

## OPINION

## Indonesia's New President Under Siege

By JOHN KURTZ AND JAMES VAN ZORGE

Indonesian President Joko Widodo's record during his first 100 days was a mixture of significant successes and noteworthy errors with very little in between. And in recent days it has become increasingly evident that the pressure he is under, especially from within his own party, is likely to be difficult to shake off.

On the positive side, Mr. Widodo took a few hard decisions that bode well for the economy. He acted quickly on his campaign pledge to slash wasteful fuel subsidies, and Minister of Energy Sudirman Said replaced some of his inherited deputies with more reformist and business-friendly officials.

Mr. Widodo also created a task force to come up with recommendations to dismantle the so-called fuel mafia. The trade in crude and refined fuels has long been controlled by a group of crony businessmen.

The new president announced measures to streamline the country's notoriously Byzantine investment approval process. The National Investment Coordinating Board would become a one-stop, full-service agency. The business community applauded these moves.

But at the same time, other ministries worked off an entirely different playbook. In late December, Indonesia's Ministry of Trade abruptly cancelled thousands of import licenses for violation of an obscure reporting regulation. It was only after companies descended upon the ministry to complain that their licenses were restored.

The Ministry of Manpower an-

nounced its intention to require foreign applicants to pass Indonesian-language proficiency tests to obtain a work permit. In a country where investors are already eager to find more highly qualified Indonesians and reduce reliance on expatriates wherever possible, the protectionist move is hard to understand.

While these policies and others have led many to question the new administration's intentions, even graver concerns are brewing about Mr. Widodo's credentials as a new reformist class of politician. The president won favor with the electorate last year because he not only has a common touch but also because he was perceived as being beyond the usual elitist politics that have left Indonesians feeling jaded and disenfranchised.

Hence the public shock and deep disappointment when Mr. Widodo became entangled last month in two cases of cronylike politics. First, during a visit to Malaysia's national car producer, Proton, Mr. Widodo presided over the signing of an agreement between Proton and an Indonesian company to explore the possibility of producing a national car in Indonesia.

Abdullah Hendropriyono, the Indonesian counterparty to the deal, also happens to be the former head of the national intelligence agency and a trusted advisor and confidante of Megawati Sukarnoputri, the chairwoman of Mr. Widodo's PDI-P party.

Unfortunately for Mr. Widodo, even after the Proton fiasco died down in the press, another more complex and lasting problem of presidential judgment erupted over



**HARD HABIT TO BREAK** Voters were encouraged by Joko Widodo's campaign of reform, but it looks like even he can't escape Indonesia's usual elite politics.

Mr. Widodo's nomination of Gen. Budi Gunawan—a former presidential adjutant and Megawati loyalist—to the powerful role of national police chief.

Mr. Gunawan was the overwhelming favorite for the role, supported by both Ms. Megawati and Vice President Jusuf Kalla. But he was already in the cross hairs of the country's anticorruption agency, the KPK. The graftbusters quickly named Mr. Gunawan as a suspect. Embarrassed and stung by this turn of events, the president had to reverse course while the country suffered a month-long paralysis as the police and the KPK squared off in the courts and the media.

Managing a ruling coalition in Indonesian politics is no cakewalk. Mr. Widodo's predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also sometimes found his ruling partners to be an unruly lot. Because Mr. Widodo was not able to pick his entire cabinet, policies can often seem ill-coordinated or downright schizophrenic.

But Mr. Widodo will need to as-

sert more discipline and control over policy making, even at the risk of upsetting his coalition partners. One way to start is to enhance his support for the coordinating ministers. Lacking the budgets and large staff of the line ministries, they can only impose coherence on policy if they have the president's full backing.

Mr. Widodo has also moved to grant newly appointed Chief of Staff Luhut Panjaitan expanded powers to coordinate policy across ministries. Whether or not Mr. Panjaitan will be successful in this role remains to be seen.

More problematic for Mr. Widodo is how he will manage his senior partner and patron, Ms. Megawati. There is no easy solution for a relationship that is complex and likely deeply dysfunctional.

Ms. Megawati, who served as president from 2001 to 2004 and is in the twilight of her political career, is intent on keeping her legacy intact. According to one insider, she is sometimes more eager to see Mr.

Widodo's power limited than she is to help him rise. As the blue-blooded scion of the Sukarno family, she tolerates Mr. Widodo as a placeholder until another Sukarno can rise to power.

As for her party, Ms. Megawati is mindful of the fact that PDI-P was banished to the political wilderness for the past decade. Now back in the driver's seat, she must reward party loyalists and find ways for her confidantes to benefit from the spoils of the office.

The rows over the Proton deal and Mr. Gunawan reflect a larger pattern of Ms. Megawati's agenda clashing with Mr. Widodo's reformist instincts. This dynamic began during the election campaign and is likely to undercut Mr. Widodo's popularity over time.

Meanwhile, there are rumors that some senior PDI-P party officials have been seeking an alliance with opposition parties inside the National House of Representatives to impeach the president. Mr. Widodo has tried to protect himself from antagonists inside his own party by improving relations with opposition leaders. So far he has managed to regain the upper hand.

