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Simultaneous Local Elections in Indonesia: More Power for Incumbents?

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Synopsis

Indonesia held its first simultaneous local executive elections (Pilkada Serentak) on 9 December 2015. While administrative efficiency was the primary rationale for the simultaneous elections, structurally it may lead to greater power consolidation among incumbent executives, especially those with linkages to local political dynasties.

Commentary

LOCAL ELECTIONS were held on 9 December 2015 for political leaders in 269 districts and cities across Indonesia, comprising more than half of the approximately 534 localities in the country. The elections were held for governors, district heads (*bupati*) and mayors (*walikota*), who would assume the role of chief executives of these localities. The move toward simultaneous local elections was legislated by a revision on the Law on Local Elections enacted by the national parliament (DPR) in March 2015.

According to the law, there would be five additional elections to be held between 2017 and 2023, so that by 2023, all governors, district heads and mayors in Indonesia would have been elected under the new simultaneous election scheme.

Results and controversies

Some local executive races were embroiled in controversies between the incumbents and their challengers. For instance, last-minute disqualification of challengers in the districts of Simalungun and Pemantangsiantar (North Sumatra Province), Fakfak (Papua Province), and Manado (South Sulawesi Province)

resulted in the postponement of elections in these localities until the next simultaneous elections scheduled for 2017.

Other hotly contested mayoral races such as those in Surabaya (East Java Province) and Solo (Central Java Province) were also marred by negative campaigning derived from supporters of both sides, mainly in social media. Nevertheless, this year's *pilkada* campaigns were much quieter events compared to past local executive elections. This was because according to the new law, the candidates' campaign expenses were entirely funded by local government's budget (APBD).

While this legislation was adopted to curb the ballooning campaign expenditures of past elections, it effectively reduced the number of posters and other advertisements during the campaigns, as tight spending limits were issued to force candidates not to overspend public funds allocated to them. The lack of campaign advertisements, combined with additional rules that explicitly prohibited large-scale campaign rallies, contributed to the less than festive campaign atmosphere in most localities compared to previous elections.

Emerging trends

While the results of the *Pilkada Serentak* are still being tallied by the National Election Commission (KPU), some trends can be seen emerging from the elections, based on the results of exit polls by reputable polling agencies which were widely broadcast by the national television networks.

Firstly, the lack of visible advertisements during the campaign period preceding the elections seemed to have given advantage to incumbent district heads and mayors. Nearly 90 percent of incumbents who sought re-election this year were returned to office by voters. They benefited from name recognition and patronage projects distributed to prospective voters during their previous five-year term in office.

This can be seen not just in the re-election of popular incumbents such as Surabaya Mayor Tri Rismaharini (re-elected with more than 80 percent of votes), but also in the re-election of less popular incumbents such as Fransiskus Hadi Rudyatmo from Solo, who won 60 percent of the votes, despite negative campaigning by his opponents which questioned his fitness as a Christian leading a Muslim-majority city, along with his alleged linkages with organised crime syndicates (*preman*).

Secondly, there is a trend of the simultaneous *pilkada* throwing up and electing new district heads and mayors with linkages to local political dynasties. Most prominently, Ratu Tatu Chasanah was elected as the new *bupati* of Serang and Airin Rachmi Diany was elected as the new mayor of South Tangerang. Both women are respectively the sister and sister-in-law of former Governor of Banten Province, Ratu Atut Chosiyah, who is currently on trial for corruption allegedly committed during her time in office from 2005 to 2014.

In addition, spouses, children, or close relatives of former local executives had won elections of the district heads of Pasuruan and Kediri (East Java), Indramayu (West Java), and Ogan Ilir (South Sumatera province).

This trend may be troubling for those who see the increasing entrenchment of these political families to come at the expense of new candidates who may find it more difficult to break through. These candidates, especially those with reformist mindsets, could struggle to win future local executive races in Indonesia.

In the past, these candidates may have greater agency than previously thought in local politics. A good example is current president Joko Widodo, who was previously mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta. He may have been the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle's (PDIP) pick in these localities. However, his popularity among the electorate had nonetheless forced the PDIP party bosses to support his bid for presidency last year.

Joko Widodo's running mate in the Jakarta gubernatorial election, Basuki ('Ahok') Tjahaja Purnama, is another example of a party candidate going his own way. Although Ahok initially ran under the ticket of the Gerindra Party, he left the party in September 2014 due to unresolved differences. He has recently declared his intention to run for re-election in 2017 as an independent candidate, a novelty in Jakarta and certainly in Indonesia.

A structural anomaly in the long run?

Legislation enacted to support this year's simultaneous elections have put strict limitations on the ability of candidates, especially those with 'outside' political credentials, to effectively challenge incumbent local executives, resulting in the successful re-election of most local incumbents running this year, often by a wide margin.

Simultaneous local executive elections seem to create more advantages for incumbent district heads and mayors, especially those who come from local political dynasties, while creating less opportunity for 'transformative' outsiders to be elected as local executives, resulting in few choices for Indonesian voters.

Although such a transition may be inevitable in the long run, the greater justification for administrative efficiency and the alleged easing of costs may ultimately compromise the quality of democracy in Indonesia at the local level.

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