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Abolishing Indonesia's Direct Local Elections: Missing the Forest for the Trees?

By Jonathan Chen and Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

The Indonesian House of Representatives is due to pass a bill ending direct elections of local leaders, leaving the selection process to legislators in regional parliaments. Is such a move missing the forest for the trees?

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN House of Representatives (DPR: *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*) is currently deliberating a bill that will transfer the election of local leaders from the people to the Regional Legislative Councils (DPRD: *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*). Direct elections at the local level or *Pilkada* (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah*) had been in place since June 2005 on the back of reforms in electoral laws that called for an "open list" system and direct presidential elections under Law 32/2004.

Proponents of the abolition of direct local elections cite the high cost of state funding required as well as uncooperative regional heads once elected. The controversial bill, if passed, will take effect less than a month before the inauguration of president-elect Joko Widodo (Jokowi), himself a beneficiary of the *Pilkada* system.

Abolish *Pilkada*?

Support for the bill has been increasingly linked with partisan interests. The Merah Putih or Red-White coalition led by losing presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto is in support of the bill although its members, including the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), had flip-flopped over the issue. The most vociferous opponents of the bill are led by Jokowi's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). Opponents of the *Pilkada* system invariably point to the financial burden and inefficiencies the state will have to bear organising elections at all levels.

A study from Seknas FITRA (the National Secretariat of the Indonesian Forum for Budget Transparency) in 2012 estimated that the average cost of holding an election in a city/municipality and province amount to approximately 25 billion rupiah and 100 billion rupiah (about S\$2.6 million and S\$10.5 million) respectively. According to a study by Tempo magazine, a gubernatorial candidate with

the money to spare can be expected to pay up to 40 billion rupiah (about \$4.2 million) for consultancy services.

With provincial, districts, sub-districts and municipality elections held simultaneously in five-year phases, money politics especially rent-seeking practices, in the midst of organising campaigns had been a major cause for concern. With aspirations for greater political power and largesse as a driving force among some local candidates, there has been a greater fragmentation of provinces and districts in recent years. Since 1999, the number of provinces had risen from 26 to 34 while districts almost doubled from 292 to 483 by early 2007.

While political decentralisation via direct voting on the whole has been beneficial to the greater project of democratisation in Indonesia, its intended purpose has not always been evenly achieved. In some cases, competitive elections for local elections have been problematic and do not in themselves guarantee that decentralised power operates democratically.

Recent cases have emerged of networks of decentralised political dynasties exploiting the *Pilkada* system to their advantage. Patrimonial alliances with strong links to dominant party patrons including the increasing presence of familial politics (*politik kekerabatan*) are becoming a norm even at the local level.

Keep Pilkada?

With greater autonomy given to the regions and local elections as proof of its legitimacy, there has also been emphasis on the significance of the local, articulated in the calls for regional sons (*putra daerah*). In some instances, this has benefitted the few constituencies and groups that were formerly ill-represented and neglected. In other cases however, it has led to greater polarisation that challenged the communal balances between different ethnic and religious groups especially among more heterogeneous populations.

In particular the growing implementation of local religious by-laws (*Perda Syariah*) in certain regions threatens to undermine the democratic fabric that the *Pilkada* system provides.

Proponents of the *Pilkada* system in general believe that the gains in democratic capital more than make up for the inefficiencies of the system. While money politics and corruption remain a perennial scourge to any democratisation and decentralisation process, direct local elections on the whole has a stimulating effect on the economy.

If the bill goes through, accountability and sovereignty will ultimately rest with the government in power rather than the people. In most instances, direct elections at local levels have led to greater participation from the ground. Qualitatively direct elections have forced local candidates to appeal directly to their constituents rather than pandering to the elites.

Missing the forest for the trees

Another line of argument contends that reverting to the DPRD system may not reduce the state's financial burden but instead encourage more money politics to take place – at the DPRD level. The *Pilkada*, notwithstanding its enduring flaws, still acts reasonably well as a form of check and balance to potential predatory interests.

More importantly, the *Pilkada* system with all its inherent imperfections had yielded several outstanding candidates at all levels of government such as Tri Rismaharini (mayor of Surabaya), Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or “Ahok” (deputy governor of Jakarta), Ganjar Pranowo (governor of Central Java) and president-elect Jokowi. An often neglected aspect of the *Pilkada* system is that independent candidates are allowed to run with specific requirements.

Surveys so far have shown that a majority of the Indonesian population were not in favour of abolishing the *Pilkada* system completely. A recent poll by the Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI) showed that more than 81 percent of participants felt that a local leader must be elected directly by the people without any interference from the DPRD.

At a strategic level, direct elections are more beneficial to some political parties than others. Smaller outfits like PKS and PAN stand to gain more from the *Pilkada* system but were nonetheless compelled to toe the line of their coalition. Surprisingly even the Gerindra Party had been a huge beneficiary of the *Pilkada* – its overall good performance at the recent legislative elections had been the result of sustained grassroots efforts that began with courting the local vote. A sharpening partisan divide between the pro-Prabowo and pro-Jokowi coalitions however has been at the forefront of the recent heated debates over the *Pilkada*.

Given that the *Pilkada* system had served Indonesia's democracy relatively well despite its inherent flaws, it would be a pity if it is abolished for the sake of the partisan divide. This is perhaps tantamount to missing the "forest" (democratisation) for the "trees" (inefficient allocation of resources).

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