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The 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election

The Jockeying Gathers Pace: Fluidity Of Candidates and Parties

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

As the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election – set for 17 April 2019 – is only nine months away, potential aspirants are currently involved in horse-trading with political parties that are likely to back them.

Commentary

WITH INDONESIA's presidential election less than a year away, the two leading candidates are Joko Widodo ('Jokowi'), who is seeking a second five-year term as president and retired Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, leader of the Gerindra Party, who was his primary opponent during the last presidential election in 2014. However, given the shifting political allegiances among the 20 political parties that are contesting the general elections and the presidential race, the emergence of other contenders cannot be ruled out.

A likely third presidential candidate is Anies Baswedan, Governor of the capital city, Jakarta, who took office last year, after a controversial election in which he defeated Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ('Ahok') – the city's previous governor – following month-long protests that led to Basuki being accused of blasphemy by Muslim groups.

A PKS-Centered Alliance?

On 4 July 2018, campaign volunteers backing Anies affiliated with the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) declared that he will run as a presidential candidate from their party. This indicated that after aligning itself with Prabowo's Gerindra for the

past five years, PKS is ready to break this alliance and nominate its own presidential candidate.

PKS' performance during the recently concluded simultaneous regional elections – in which candidates backed by the party won 7 out of 17 contested gubernatorial races – seems to have emboldened PKS cadres about its prospects during the 2019 general elections for the legislature, likely motivating them to consider contesting the parallel presidential election on their own.

That PKS declaration triggered several frenzied meetings between officials from the two parties. They were concluded on 8 July with a declaration that Anies will serve as Prabowo's vice presidential nominee. However, Tifatul Sembiring, a former PKS general chairman, announced two days later that the party is ready to break away from the Gerindra-PKS coalition - if Prabowo failed to select a PKS-backed vice presidential nominee.

This indicates no firm agreement has been settled between the two parties and PKS still considers the possibility of nominating its own presidential candidate – likely with Anies as the party's nominee and Ahmad Heryawan – the outgoing West Java governor – as its vice-presidential candidate.

Earlier this year, PKS held discussions with both the National Awakening Party (PKB - affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama or NU) and the National Mandate Party (PAN - affiliated with Muhammadiyah) for a possibility to form an Islamist alliance (*poros Islam*) consisting of the three parties. This idea could be revisited should PKS decide to end its alliance with Gerindra and nominate its own presidential candidate.

Jokowi's Likely VP Nominee

Meanwhile, President Jokowi is considering Tuan Guru Bajang (or TGB whose real name is Muhammad Zainul Majdi) as his vice-presidential nominee. Like Jokowi, Majdi is considered as a successful local executive, having completed two consecutive terms as governor of West Nusa Tenggara and made the province as an internationally renowned Islamic tourist destination.

In addition, Majdi is a well-regarded religious scholar (*alim*), who obtained degrees in Islamic theology (*usuluddin*) from Al Azhar University in Egypt - considered by many Muslims as the most important Islamic higher education institution in the world.

As a preacher, he has a wide following in West Nusa Tenggara and in the outer islands such as Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. By appointing Majdi as his vice-presidential nominee, Jokowi plans to split the support from the Jakarta protest participants (known collectively as 'Alumni 212' groups); as a result some of them would have backed his re-election bid, instead of supporting other presidential candidates like Prabowo, Anies, and retired General Gatot Nurmantyo, the former Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) commander-in-chief.

Jokowi also seeks support from other religious leaders, mainly NU clerics, to boost his re-election chances. On 10 July 2018, 100 Islamic clerics who called themselves The Young Ulama Solidarity Group for Jokowi (*Samawi*) announced their support for his

re-election, declaring that as president, Jokowi is “a leader who pays attention to the welfare of religious groups, especially Muslims”. The group is chaired by Aminuddin Ma’ruf, a former general chairman of the Indonesian Islamic University Students Association (PMII), which is affiliated with NU.

Other ulama groups are also preparing to declare their endorsement for Jokowi. Majdi is scheduling an international conference of Islamic clerics in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, inviting this month Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque, as its keynote speaker.

Another ulama conference organised by ‘Alumni 212’ groups is also scheduled in Jakarta around the same time. The latter conference - endorsed by Rizieq Shihab, supreme leader of Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), is expected to endorse one of Jokowi’s opponents as a presidential candidate. Supporters said this conference would be attended by up to 10,000 Islamic clerics, lending religious legitimacy to their effort to unseat Jokowi in the 2019 general election.

Apart from these presidential aspirants, we can expect other key players like former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his Democrat Party to have an important role in the coming month, by either aligning itself with one of the leading presidential candidates or sponsoring its own candidate – likely to be Agus Yudhoyono - the eldest son of the former president. The Jakarta Post reported on 17 July that Prabowo is seriously considering Agus to be his vice-presidential nominee.

The backroom negotiations and deals between political parties and presidential candidates is expected to continue up to 10 August 2018, when the list of presidential and vice-presidential nominees is finalised. This will be followed with an eight-month long campaign period that will end one week before the election day scheduled for 17 April 2019.

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