Most Indonesians expected Mr. Widodo to face powerful challenges from opposition leaders Prabowo Subianto and Aburizal Bakrie. Instead, the biggest threats to his presidency are emerging from within. Some business leaders are starting to wonder aloud if he is tough enough to handle them.

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## A Spirit in the Dark

By OLIVIA WANG

Shanghai

With his shoulder-length wavy hair, hoop earring and goatee, one wouldn't expect Zheng Chongbin to be so mild-mannered and soft-spoken. For an artist of his accomplishment, he is almost shy, yet he possesses a quiet charisma. Over a lunch of smoked fish that he insisted I must try, we discuss his art and his next exhibition, to be held in May. Deboning the fish with the intense and consummate skill of a surgeon, he speaks with incisive, eager eyes.

Mr. Zheng's sensibility is influenced both by Chinese and Western

artistic practices—two traditions that are, on the surface, at odds with each other. But Mr. Zheng finds their affinities and brings them together. What results is a unique and dynamic perspective.

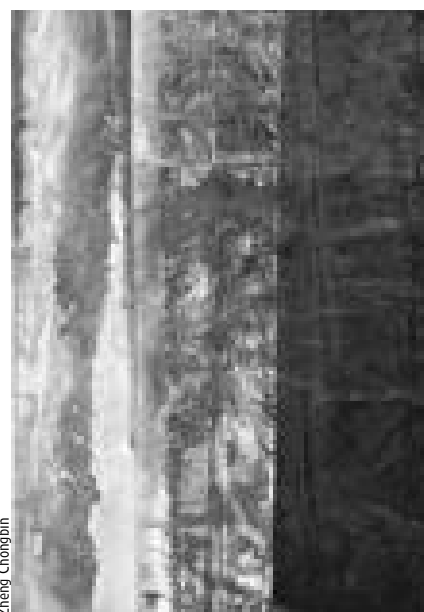
## Radical interpretations of the classical art form that focuses on ink as physical matter.

Mr. Zheng's approach reflects his bicultural education. Born in 1961 here in Shanghai, Mr. Zheng trained as an ink painter at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. He later received a master's in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. This synthesis of East and West has allowed him to draw parallels between the Abstract expressionists and Chinese literati painters. For example, Mr. Zheng sees similarities between Jackson Pollock and Bada Shanren, a 17th-century Chinese artist who, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, used painting as a means of protesting the new Manchu rule. Just as Pollock channeled his anger and energy onto the canvas, Mr. Zheng explains, Bada expressed his frustration and dissatisfaction for the new regime through disturbing, physically charged brushstrokes. Both artists have created works whose energy emanates far beyond

the confines of their canvas or paper surface. "It is not about what they paint," Mr. Zheng says. "It's about how they paint."

Mr. Zheng's own practice has evolved over years. As an undergraduate he studied figure painting. Then for several years afterward he focused on conceptual and installation art. But Mr. Zheng is best-known for his radical interpretation of the classical ink-painting form. Combining a monochromatic ink palette with white acrylic and using techniques of collage, paper-soaking and paint-layering, Mr. Zheng creates intricate, abstract paintings. This is encapsulated in "Season" (2014), in which Mr. Zheng plays with layers and textures, bringing out the tensions between light and dark, ink and acrylic, translucency and opacity. The work is composed of vertical panes. On one side are soft, fluid washes of gray ink. In the middle, the ink is layered with white acrylic. The final panel is saturated in ink—the blackness is dense yet iridescent. The effect is abstract, bold and enthralling.

Many Chinese contemporary artists are involved in a revival of Chinese ink painting, drawing inspiration from antiquity. Known as "contemporary ink," an increasing number of museums are staging exhibitions dedicated to this genre—including, most recently, the 2013 "Ink Art" show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Mr.



'Season' (2014) by Zheng Chongbin.

Zheng's intention is not to revive traditional ink painting so much as to forge a path that is completely his own, focusing instead on ink not as a medium but as physical matter. He brings forth the tactile nature of ink, amplifying its volume, texture and depth. There is a three-dimensional sculptural presence to his work.

Mr. Zheng has also been making increasingly innovative use of light in some of his works. He finds deep inspiration in the natural light and landscape of Northern California

(where he has lived since the early 1990s), to the paintings of Caravaggio and Turner and the Light and Space Movement. Ink and light play an equal role in Mr. Zheng's work. To him, they are both formless, adaptable and with depth. In "Wordless, Formless" (2015), Mr. Zheng created installations that employ light to further enhance the sculptural potential of ink, changing appearance as the observer moves around them.

"Wordless, Formless" will be shown in May as part of Mr. Zheng's solo exhibition at Beijing's Ink Studio. That same month, Mr. Zheng's work will be included in group shows at Daimler Contemporary in Berlin and at the Venice Biennale. This comes after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently acquired "Turbulence" (2013), one of Mr. Zheng's major works.

While its connection to the East may not always be palpable in Mr. Zheng's art, one critical principle of Chinese ink has remained constant throughout: *qi yun*, or "resonance of the spirit." This is the energy and life that resonates from an artwork. When I ask how one can discern whether this resonance is present, Mr. Zheng smiles and responds: "You can just feel it."

*Ms. Wang is an independent curator and art consultant based in Hong Kong.*

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