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2017 Jakarta Election

Alternative View: Beyond Religion

By Chaula Rininta Anindya

Synopsis

While religion was a major factor in the recent Jakarta election for governor, fear of oppression and social welfare were significant issues framed by Anies-Sandi and successfully used to mobilise voters. Strategic issue-framing could be replicated in the 2019 presidential election to shape political contestation.

Commentary

THE JAKARTA gubernatorial election for 2017 was a tight race between Basuki “Ahok” Tjahja Purnama-Djarot Saiful Hidayat (Ahok-Djarot) and Anies Baswedan-Sandiaga Uno (Anies-Sandi). Yet, Anies-Sandi surprisingly won with a huge margin of 16 percent against Ahok-Djarot. Despite having led in the first round against the other candidates, many had predicted that it would be unlikely for Ahok-Djarot to win against Anies-Sandi, particularly with the voters of defeated first round candidates Agus Yudhoyono and Sylviana Murni (Agus-Silvi) being inclined to support Anies-Sandi.

The underlying factor is that Anies-Sandi and Agus-Silvi’s voters shared a similar objective to vote for a Muslim Governor to lead Jakarta. The Jakarta election was beyond choosing the next governor of the capital city. The path of President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, who began his journey to the presidency by first running in the Jakarta election, illustrates the centrality of the capital in Indonesian politics. This year’s Jakarta election could set the pattern for the upcoming presidential election.

Strategic Issue-Framing

The Islamist groups promoted the necessity of voting for a Muslim candidate to lead Jakarta. It is based on their interpretation of Surah Al-Maidah Verse 51 by which they believed Muslims should only be led by a Muslim. Their interpretative approach represents the method of modern salafi groups in implementing the core tenets of their ideology through the concept of *al-wala wal-bara* (loyalty and disavowal).

The concept of *al-wala* directs the loyalty of the Muslim community to the ummah, whereas the concept of *wal-bara* refers to the disavowal to anything that is seen as unIslamic and has the potential to threaten the sanctity of the religion.

In this light, religion could be seen as the fundamental issue in the Jakarta election. Nevertheless, religion is primarily an enabler to mobilise support. The main issues that mobilised support for Anies-Sandi were not necessarily religion, but the fear of being oppressed plus social welfare concerns. Anies-Sandi and their supporters smartly framed these issues to garner support.

The first issue was the fear of being oppressed; it represented the concept of existential identity - the fear that the group which they belong to is under threat. In essence, the concept of *al-wala wal-bara* also addresses the fear of being under threat whereby a believer cannot practise an Islamic way of life if they are led by a non-Muslim leader. It clearly threatens the belief that binds the group together.

Ahok-Djarot's latest video campaign also heightened this fear. It was circulated a few weeks before the second round. The beginning of the video had stirred controversy; there was a scene when an Islamist group held a rally while holding a big banner with the words "Crush Chinese" written. The Islamist groups perceived this scene as a form of oppression because it labelled them as a reactionary movement.

It creates a sense of urgency for the Muslims not to vote for a non-Muslim leader for fear that he would continue to oppress the Muslim community at large. Even though the main purpose of the video was promoting unity in diversity, the opening point backfired on Ahok-Djarot.

Nothing Intrinsically Religious

The second issue was social welfare, with Anies-Sandi touching upon the Jakartans' housing grievances. They promised low-income earners would get a home-loan with zero down payment. Although it seemed impossible to implement this project, this issue was strategic in addressing the despair of the poor in Jakarta.

Furthermore, the poor people who became the victims of Ahok's forced eviction also viewed that voting for Ahok was not an option. For instance, the victims of forced evictions at a neighbourhood of fishermen in North Jakarta strongly opposed Ahok's relocation solutions arguing that the relocated housing was way too far from the place they work.

The religious factor notwithstanding, Anies-Sandi and their supporters used

strategic-issue framing to mobilise the support. The religious rhetoric is one of the most effective issues in a Muslim majority country like Indonesia. But what actually had been done by Anies-Sandi were firstly to address the grievances of Jakartans and later finding a particular means of framing or context that resonated the most within the society, in this case the Muslim-majority Jakarta.

A similar approach could also be employed in secular society, but in this context the rhetoric is not religion but nationalism. President Donald Trump had successfully garnered support in the United States through his campaign promoting the nationalist spirit of “America First”. He once stated that he would no longer surrender the US or its people to the false promise of globalism. This resonated with a large group of Americans who believed that the US was in a state of decline.

In other words, there is nothing unique with the methods employed by Anies-Sandi and their supporters. Strategic issue-framing is a useful tactic to mobilise support.

Now for the Presidential Election

The pattern of strategic issue-framing might be replicated in the 2019 presidential election. With Jokowi predicted to run for a second term, his political rivals presumably will employ a similar method to undermine him. However, the question will be what issues and rhetoric are going to be addressed, especially as Jokowi is a Muslim and Javanese.

It will no longer be valid to use the rhetoric of “voting for a Muslim leader”, unless the rumours perpetrated in the past - that Jokowi was a secret Christian, of Chinese ethnicity, and having communist sympathies - were revived. If the rumours circulate again when the presidential election draws closer, Jokowi should change his strategy because relying on mere performance would be insufficient to secure his position.

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