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2017 Jakarta's Election and Indonesia's Democracy

Ascent of a Javanese King: President Jokowi's Leadership Style

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

With endless political tussles confronting him, particularly during the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, President Joko Widodo has drawn inspiration from Javanese philosophy for his political compass when dealing with his political opponents.

Commentary

JAVANESE CULTURE has permeated Indonesian politics throughout Indonesia's short political history. Sukarno's quest for national unity drew inspiration heavily from the Javanese figure Gadjah Mada who was determined to unite the archipelago under the control of the Majapahit Kingdom. Benedict Anderson, writing in 1998 about Sukarno's successor, described him thus: "[W]hen speaking off the cuff, Suharto sees himself not as a modern president but as a Javanese king."

Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono were also drawn to the practice of mysticism in search of wangsit or inspiration before taking important political decisions. President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is similarly influenced by Javanese political culture though in his own ways.

Jokowi's Javanese Leadership Style

Coming from a non-aristocratic Javanese background, President Jokowi is known to utilise the Javanese calendar in ceremonial matters. An example is when he decided

to announce his second cabinet reshuffle on 27 July 2016, which, when calculated using the *Wetonan* cycle – a system often used by Javanese to determine dates for an important event – fell on an auspicious day for a new beginning.

The philosophy of *sugih tanpa bandha* or being humble has become inseparable from his daily political image. His frequent impromptu visits *blusukan* to places such as slums and wet markets skyrocketed his popularity when approaching the 2014 presidential election as it projected the persona of a people's man.

As the election for governor in Jakarta grew heated, various issues including mobilisation of voters on religious and ethnic grounds were used to undermine the establishment particularly the non-Muslim Indonesian-Chinese incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). When dealing with such forces, Jokowi resorted to the use of proxy. This can be associated with *nglurug tanpa bala* which can be interpreted as the use of the soft approach, which also implies not getting your hands dirty.

To neutralise the demand by an agitated Muslim community to charge Ahok for blasphemy, Jokowi visited 17 Islamic organisations including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. This resulted in a more restraint posture from NU against Ahok after the NU chairman Kyai Said Aqil Siradj, declared that NU followers should not be participating in anti-Ahok rallies. Jokowi also mobilised the security apparatus to neutralise the movement confronting Ahok.

Dealing with Rivals

Jokowi also struck a bargain with his rival Prabowo Subianto, patron of the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), to handle the opposition. This move was seen as an attempt to alienate another challenger, former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. This argument was strengthened after an indirect reference by Jokowi in the aftermath of the 4 November 2016 anti-Ahok rally. He said there were political actors mobilising Muslims against Ahok, a remark deemed by many as targeting his rivals, including Yudhoyono.

Another of Jokowi's ways in dealing with Yudhoyono was through Antasari Azhar, a former chairman of Corruption Eradication Commission, who had publicly claimed that he was made a scapegoat in the high-profile murder case in 2010 during the administration of Yudhoyono.

Antasari previously asked for clemency after Jokowi became president on 20 February 2015, but this was rejected. His request was finally granted just before the Jakarta election a year later on 16 January 2017, which raised questions about Jokowi's political motive. A series of statements by Antasari about Yudhoyono, after the former president's meeting with Jokowi at the Presidential Palace on 26 January, contributed to the weakening of the appeal of Yudhoyono's son against Ahok during the first round of the governor election.

Keeping the Aura Alive

Another interesting decision made by Jokowi was when he abruptly decided to join the 2 December 2016 rally to pray alongside the protesters to show that he was

digdaya tanpa aji or strong without being forceful. For him it was important to be at the high-risk event to show that he was in charge. Public confidence in him had been weakened after he was nowhere to be seen during the earlier rally on 14 November.

Preservation of image during volatile political situations is important in the Javanese concept of power. It is pivotal in preserving the belief that the king still enjoys the “divine light” as a symbol of authority. As explained by Anderson, “once the people believed the [Javanese] king’s divine light had moved on, it will be difficult to restore”. Jokowi reportedly pushed aside many important meetings to take the spotlight at the rally.

To keep this popular psychology positive towards him, Jokowi relied much on his social media team, primarily to counter fake news and statements attacking Ahok. The President’s twitter account had in fact been busy making clarification after clarification.

Accommodating after Winning

After the first round of the Jakarta election, Jokowi hosted Yudhoyono on 9 March at the Palace as a sign of reconciliation. This showed that although Jokowi was on the winning side, he was ready to accommodate the losing side as understood in the phrase *menang tanpa ngasorake*.

His meeting with Yudhoyono was intended to cool the rift between the two leaders who had been engaged in a public feud in the run-up to the Jakarta election. As the two adversaries reconciled, Yudhoyono took a more neutral approach towards Jokowi and did not directly declare support for Anies Baswedan from Prabowo’s camp after his son, Agus, was defeated.

This also illustrated Jokowi’s political tact in preserving his presidency, by showcasing his ability in engaging in political transactions, and working with fellow rivals against other rivals.

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