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**By Philip Jacobson | 12 June 2016**

*This is an update to our "Tracking Jokowi" project. Last year's summary: 9 months in, how has Indonesian president Jokowi fared on the environment?*

- In 2014, Joko Widodo became Indonesia's first head of state to emerge from neither the political elite nor the military.
- The election of the former furniture salesman to the nation's highest office represented a break from its authoritarian past, and Jokowi, as he is known, was expected to enact major reforms.
- Last year, it was the environment that served up what will perhaps be remembered as the defining challenge of Jokowi's presidency.
- Jokowi responded to the disaster with some of his most drastic measures.

In 2014, Joko Widodo became Indonesia's first head of state to emerge from neither the political elite nor the military. The election of the former furniture salesman to the nation's highest office represented a break from its authoritarian past, and Jokowi, as he is known, was expected to enact major reforms. He promised to eradicate corruption, overhaul the bureaucracy, upgrade the infrastructure, facilitate investment, boost economic growth, lead a "mental revolution" and resolve past human rights violations. And more.

Last year, it was the environment that served up what will perhaps be remembered as the defining challenge of Jokowi's presidency. The devastating forest and peatland fires of 2015 burned an area the size of Macedonia, sickened half a million people, pumped an incredible amount of carbon into the atmosphere and, according to the World Bank, cost the country \$16 billion. The underlying cause: the draining and drying of Indonesia's vast peat swamp zones for agricultural production, which has occurred since colonial times but ramped up in recent decades with the spread of palm oil and timber plantations.

Jokowi responded to the disaster with some of his most drastic measures. He declared a moratorium on peatland conversion, and then banned new palm oil permits, despite protests from the powerful forestry lobby. He formed a dedicated agency to restore damaged peatlands, a Herculean task given the competing and often renegade vested interests at play almost everywhere you look in Indonesia. He moved to prosecute companies for causing the fires, waging high-profile lawsuits to extract compensation from allegedly errant firms. Whether Jokowi can succeed where every one of his modern-day predecessors has failed remains to be seen. But last October at the height of the crisis, with the air above Palangkaraya city a noxious yellow, he offered a yardstick with which to measure his efforts. “You will see results soon and in three years we will have solved this,” Jokowi told the BBC. One must admire his optimism.

It wasn't only the fires that Jokowi pledged to address on the environment. He vowed to turn Indonesia into a maritime power. He promised to improve the lots of farmers and indigenous peoples. He committed to lead Indonesia into a new era of clean energy, with a plan that calls for less petroleum, but more coal and biofuels — much of which is produced by the very same palm oil industry whose breakneck expansion has driven the annual haze. Jokowi has had to walk some fine lines, and he will have to tread many more. Mongabay will continue to monitor his progress.

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### **The annual fires and haze**

Last year's fires were the worst since 1998, the year a popular revolt forced strongman president Suharto from office. At the height of the disaster, in November, Jokowi took the momentous step of banning all new clearance and conversion of peatlands, even in areas already earmarked for development. But the edict took the form of a presidential instruction, or Inpres, rather than a legally binding decree, or Perppu, which is tougher to push through but easier to enforce. Indeed, some firms have already been accused of flouting the order.

In early 2016, Jokowi established the Peatland Restoration Agency and appointed a team of conservationists to lead it. Aiming to rehabilitate more than 2 million hectares of peat by 2019, the agency is currently focusing on four districts in Sumatra and Kalimantan. There has been some debate over how far it will be allowed to go, especially when it comes to areas that have already been planted by large companies.

Jokowi also embarked on a major law enforcement drive, with his administration suing a number of planters for causing the fires. Last September, the Supreme Court ordered palm oil firm PT Kallista Alam to pay an unprecedented \$26 million in fines and reparations. Then in January, pulp and paper supplier PT Bumi Mekar Hijau prevailed in a similar case. It remains to be seen how the gavel will fall in a raft of upcoming cases, which will take years to complete.

Other countries have offered to lend a hand in the fight against the haze. Singapore, which lies just downwind of Indonesia, has been especially eager to help. But the city state has tussled with its neighbor over the concession maps of planters operating in the archipelago, which are needed to activate a regional haze monitoring system but which Jakarta has refused to share. The spat has thrown other bilateral anti-haze programs into question.

