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2017 Jakarta Election and Indonesia's Democracy

Jakarta's Contentious Election: What Anies Baswedan's Victory Means

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Jakarta's 2017 Gubernatorial Election is Indonesia's most discussed political event so far. Marked by tacit competition between oligarchs and the mobilisation of religion-related issues to capture votes, the victory of Anies Baswedan to unseat Ahok as governor has raised questions about the prospects in the 2019 presidential election.

Commentary

A HARD-FOUGHT election for Jakarta's governorship has thrown up a new leadership, dethroning the controversial incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known as 'Ahok') and his running mate, Djarot Saiful Hidayat. Final quick count results on voting day on 19 April 2017 by three pollsters have shown the winning pair to be former education minister Anies Baswedan and his entrepreneur running mate Sandiagio Uno. The margin of victory for Anies-Sandiagio was as decisive as a double-digit lead over Ahok-Djarot. Anies won by about 58 percent of the votes versus about 42 percent for Ahok based on several quick count results. Official results will be known in May.

Nonetheless, the Jakarta gubernatorial election has been divisive, indicating a split among Jakartans between those who voted based on performance and others who voted based on identity politics. This polarisation could possibly have deep political consequences going forward; Anies and Sandiagio would now have to prove themselves that they can deliver development and change in the capital city.

Anies Baswedan for President?

Anies succeeded to unseat Ahok despite having risked his positive image as a prominent education figure by jumping from a nominee in former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democrat camp to a supporter of President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP).

Anies then joined forces with Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra Party, one that he fiercely criticised when he was in Jokowi's camp. For Jokowi and PDIP, a victory for Ahok was important to block the possible rise of a new contender leading up to 2019. Now that Anies has won, at least going by unofficial results, it does raise the question of whether he would follow Jokowi's footsteps and aim for the presidency next.

This would, however, be difficult if his Gerindra chief Prabowo sets his sights on taking on Jokowi in 2019, which would relegate Anies' prospects to that of being his running mate instead. Anies' victory on the Gerindra ticket also means that Gerindra's role as an opposition in parliament and a challenger to the Jokowi administration will be much strengthened.

Mobilisation of Identity Politics

Anies' victory has also shown that his strategy of tapping into issues related to religion to capture votes, despite disappointing many of his admirers, was an effective political move against Ahok. It helped that Ahok was a controversial figure. Although Ahok was an incumbent with a track-record, supported by the majority coalition in parliament, and enjoying close ties with the mainstream media moguls, he slid into deep controversy when he was captured on video camera making questionable references to a Quranic verse that provoked the Muslim electorate.

After a series of massive rallies against Ahok demanding him to be punished, Ahok's popularity slumped. He was subsequently charged with blasphemy and is facing trial. Nonetheless, Ahok, who is an ethnic Chinese Christian, still emerged as the leading winner in the first round with 43 percent of total votes.

Indeed, the mobilisation of religious issues has nuanced the election. Some mosques in Jakarta had openly refused to extend burial rites for those who supported or voted a blasphemer, which was an indirect reference to Ahok.

Anies, on his part, is known as a progressive Muslim figure, although he seemed comfortable with a more conservative line during the campaigns. Although one survey by the Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) showed that only 16.7 percent of the Jakarta population voted along religious lines, every vote counted. The SMRC survey had revealed that 32.4 percent of Anies' voters voted for him based on religion in the last election.

Party Patrons Behind Jakarta Election

Given the tight race, all the candidates had resorted to patrons with their political party machineries, particularly to capture the undecided voters.

Ahok had turned to Megawati, chief patron of the PDIP, who openly endorsed him and his running mate Djarot. For Megawati, an Ahok-Djarot victory was important to entrench PDIP's position as the leading party. Megawati personally ordered PDI-P members to defend Ahok after the controversial video went viral since last September.

Former president Yudhoyono, on his part, had also openly endorsed his son Agus Yudhoyono as a candidate in the first round of election perhaps with a view to building his own political dynasty at the Democrat Party that is going through a decline. His endorsement, however, had backfired as it affected Agus's electability after high profile social media attacks on Yudhoyono.

As for Prabowo, he had openly declared that he was likely to contest the presidency in 2019. Although Anies might not in the end run in 2019 as his vice-presidential candidate, Prabowo's support for him was good enough to increase his public presence as a step towards 2019, should he decide to contest. Prabowo has shown that he is not to be discounted when he contributed to 40 percent of Anies and Uno supporters in the first round of election in February.

Having these old political figures actively endorsing each favourite pair of candidates indicated the Jakarta election is as much an avenue for them to advance their respective individual interests.

Jokowi's Road to 2019

Anies' victory is earth-shaking for Jokowi's fluid coalition as it opens the door for another centre of power to emerge. Moving forward, the opposition led by Gerindra will likely start to raise issues to undermine the cohesion of Jokowi's coalition, as Prabowo lays the groundwork for his presidential election bid in 2019. Jokowi has to drive a hard bargain to keep his coalition members from gravitating towards either Prabowo's or Yudhoyono's camp.

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