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2019 Indonesian Presidential Election

The #2019ChangePresident Campaign: Tightening the Screws?

By Dedi Dinarto

Synopsis

An anti-Jokowi movement is building up, rallying around the hashtag #2019ChangePresident. The rallies have resonated such that they have extended beyond Java. The screws are tightening ahead of the 2019 presidential election.

Commentary

#2019CHANGEPRESIDENT – a movement against President Joko Widodo better known by its Indonesian hashtag #2019GantiPresiden – is growing in momentum. Initially established by the Secretary General of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) Mardani Ali Sera, the movement has drawn increasing public attention for the upcoming Indonesian presidential election due next year.

Positioned as a 'wakeup call' for the Islamic community in Indonesia, this movement has as its foundational principle the goal of critiquing the Jokowi administration's performance, especially its infrastructure projects, and more strategically to hinder President Jokowi from winning a second term in office.

Growing Rallies for Change

#2019ChangePresident rallies have been systematically organised in several parts of Indonesia. The first rally occurred in Solo, Central Java on 2 July 2018 where the movement aimed to deal a psychological blow by criticising the catering business of Jokowi's eldest son. Two weeks later, the movement organised a similar rally in Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra province.

The victory of Edy Rahmayadi as the Governor of North Sumatra, who was backed by the coalition of opposition political parties and conservative Islamic groups, opened a platform for the #2019ChangePresident campaign to flourish. On 29 July 2018, the spreading movement surprisingly reached Batam, a multicultural city located some 45 minutes south of Singapore.

In Batam the #2019ChangePresident campaign was organised with the assistance of the *Aliansi Umat Islam Batam Bersatu* (United Batam Islamic Alliance) led by Ustadz Erwin Abu Ghaza. The Batam movement for presidential change was initially designed to counterbalance the “*Jalan Santai Cinta Jokowi*” or Love Jokowi Fun Walk in Batam Centre, which was initiated by various elements of Jokowi supporters in Batam.

Tension between the two camps had already occurred a day earlier at Hang Nadim Airport when Neno Warisman, a former singer and a leading figure of the #2019ChangePresident movement, arrived in Batam. She is also the primary financial contributor for the #2019ChangePresident campaign with her personal investment of about 40 million rupiah (more than SGD 3700).

Neno, who is also a cadre of the Islamist PKS, came to Batam to establish mass support at the grassroots level in the city. However, a group of Jokowi sympathisers blocked Neno’s entry and unfolded banners indicating their desire to stop ‘external provocateurs’ in Batam.

Leading Figures and Underlying Motives

Widely known as Bunda Neno (Mother Neno), she has been active in disseminating the campaign message beyond the island of Java. Before Batam, Neno had visited Medan to deliver a political speech in front of the Masjid Raya Al Mahsum in Medan, assisted by a parliamentarian from Gerindra Party Raden Syafii.

The #2019ChangePresident national campaign team has been creating a solid network with its stakeholders in Batam. Ustadz Erwin, identified as an arm of the #2019ChangePresident movement, delivered a political speech before and during the Batam rally for change in which he said: “Your mobile phone is our AK-47. It is time for war using all social media platform.”

He is also the leader of the United Batam Islamic Alliance, an Islamic organisation on the island that has been vocal in supporting the imprisonment of the former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahja Purnama (Ahok) and Sukmawati Soekarnoputri, the daughter of Sukarno who controversially read out a poem criticising the practice of Islam in Indonesia.

Political Dimension

Serving as the Deputy of Forum Ukhuwah Islamiyah (FUI) of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in Batam, Ustadz Erwin also enjoys a close relationship with PKS and the 212 Alumni in Jakarta, the movement that was behind the mass protests against Ahok. Given his background and affiliations, Ustadz Erwin is strongly associated with the opposition camp and playing its role as its outpost in Batam.

The #2019ChangePresident rally in Batam indicates an effort to convince Indonesia's Muslim community to back one of Jokowi's opponents, likely to be Prabowo Subianto of Gerindra, in the upcoming 2019 presidential election.

The #2019ChangePresident team has been quite successful in promoting the anti-Jokowi sentiment from Jakarta into the outlying regions. Some issues it has used effectively during its rallies in Medan and Batam are the criminalisation of ulama (religious leaders); the increasing prices of staple food; and the failure to maintain social cohesion by using the examples of mosque burning in Aceh and discrimination of Muslims in numerous policy deliberations in Jakarta.

The antagonistic message of this movement is targeted with precision: do not vote for President Joko Widodo for the 2019 presidential election unless the people want to suffer more in the next five years. Ultimately, the campaign seeks to build and consolidate political power, to identify a common enemy, and to destroy Jokowi's political image.

Potential Implications

With the recent rallies organised by the #2019ChangePresident movement in Batam, social segregation will possibly be dichotomised into pro-Jokowi and anti-Jokowi forces. This situation is more likely to cause social friction whereby pro-Jokowi voters will be accused of being anti-Islam and those who opposed him would be considered as pro-Islam.

Given the circumstances, the local government must work together with security authorities to ensure peace and stability in Batam ahead of the 2019 presidential election.

At the national level, the political signal is clear: Jokowi is likely to face strong opposition from the group during the upcoming 2019 election campaign. The support from major political parties, such as PDI-P, Golkar, NasDem, Hanura and others, does not necessarily ensure Jokowi's victory in the presidential race. Rather, whoever influences public opinion at the grassroots level is likely to decide the election outcome.

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