This organization allows Mietzner to develop a layered analysis of Jokowi's governance. The opening chapter establishes the analytical foundation by explaining Indonesia's global significance and the relevance of Jokowi's decade-long leadership. By connecting national strategies to transnational perspectives, the chapter moves beyond description, illustrating patterns of governance, economic development, and regional diplomacy. This approach emphasizes analytical insights into how Indonesia's internal priorities resonate internationally, offering a nuanced understanding of leadership and policy-making within a comparative Global South context. Although his policies were largely domestically oriented, they embodied perspectives widely shared among Global South leaders (p. 3). Chapter 2 explores coalition-building and political consolidation. Initially perceived as a political outsider, Jokowi gradually constructed a broad governing alliance by incorporating former rivals, as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had done before him, thereby reducing opposition and stabilizing his government. Mietzner notes that Jokowi achieved a parliamentary super-majority, eventually forming the largest alliance in Indonesia's democratic history (p. 30). However, this strategy also weakened democratic accountability by diluting opposition forces. Chapter 3 examines infrastructure development as Jokowi's flagship policy. For Jokowi, infrastructure functioned as a tool of nation-building (p. 54). Major investments in transport and the ambitious new capital project enhanced connectivity and national development, but relied heavily on state enterprises and increased debt, raising concerns about long-term sustainability. Chapter 4 evaluates foreign policy, portraying Jokowi as a pragmatic leader balancing relations between China and the USA, though Mietzner criticizes the president's limited strategic vision, describing his foreign policy as reflective of his broader leadership style (p. 105). Rather than pursuing transformative or visionary policies, he emphasizes incremental, consensus-driven decisions, reflecting caution and pragmatism, but potentially restricting Indonesia's ability to assert a stronger, more independent international role. Chapter 5 analyses COVID-19 management, where economic priorities initially overshadowed public health concerns. Despite this, Indonesia was later recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "one of the best" in COVID-19 management (p. 128). Chapter 6 addresses democratic regression, arguing that civil liberties declined and institutional erosion accelerated under Jokowi, returning democracy to levels last seen at the start of *reformasi* in 1998 (p. 139). Mietzner builds this case by tracking trends in freedom of expression, assembly, and the press, alongside changes in the independence and effectiveness of legislative, judicial, and oversight

institutions, drawing on comparative indices such as Freedom House ratings and the Varieties of Democracy dataset. Detailed case studies of policy decisions, legal reforms, and government interventions further illustrate how these declines were enacted incrementally rather than through a single authoritarian rupture. Chapter 7 examines political succession and dynastic tendencies in Indonesia, focusing on Prabowo Subianto, a former general who served as Jokowi's defense minister and who succeeded him as president in October 2024, and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Jokowi's eldest son, who moved from the mayoralty of Surakarta to the vice-presidency on the same ticket (p. 164). The chapter examines how the rise of these figures illustrates broader patterns of familial influence, meaning the ways in which family ties shape political power, succession, and decision-making in Indonesia. It highlights how political elites often maintain continuity through kinship networks, leveraging family connections to access resources, secure positions, and influence policy. This analysis situates individual careers within systemic patterns of elite reproduction and inherited political authority. Mietzner concludes that while Jokowi held significant power, he remained constrained by competing elites, resulting in his mixed legacy of achieving economic progress while presiding over significant democratic decline (pp. 190, 198).

Mietzner's book has several strengths. First, it stands out for its empirical depth, drawing on extensive interviews, including direct engagement with Jokowi and senior cabinet figures, which provides unique insight into elite decision-making processes. This robust methodology strengthens the analysis and enables interpretations that go beyond superficial observations. Second, the work exhibits strong conceptual clarity through an interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from political science, economics, philosophy, and international relations into a coherent framework. Its central claim – that economic developmentalism underpins both policy achievements and democratic regression – is systematically articulated and well supported. Third, the book enriches debates on democratic backsliding by presenting a case that diverges from conventional authoritarian trajectories, highlighting indirect and complex patterns of democratic erosion.

Despite its notable contributions, the book also presents several limitations. One key concern lies in its relatively limited theoretical engagement. Although Mietzner intentionally avoids dense theorization, this decision may reduce the book's purchase within broader comparative debates. A more explicit engagement with frameworks such as populism, competitive authoritarianism, or developmental state theory would have strengthened its analytical depth and comparative positioning. This matters for two reasons. First, Mietzner has himself read Jokowi through a populist lens elsewhere, distinguishing his technocratic populism from Prabowo Subianto's confrontational variant (Mietzner, 2015); the absence of that framing here leaves an unexplained discontinuity within his own body of work. Second, the vocabulary of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010) and of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016) is precisely what allows comparativists to set Indonesia alongside Hungary, India, or the Philippines; without it, the book's rich evidence would be harder for non-Indonesianists to place. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on Jokowi's individual agency, while insightful, tends to understate the role of structural factors. Indonesia's political economy – characterized by entrenched oligarchic interests, decentralization, and institutional fragility – plays a crucial role in shaping political outcomes, as a substantial body of scholarship has argued (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Robison & Hadiz, 2004; Warburton, 2023; Winters, 2011). Although these constraints are acknowledged, the analysis occasionally overattributes change to Jokowi's personal choices rather than systemic dynamics. In addition, the discussion of economic policy remains somewhat limited. While infrastructure development is thoroughly

documented, the book provides less systematic assessment of its long-term implications. Critical issues such as fiscal sustainability, environmental impact, and social inequality receive comparatively little attention, leaving an incomplete evaluation of Jokowi's developmental legacy. Nevertheless, compared with earlier studies of the same period – Bland's (2020) mid-term biographical portrait, the institution-by-institution diagnosis assembled by Power and Warburton (2020), and Warburton's (2023) political-economy account of resource nationalism – Mietzner's work stands out for its integrative approach, linking domestic governance with international context and offering a more coherent, comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's political development over the past decade.

This book provides a thorough and engaging analysis of one of the most consequential political decades in Indonesia's post-authoritarian history. Its interest is not confined to the national case: Jokowi's combination of sustained popularity, developmentalist delivery, and quiet institutional erosion is a recognizable variant of a pattern documented across Southeast Asia, from the Philippines under Duterte to post-2014 Thailand, which makes Indonesia a valuable reference point for regional debates about how democracies decline without collapsing. It offers a well-balanced evaluation of Joko Widodo's presidency, carefully addressing both its accomplishments and its limitations. The core argument – that a focus on economic developmentalism simultaneously enabled progress while contributing to democratic decline – is convincingly articulated and supported by substantial evidence. Although the discussion would be strengthened by a deeper theoretical framework and a more detailed exploration of structural dynamics, these shortcomings do not substantially diminish its overall value. Instead, the book's interdisciplinary perspective, combined with its strong empirical foundation, enhances its relevance for academics, students, and policy practitioners. In short, *Ruling Indonesia* is highly recommended, as it not only presents a comprehensive account of Jokowi's leadership but also offers broader reflections on the challenges of governance in a period characterized by democratic uncertainty and intensifying geopolitical competition.



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