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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

The Coming Divisive Contest: Jokowi vs. Prabowo

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Indonesian politicians are preparing for the 2019 presidential and legislative elections. A high barrier to entry has shaped the coming presidential election into a two-horse race. As the two separate elections will be held on the same day, this has affected the way each party is approaching coalition building.

Commentary

THE 2019 presidential election in Indonesia is approaching, scheduled for 17 April next year, and political parties or political coalitions have to register their preferred pair of candidates to the General Election Committee between 4 and 10 August 2018. Only those with 20 percent of parliamentary seats or 25 percent of popular votes can nominate a pair of candidates.

This high barrier to entry for the presidential race has forced the smaller parties to gravitate towards either the incumbent, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) or Prabowo Subianto – seemingly Jokowi's one and only potential opponent in Indonesia's coming presidential election.

A Fraught Coalition

The coming race is not only a presidential but also a legislative contest taking place at the same time. As indicated by the dynamic in the recently concluded Indonesian regional elections, the legislative elections for the national assembly loom in importance as the seats will form the basis to determine each party's standing in the subsequent elections in 2024.

Take for example, the Democratic Party of Struggle's (PDI-P) approach in the elections. Its leader, Megawati Sukarnoputri, personally decided to nominate only party cadres and insisted the party be the leader of the coalition despite it being aware the move might cost it votes. By leading a small coalition, whilst campaigning for local candidates, PDI-P is able to [campaign](#) for the re-election of President Joko Widodo.

PDI-P isn't the only party operating with an eye on the big prize next year. The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) too changed its tactics. Instead of focusing on winning in key areas, PKS honoured its coalition with Gerindra Party. In the recent regional election, Gerindra and PKS formed a [coalition](#) in five pivotal provinces, including West Java and North Sumatra.

They limited themselves to these constituencies even though they might have wished to contest more seats but found it was difficult to work together sometimes. The PKS and Gerindra coalition at the regional election has given impetus to the [#ChangePresident2019](#) movement to unseat Jokowi in 2019.

In exchange for PKS loyalty, Gerindra has reportedly signed a [written agreement](#) with the Islamist party to endorse Prabowo as the presidential candidate, but PKS has to be consulted when selecting the vice-president candidate. This is of course merely a gentlemen's agreement.

Prabowo's Dilemma

This, nevertheless, has made selecting a running mate more difficult for Prabowo. PKS has insisted Prabowo's running mate to be from one of the [nine PKS cadres](#) proposed by the party, including Salim Segaf Al Jufri, the Chairman of the PKS Advisory Council.

Earlier this year, Prabowo has announced his intention to contest. But, interestingly the announcement was made with some [reluctance](#). It appears that his nominations were largely a result of party pressure. Sandiaga Uno, deputy governor of Jakarta and Prabowo's strategist, [posited](#) that Prabowo's lack of ambition was due to his age, as he is approaching 67. After losing the race three times and mobilising significant resources, Prabowo is keen just to be the kingmaker.

For Gerindra, however, the nomination of Prabowo, as of now, is non-negotiable. Having Prabowo contesting the presidential election, no matter the result, will be a big boost for the party at the concurrent legislative election. This is also probably the reason for many parties, including PKS, to be really persistent in having their own cadre to run with Prabowo in the next presidential race.

Demise of the Third Axis

The possibility of a third axis driven by the Democrat Party (PD) – the Yudhoyonos' camp - is now highly unlikely, because Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, former president and the patron of PD, has [declared](#) his support for Prabowo in the presidential race. The more important stake for him is for the Yudhoyono dynasty to be preserved. As such, PD can neither align with the Jokowi camp nor Prabowo's.

Also out is the option of leading its own coalition of parties, depending on whether Yudhoyono's son, Agus H. Yudhoyono, will be able to secure a vice president position or an important ministerial position. As declared by the senior Yudhoyono in a [press conference](#) on 25 July, despite good relations between him and Jokowi, it is difficult for PD to be in the same coalition with PDI-P. One of the reasons is the [rift](#) between Yudhoyono and Megawati dating back to when he defeated Megawati in the 2004 presidential election.

Nonetheless, it is [difficult](#) for Yudhoyono to pressure Prabowo to accept his son, Agus, as his running mate, so long as PKS is not agreeable with the proposition. Yudhoyono is building a [closer relation](#) with the National Mandate Party (PAN), another player in the coalition that might be willing to support Agus' vice-presidential candidacy.

For Prabowo, PD is a balancing force when dealing with PKS that has been breathing down his neck. Indeed, managing a coalition of equals, comprising parties with relatively [similar percentage of parliamentary seats](#), is more precarious compared to Jokowi's coalition that centered on PDI-P and the Functional Party (Golkar).

The Coming Divisive Race

A coalition of PDI-P and seven parties has nominated Jokowi as the presidential candidate. It is likely that to strengthen his Islamist credentials that has been [under attack](#) after the 2017 regional election Jokowi will select a non-partisan [vice president](#) with a wide Islamist-based support. During the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election the issue of religion was successfully worked up by the opposition as a stick to beat Jokowi's camp. This strategy is likely to be redeployed by the opposition to win the presidential race.

In the recently concluded regional election, Prabowo made obvious efforts to deepen emotional ties with popular Islamic clerics including [Rizieq Shihab](#), Abdul Somad, and local Islamic figures throughout Indonesia such as [Tengku Zulkarnain](#) from North Sumatra. There is a real danger these moves to secure political support through religion will divide the country and be detrimental to Indonesia's democracy in the long run.

Unfortunately, division in Indonesia based on religious interpretation is an ongoing and seemingly irreversible trend. Largely mobilised by the opposition, Prabowo has positioned his coalition for the next election in the name of [keumatan](#) or the legitimate representation of Indonesian Muslims against Jokowi and PDI-P both of whom are painted as anti-Islam.

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