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Indonesia's 2018 Regional Elections

The Race For West Java's Governorship: Some Preliminary Observations

By Keoni Marzuki

Synopsis

The West Java gubernatorial elections are one of the key highlights of the 2018 Regional Executive Elections. What are some of the trends that can be discerned from the West Java gubernatorial contest?

Commentary

THE HIGHLY anticipated third stage of the simultaneous regional executive elections (*pilkada serentak*) is set to take place this week on 27 June 2018, with 17 provinces, 39 municipalities, and 115 regencies throughout Indonesia holding elections at the same time. These elections for regional-level leaderships will take place in several provinces considered as key battlegrounds in national elections, for instance West Java, Central Java, East Java, North Sumatera, South Sumatera, and South Sulawesi.

West Java, home to around 31.7 million potential voters, is slated to be one of the highlights in the upcoming *pilkada*, given that the province has the highest number of potential voters. Both political parties as well as political elites will scramble to secure victory in the West Java regional elections, in the hope that it will translate into electoral advantages in the 2019 simultaneous national elections, including the race for the presidency. Hence the importance of the race for the governorship of West Java, Indonesia's biggest province.

Impact of Demography, Recent Memories and Timing

West Java province is home to roughly 30 million native Sundanese, constituting nearly 80 percent of the total population in this key province. Muslim population

constitutes an overwhelming religious majority, with around 47 million Muslims or more than 95 percent of the total population according to the latest available statistics.

Muslim communities in West Java are predominantly conservative, especially those living in urban areas. The demographic make-up of West Java province means Islamic and Sundanese credentials are important, though not absolutely critical, attributes for voter appeal.

The currency of identity credentials has grown substantially following the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election where identity-based attacks were widely exploited as part of electoral strategy to undermine Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the former Governor of Jakarta who is now jailed on a religious blasphemy charge. The memory of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election arouses concerns for certain candidates that such a strategy would be re-deployed, albeit with certain modifications to fit the local context.

Shoring Up Ethno-Religious Credentials

The importance of identity credentials in turn prompts candidates to bolster their Islamic and Sundanese identities – by means of pairing up with Islamic and/or Sundanese figures, promising policy programmes that overtly benefit Muslim communities, and espousing ‘Islam-friendly’ vision and mission statements – to insulate themselves from the possibility of identity-based attacks.

The well-known Mayor of Bandung and a contender in the gubernatorial race, Ridwan Kamil, for example, selected Uu Ruzhanul Ulum, two-term Tasikmalaya regent from the Islam-based PPP as his running mate. Kamil is a well-known figure in Greater Bandung Area, thanks to his adept marketing skill and wide social media presence. These allow him to publicise his achievements in managing the capital of West Java Province, although some observers have criticised them as superficial and cosmetic in nature.

His popularity, however, has proven to be insufficient to inoculate him from accusations of him being a closet Shia or that he is sympathetic to LGBT communities. Ulum’s *santri* background and networks with a madrasah in Tasikmalaya region are important qualities for Kamil to reaffirm his beleaguered Islamic credentials and simultaneously attract voters from Ulum’s madrasah networks.

Yet, strong Islamic credentials alone is insufficient. Deddy Mizwar, the sitting Vice Governor of West Java, is popular like Kamil due to his acting background, but he has also been the subject of attacks due to his non-Sundanese ethnicity despite of his association with conservative Islamic groups such as the Anti-Shia National Alliance.

His running mate, Dedi Mulyadi – the Regent of Purwakarta and Head of Golkar’s West Java leadership board - is renowned for promoting Sundanese culture and a brand of culturally-infused Islam, which often puts him at odds with conservative-puritan Islamic groups that considered such practices as heretical.

Adapting To Political Realities

Other candidates also adapt to local political realities. PDIP-backed Major General

(Rtd) Tubagus Hasanuddin is paired with recently retired Inspector General Anton Charliyan, the former West Java Regional Police chief, who has networks with local Islamic clerics in Tasikmalaya region. In an attempt to anticipate the exploitation of identity and sectarian politics, the Hasanuddin-Charliyan pair has promised to allocate one trillion rupiahs (equivalent to around US\$ 72.6 million) annually to fund mosques, Islamic boarding schools, teachers and clerics to bolster their credentials further.

Similarly, Gerindra paired its cadre Major General (Rtd) Sudrajat with Ahmad Syaikh, Vice Mayor of Bekasi from the Islamic-based PKS party, which are known for its devoted and organised followers across the West Java province. MG Sudrajat touted his ancestral lineage to one of West Java's prominent clerics, as well as his ownership of a madrasah in the Sukabumi area.

The pair visited Habib Rizieq Syihab, one of the key individuals driving the Defend Islam rallies in 2017 who is currently on a self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia in May 2018 to obtain his blessings in a move to attract the Islamic Defenders Front's (FPI) sympathisers.

Implications of Regional Elections and National Elections

The dynamics of the West Java gubernatorial election showcases the endurance of identity politics in local/regional elections in the aftermath of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election that deposed the capital's governor, Ahok. Consequently, the race becomes a relatively homogenous contest, whereby all candidates have similar, if not identical, credentials.

To a certain extent, the homogeneity has helped undercut attempts to exploit ethno-religious sentiments and identity politics as a viable electoral strategy and correspondingly while subsequently muffling the salience of identity politics in the election.

That being said, certain sentiments or dynamics in local elections can permeate and subsequently influence national-level dynamics of the 2019 elections. For instance, two separate violent assault cases against two Muslim clerics in West Java province in early 2018 reinforced the view that Islam is being continuously undermined by certain quarters in Indonesia, thereby fuelling pro-Islamic sentiment and potentially making Islam's presence in politics more pronounced.

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