

How Indonesia's election puts global biodiversity at stake with an impending war on palm oil

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A critically endangered Tapanuli orangutan from Sumatra, Indonesia. Maxime Aliaga / Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme, Author provided

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This week, Indonesia will hold a presidential election that will make or break incumbent Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's chances of getting a second term in a rematch with his nemesis, Prabowo Subianto.

Jokowi's re-election may put global biodiversity at risk as he is threatening to renege on a national moratorium he declared on new palm-oil plantations — which could quickly escalate deforestation in Papua, Borneo, Sumatra, and beyond.

Almost overnight, Jokowi has transformed from an environmental good-guy — someone who's battled destructive wildfires and noxious haze, tried to slow palm oil expansion and promoted several other eco-smart measures — into a nationalistic mouthpiece for the oil palm industry.

Let's hope this 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' transformation of Jokowi is temporary — a kind of fleeting election madness that overtakes many politicians in the heat of battle.

If not, Indonesia's forests and the endangered species living in them will be at even more risk.

From 2001 to 2017, Indonesia lost 24.4 million hectares of forest cover — an area larger than the United Kingdom — making it one of the worst forest-destroyers and greenhouse-gas emitters on

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Such rampant forest loss greatly imperils the intensely high concentrations of endangered animals in Indonesia, which is one of the biologically richest nations on Earth.



Massive concentrations of endangered animals in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

What's happening?

Indonesia is the world's largest palm-oil producer. Together with Malaysia, its neighbouring country, Indonesia produces over 85% of the world's palm oil.

In September last year, Jokowi imposed a moratorium on new oil-palm plantations. Though only partially effective, his initiative was applauded by conservationists and scientists worldwide.

But now, barely six months later, Jokowi is threatening to backtrack on his much-praised moratorium. Why?



Rainforest destruction for oil-palm plantations in Borneo. Rhett Butler / Mongabay

Jokowi wants to punish the European Union (EU) — for introducing a measure to phase out biofuels produced from palm oil by 2030.

Jokowi has vowed to boost biofuel use within Indonesia, to improve the country's energy self-sufficiency. His presidential opponent, Prabowo, has made similar promises.

The EU's phase-out plan

The EU's rather bungled experimentation with biofuels started in 2003, in an attempt to reduce their use of fossil fuels and greenhouse-gas emissions. They quickly became the biggest consumer of biofuels in the world.

The EU's biofuel spree was initially a bonanza for Indonesia and Malaysia. Industrial plantations and smallholders alike expanded already-massive estates into forests and carbon-rich peatlands to take advantage of the situation.

But the Orangutan in the room is that the EU failed to realise just how much deforestation was caused by oil palm, both directly and indirectly.

In response, alarmed environmental organisations and scientists warned that the EU was actually driving deforestation — producing far more greenhouse gases from forest destruction than they'd save by marginally reducing fossil-fuel use.

Hence, the EU now plans to phase out palm oil.

Blame for the EU too

As this saga unfolds, there's plenty of blame to go around. The EU's new policies are flawed because their palm oil "phase-out" does not in any way stop EU importers from buying palm oil from Indonesia – it only prevents them from including those supplies in their renewable-energy targets.

And if palm oil is certified as deforestation-free — which certain producers are able to do — then it can be freely bought by the EU too.

For their part, Indonesia and Malaysia have been playing hardball with the EU for many months, pledging to launch a World Trade Organisation (WTO) challenge, encouraging palm oil companies to file law suits against the EU, and threatening to ban European goods.

Indonesia and Malaysia's tactics have shifted to promoting smaller and medium-sized producers collectively called "smallholders" — traditionally thought not to cause massive forest loss.

But smallholders now comprise over 50% of Indonesia's palm oil estate, and they are one of the largest forest destroyers of all.

Helping "smallholders" has become the catch-cry of the Nigeria-based Initiative for Public Policy Analysis, a lobbying group partly supported by climate-sceptics combating efforts to slow global warming.

Malaysia is now spending big money to get the Nigeria group to lobby the EU on its behalf.

Election fever

With the pending election, Jokowi's threats to revoke the moratorium on palm oil have gone from nerve-wracking to flat-out scary.

Beyond declaring that he may jettison his palm-oil moratorium, he's even threatening to sidestep the EU completely and have Indonesia sell much of its palm oil to China and India — massive consumers that are happy to buy palm oil regardless of its source or impact on forest destruction — as long as it's as cheap as possible. Malaysia is similarly considering new markets with weak environmental records in Africa.

And in a true pique of recklessness, Indonesia is even threatening to pull out of the Paris climate accords.





Razing forest for oil palm in Kalimantan, Indonesia. David Gilbert / Greenpeace

Take-home lessons

Above all, let's hope sanity returns once the Indonesian elections are over.

Jokowi's oil-palm moratorium is far from perfect, with breaches of the current moratorium being reported almost daily.

But for all its faults, the moratorium has indeed slowed the rate of forest loss. It includes not just a freeze on new licences, but also a planned review of oil-palm licensing which, if implemented, would catch big and small illegal forest destroyers alike.

And for all its weaknesses, the EU's 'phase-out' is a step in the right direction as long as it doesn't open the door to other biofuel crops such as soy – much of which also comes from destroying forests.

So, let's see who gets elected on April 17.

If Jokowi, it's vital that we all implore him to leave his moratorium in place.

If Prabowo, who largely mirrors Jokowi's pro-oil-palm positions, we'll likely be facing comparably serious environmental challenges.

Whoever wins, we'll need to watch Indonesia, Malaysia, and Europe closely – to see whether they pursue sustainable-development policies generally. Or effectively become forest-destroying puppets of their powerful agriculture lobbies.

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