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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Joko Widodo: Vulnerable Despite Strong Incumbency

By Alexander R Arifianto

SYNOPSIS

Incumbent Indonesian President Joko Widodo enters the 2019 presidential election with a strong advantage based on the support from political parties, politicians, and other notables. However, he remains vulnerable to attacks by his chief contender, Prabowo Subianto, on his economic achievements and Islamic credentials.

COMMENTARY

WITH INDONESIA'S presidential election campaign now passing the halfway mark, with some three months of hustings remaining, the electoral performances of the two candidates – incumbent president Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) and his challenger retired Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto – have emerged as talking points.

On the surface, Jokowi currently seems to be in a very strong position. A newly-released survey commissioned by Indikator Politik, one of Indonesia's most reliable public opinion companies, shows that he is leading Prabowo with a margin of 55 percent to 35 percent. This is a slight decrease from the company's September 2018 survey, which puts the candidates' electability at 58 percent and 32 percent, respectively.

Jokowi's Strategy

The Jokowi campaign has pursued several strategies to bolster the president's popularity rating. Firstly, it touted the economic accomplishments made during Jokowi's first term (2014-19).

This includes new tax holiday schemes and streamlining of business permits to encourage new foreign direct investments; speeding up the construction of new infrastructure projects, especially new toll roads, airports, and seaports; and increasing the number of Indonesians eligible to receive free or highly-subsidised healthcare through the national health insurance schemes (JKN).

Secondly, Jokowi nominated Ma'ruf Amin, a senior Islamic cleric from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, who is also general chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). This appointment was made to shield himself from charges often made by conservative Muslims regarding his lack of strong Islamic credentials.

With Ma'ruf's appointment, his campaign hopes it will solidify support for Jokowi among pious Muslims.

Power of Incumbency

As incumbent, Jokowi is also using his powers to secure endorsement from regional officeholders and other senior politicians. So far 31 governors (out of 35 provinces) have declared their support for him. Since in Indonesia prospective voters are more likely to be swayed by influential figures (*tokoh*) rather than political parties, such endorsements can help Jokowi to secure electoral support.

This is especially so in the provinces where Prabowo has commanded significant support in the polls, like West Sumatra, West Java, and South Sulawesi. Jokowi is also backed by nine out of 16 political parties which are contesting this year's national legislative election – compared to Prabowo who is backed by only five parties.

Lastly, the Jokowi campaign has assembled approximately two dozen 'volunteers' (*relawan*) groups, which are financed and coordinated by leading retired Indonesian military officers (TNI) supporting the president, including Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, Moeldoko, Wiranto, and A.M. Hendropriyono.

Jokowi Remains Vulnerable

However, despite the fact Jokowi is currently leading in the polls, his electability is widely considered by many observers to remain vulnerable from potential new attacks from the Prabowo campaign. This includes those who criticise his economic policies and those who continue to questioning his Islamic credentials.

On the economic front, the Prabowo campaign has criticised Jokowi for the relatively high prices of food items such as rice, meat, vegetables, and other staples. They also criticised Jokowi's policy to import most of these staples from overseas, while these imports have failed to bring down the prices of these goods.

In the outer island provinces like West Kalimantan and North Sulawesi, the campaign attacks the administration for failing to halt the falling prices of plantation commodities like palm oil and rubber, which are important economic resources for farmers who live in these provinces. These attacks have managed to bring down Jokowi's electability

ratings in West Kalimantan, from 60 percent of the votes during the 2014 presidential election to approximately just 54 percent today.

Despite the presence of Ma'ruf as Jokowi's vice-presidential nominee, so far he has not been able to attract more supporters from the conservative Islamic background. Much of the clerics and organisations affiliated with the National Movement to Support the Ulama Edicts (*GNPF Ulama*) are steadfast in their support for Prabowo Subianto.

Is Jokowi Prepared for Battle?

Ma'ruf has also not been able to attract supporters from Muhammadiyah – Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation, given the wide perception within the organisation that the Jokowi administration favours NU rather than the former. This is indicated by the large number of political appointees from NU background and government grants and subsidies given to NU-linked religious institutions. Consequently, most Muhammadiyah members are supporting Prabowo instead of Jokowi.

There is also a growing perception that despite his position as MUI general chairman, Ma'ruf is not well-known among grassroots-level Muslims, including those who aligned themselves with NU. This can be seen even in Ma'ruf's native province Banten, where he is not well-known in rural villages where most of the province's residents live.

According to a recent survey, Prabowo has a large lead over Jokowi in Banten province, 59 percent versus 39 percent. While in West Java, another province with a significant number of pious Muslim population, Jokowi only has a slight lead over Prabowo, 47 to 42 percent.

Using the advantage of his incumbency, Jokowi is able to marshal more political support from political parties, regional executives, retired TNI officers, and influential notables compared to his opponent Prabowo. This support, if effectively utilised, can potentially help him to secure his re-election relatively easily.

However, evidence on the ground indicates that this election will be much closer than what most pollsters and pundits have anticipated. Jokowi remains vulnerable to attacks from Prabowo's camp on his economic records and on his Islamic credentials. In addition, Prabowo seems to have more committed supporters on his side rather than Jokowi.

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