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Youth and the “Jokowi Effect”: Strike while the Iron is Hot?

By Jonathan Chen and Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

The governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo, has taken the nation by storm with his down to earth approach. Youth are perceived to be most attracted to this phenomenon dubbed the “Jokowi effect”. Is his appeal among youth representative of a desire for change beyond the man that can last until the 2014 elections? This commentary is the first in a series on Indonesia Election Watch (No 1).

Commentary

EVER SINCE Joko Widodo was elected governor of Jakarta, the media spotlight has been directed at this modest, self-effacing former mayor of Surakarta, for good reason. He is a fresh face among the well-worn politicians, aloof bureaucrats and controversial military men in public positions.

His down-to-earth, popular charm and self-effacing demeanour offers a distinct appeal to the common man in the street. He is also known for championing the rights of the *wong cilik* (micro businesses and plebeians) under his jurisdiction. Although untested at the legislative and central governmental level, he is not a political neophyte. He has a relatively unblemished track-record as mayor of Solo, coming in third for the 2012 World Mayor Project.

The elusive effect

A recent poll by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has indicated a big margin of support for Joko Widodo as presidential hopeful. With 28.6 percent of the vote, “Jokowi” is way ahead of his next competitor Prabowo Subianto (15.6%) and Aburizal Bakrie (7%). He is even more popular than Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of his Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), but remains reticent on whether he would be running for the presidency.

Despite the media hype over his personal magnetism, there are indications that run counter to the “Jokowi effect”. Firstly, a large proportion of respondents, 28%, remained undecided on who to vote for president. Some of them fall under the category of the “*golongan putih*” (white group) – a poignant indicator of a lack of interest in involvement in politics. The others are adopting a “wait-and-see” attitude.

Secondly, the “Jokowi effect” did not always correspond to realities on the ground. More often than not, his celebrity status did not seem to rub the right way all the time. Widodo was unceremoniously barred from

campaigning in Bali for the regional *Bupati* elections. His endorsements of two PDI-P candidates for the gubernatorial elections in North Sumatra and West Java did not result in any win.

Moreover, the Bali elections did not yield positive result despite it being a PDI-P bastion. Ganjar Pranowo's recent success as the governor in Central Java was credited to party solidarity, a strong PDI-P base and clever campaigning rather than an opportunistic ride on the Jokowi bandwagon. Puan Maharani's contribution cannot be ignored.

Thirdly, his surge in popularity came after a dry spell of popular governance that featured alleged public discontent over the incumbencies of Surakarta and Jakarta. The Indonesian Journalist Alliance (AJI) in particular claimed that favouritism was on the cards. The apparent "victimisation" of the Jokowi-Ahok pair instead of adequate coverage of the incumbents' lacklustre track-record gave the former a distinct edge over their competitors.

A novel approach towards campaigning fed by the media catapulted Joko Widodo the man to sudden fame. Nevertheless Widodo's popularity seems to be one that is given rather than earned.

Tackling the youth vote bank

It is estimated that by the 2014 general election, first-time voters of ages 17-21 will comprise 17% of the electorate at 29.2 million. Young voters (ages 22-30) will make up another 17.3% of the total voting populace. They will bring the total number of young voters for 2014 to 59.5 million or 34.3% of the populace, set against Indonesia's relatively robust demographic bank of young, working-age adults of which 70% are under 50 years old.

In addition, youth have always played a pivotal role in setting the course of Indonesia's history and politics. As a result of their close and often tenuous relationship with the state playing the role of revolutionaries and activists, they are dubbed by many as "change-makers" and "active agents".

Contrary to popular imaginations, surveys have shown a less than sanguine side. Though the youth of today are more politically-conscious they are conspicuously reserved in their participation. Hailing primarily from the *Reformasi* generation, they are more likely to be open-minded, opinionated, cosmopolitan and critical.

They are also less nationalistic, more self-absorbed and more materialist-oriented. They may not choose to express their political ideologies like their predecessors in the past; nevertheless they can be driven to action by issues they feel strongly about. They are more media-savvy, relying heavily on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Although perception polls have shown otherwise, it is still too premature to vouchsafe that the youth will coalesce under the Jokowi umbrella. Late entrants to the electoral race can still tip the balance. Given the notoriously fickle youthful demography that is prone to display swing-voting behaviours, such a scenario can never be dismissed as improbable.

Jokowi's dilemma: strike while the iron is hot?

Despite Widodo's soaring popularity, several obstacles still stand in the way of the ultimate prize. Only months into his post as governor of Jakarta, he has vowed explicitly to solve the traffic gridlock and flooding woes of the beleaguered metropolis during his tenure. With big shoes to fill in Jakarta, abandoning his post for higher office may look like the easier choice. Nonetheless, it would reflect badly on his record as a Mr Fix-it.

Secondly, in a conservative society where it is still considered *kasar* (unmannered) to circumvent one's superiors for the sake of political expediency, undertaking an opportunistic manoeuvre would entail hefty political cost especially to a well-received figure like Widodo. He has yet to receive the blessings of his commander-in-chief Megawati. While it remains to be seen whether Megawati will make the uncharacteristic move, the sudden death of Taufik Kiemas will at least take the limelight away from Widodo in the meantime.

In Indonesia, populist opinion can sometimes triumph political rationalisation. The power of social media in a decentralised post-*Reformasi* Indonesia cannot be underestimated. Performance-based voting may still bow down to personality-based voting in a society where political celebrities are often put on a pedestal. As old loyalists looked set to stick to their guns, the youth vote will inevitably figure as the safest bet in perpetuating the Jokowi fervour.

Will the Jokowi phenomena be sustainable then? If youths are truly more sensitive to symbols of change rather than the man himself, the "Jokowi effect" could see its staying power dissipate in the face of a worthy

contender. “Strike while the iron is hot” may be a tempting proposal. Nevertheless, Widodo would have to tread very carefully - his current popularity notwithstanding.

Jonathan Chen and Emirza Syailendra are respectively Associate Research Fellow and Research Analyst at the Indonesia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.