## **Chaotic licensing and governance**

“Dysfunctional” and “corrupt”: two words Indonesians frequently use to describe their country’s politics. Changing that is a pillar of Jokowi’s platform. He has presided over a number of initiatives to improve governance of natural resources; these have led to the cancellation of hundreds of unlawful mining permits and the rejection of dozens of proposals to plant oil palm in the forest zone. In April, Jokowi declared a moratorium on new palm oil and coal permits. The governor of Aceh province, whose administration has fought to undermine the protected status of the nationally imposed Leuser Ecosystem, agreed that the permit freeze would apply there.

Illegal logging also has been a focus. Last year, a presidentially sanctioned report by the anticorruption agency found Indonesia had lost nearly \$9 billion in state revenue from unreported timber sales from 2003-14. In April, the EU announced the archipelago was on track to become the first country to certify its exports as legal under the Europe’s anti-illegal-logging action plan, with the establishment of a licensing scheme for Indonesian shipments said to be only months away.



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## **Palm oil’s environmental impact**

In the wake of last year’s haze crisis, Jokowi took advantage of his mandate to rein in the palm oil sector by declaring a freeze on new plantation permits. His administration subsequently rejected proposals from 61 companies to grow oil palm in the forest zone, sparing an area almost as big as Puerto Rico from conversion. The forestry ministry is now reviewing existing licenses, and officials say more permits could be revoked.

Senior administration officials continued to disparage the Indonesia Palm Oil Pledge (IPOP), a pact between several of the largest palm oil companies to purge their supply chains of deforestation, peatland conversion and human rights abuses, as an affront to Indonesian sovereignty and an attack on small farmers. The government’s anti-monopoly agency said it would investigate suspected cartel practices by IPOP signatories. Meanwhile, the agriculture ministry tried to foil an attempt by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil to improve

transparency in the industry by forbidding growers from sharing their own concession maps. Administration officials appeared to be divided in their view of these external mechanisms, with some speaking out in favor of them, and others against.

To assert greater control over the sector, Indonesia and Malaysia formed the Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries, which will introduce its own sustainability guidelines and try to control prices. Indonesia endeavored to raise the production of existing plantations through the introduction of better seeds and plantation techniques, especially among smallholders.

## **Indigenous rights and land reform**

In 2014, Jokowi became the first presidential candidate to earn the endorsement of Indonesia's main indigenous peoples alliance, AMAN, and his rise from a slum endeared him to poorer citizens more broadly. But some have become to sour on the president, with promised task forces on agrarian conflict and indigenous rights yet to materialize. Farmers continue to demand that Jokowi make good on his pledge to redistribute 9 million hectares of land, while AMAN wants him to throw his weight behind a draft law on indigenous rights now languishing in parliament.

Land conflicts between communities and companies were as high as ever in 2015, with the Agrarian Reform Consortium reporting more than 250 active cases involving more than 100,000 families.

## **Climate change, energy security and renewables**

Last September, Indonesia, a top carbon polluter, submitted a plan to cut emissions by 29% — or, with international assistance, by up to 41% — from business-as-usual levels by 2030. The target depends on the government's ambitious goal of achieving 23% of its energy from renewable sources by 2025, a more than doubling of current levels. It also requires a crackdown on fires that drove Indonesian emissions beyond those of the U.S. on 47 of the 74 days to late October 28 during the 2015 haze crisis.



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Jokowi’s energy plan is aimed at cutting petroleum imports, but calls for an uptick in coal and biofuel derived from palm oil, whose rapid expansion is driving deforestation and social conflict. In Central Java province, residents sued the governor over the giant Batang power project, with NGOs criticizing the president for moving ahead with the coal plant without a proper land acquisition process.

**Food security**

Rice self-sufficiency has been a pillar of Jokowi’s food security agenda. Last October, the agriculture minister said he had succeeded in stopping rice imports.

The ministry also imposed additional regulations affecting fertilizer and seed distribution. A leaked government report revealed corrupt practices among state-backed retailers entrusted with selling subsidized fertilizers to small farmers.

## **Maritime governance, illegal fishing and fisheries depletion**

Jokowi's Indonesia has evolved into something of an enforcer of the seas, arresting vessels that plunder not only its own fisheries but others too. In March, Indonesia captured the Nigerian-flagged Viking, the last of a notorious group of six ships that had illegally plied Antarctic waters for toothfish. That same month, Indonesia apprehended a Chinese squid jigger that had fled Argentine and Uruguayan patrols after poaching there. (Both boats were caught in Indonesian waters.) Blowing up such vessels has remained a signature move of fisheries minister Susi Pudjiastuti, Jokowi's top general in the war against illegal fishing. In April, the government sunk 23 ships, including 10 from Malaysia and 13 from Vietnam. This week, Pudjiastuti announced that 30 more would be destroyed.

Pudjiastuti has also directed a purge of foreign-made fishing boats, which purport to have been purchased from abroad by Indonesians but often serve as fronts for foreign-controlled operations. Many of these ships have been linked to human trafficking. Last year, Pudjiastuti renewed a six-month licensing freeze on such vessels, forcing them into port and buying time for an audit. Of 1,132 foreign-built boats, 328 were cited for major infractions and sunk, and 390 were cited for minor infractions and asked to deregister, after which they could "return home." The rest reportedly fled the country.

The licensing freeze also produced new revelations of maritime slavery in eastern Indonesia, where in early 2015 the Associated Press had uncovered a major trafficking syndicate around Benjina island. After the freeze forced 240 vessels into the Port of Ambon, Cambodia noted that hundreds of its citizens were stuck there; many, it turned out, had been held captive and forced to work. It also came to light that Ambon was home to number of escaped slaves that over the years had fled their captivity and been taken in by locals. Indonesia has since repatriated more than 1,300 trafficking victims from mainland Southeast Asia.

Pudjiastuti has trumpeted her policies as successful, saying that as a result, Indonesians are catching more fish and the fisheries sector is growing faster than the economy as a whole.



## **Endangered species and wildlife trafficking**

On April 14, the same he announced the palm oil permit freeze, Jokowi launched a national movement to conserve biodiversity, commemorated on an island near Jakarta by the release of hundreds of endangered sea turtles. His proclivity for freeing animals, however, has not always gone smoothly. In January, Jokowi's release of 190 birds at the presidential palace in Bogor earned an unexpected backlash. He had intended to make a point about preserving nature in urban areas, but conservationists assailed him for patronizing the notorious Pramuka wildlife market, where the birds had been purchased. "Our president means well in buying birds and releasing them, but all he is doing is supporting criminals who illegally sell wildlife at this terrible market," said one group, which called on him to close the market and others like it.

The government continued to make high-profile busts of wildlife traffickers, and while guilty verdicts became more frequent, offenders continued to receive

light sentences. A man convicted of smuggling five tons of pangolin received just 1.5 years; a “kingpin” who presided over a vast trafficking network and was arrested while trying to sell a baby orangutan got only two years; seven elephant poachers received one year each. The list goes on. To achieve greater rigor of verdicts, the environment ministry began training judges to increase their environmental knowledge. There is also a push to revise the 1990 Conservation Law, which allows for a maximum sentence of only five years for wildlife trafficking.

## **Controversial land reclamation projects**

Jakarta Bay. Bali’s Benoa Bay. The Makassar coast. All are the sites of controversial land reclamation projects, of which more than 15 are planned across Indonesia. Officials and developers say they will bring economic benefits, but many have been slammed by environmental advocates for the impact they could have on coastal ecosystems, fishermen’s livelihoods and local cultural practices. Increasingly, they have been mired by allegations of bribery and corruption; in April, a Jakarta city councilor and the CEO of property developer Agung Podomoro Land were named as suspects by the nation’s antigraft agency. Activists resisting the Bali reclamation want the agency to expand its investigation to their island. Both projects are worth billions of dollars.

Jokowi is said to have no objection to the Jakarta Bay reclamation, provided it doesn’t damage the environment. He has spoken to the importance of the flood-prevention aspect of the project, which envisions a 32-kilometer-long sea wall as well as luxury real estate and shopping centers. Fisheries minister Susi Pudjiastuti, on the other hand, has called the project unnecessary (“Jakarta is not Dubai”). Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama has agreed to suspend the project while the permits are worked out, even as he insists it should eventually go ahead.

*Follow Mongabay’s articles tracking Jokowi’s commitments [here](#).*