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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

East Java: Deadheat in a Battleground Province

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SYNOPSIS

Home to roughly 31 million eligible voters, both President Joko Widodo and his opponent Prabowo Subianto are currently locked in a statistical deadheat in East Java – a key province in which the winner is likely to become Indonesia's next president.

COMMENTARY

FOR BOTH contenders of the 2019 presidential election – incumbent President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo and his challenger Prabowo Subianto – East Java is a "must win" province. East Java has a total population of 42 million – including an estimated 31 million citizens who are eligible to vote in the 2019 Indonesian general election. It is Indonesia's second largest province measured in terms of its population.

East Java is generally considered a stronghold of Jokowi. This is because he won handily against Prabowo in the province – with a margin of six percent – during the pair's first presidential match-up in 2014. Most experts expect Jokowi to have a strong advantage in East Java because of the dominance of two political parties within the president's coalition, the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) – which traces its lineage to Indonesia's founding president Sukarno, and the National Awakening Party (PKB) – which is affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation.

Reversal of Fortune?

PDIP is considered the dominant party in major urban centres within the province, including Surabaya (population approximately 3 million) and Malang (population

approximately 900,000). It is also the dominant party in the west coast region of the province extending from Jombang to Madiun – locally known as the Matraman region.

Meanwhile, PKB dominates regions within the province where the majority of population are considered as NU followers. This includes the eastern coastal districts spreading from Pasuruan to Banyuwangi known locally as the *tapal kuda* ('horseshoe') region, as well as Madura Island.

Nonetheless, recently conducted fieldwork by RSIS' Indonesia Programme researchers indicate that unlike in 2014, it would not be easy for Jokowi to win over a majority of East Java voters, since Prabowo and his coalition partners have invested their resources in trying to wrestle the province away from Jokowi and his coalition.

Like elsewhere in Indonesia, there is a growing Islamic conservatism in East Java province, especially in urban centres like Surabaya and Malang and in rural regions with a deeply religious tradition like Madura Island. Thanks to this trend, Prabowo's own Gerindra Party and Islamist parties aligning with him – the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Mandate Party (PAN) – are gaining ground within these regions.

Replicating 2018 Gains

The June 2018 East Java gubernatorial election shows the potential leverage of the Prabowo coalition in shifting the political fortunes in East Java away from parties aligned with Jokowi. Initially, Gerindra and PKS were aligned with PDIP and PKB in supporting Saifullah Yusuf's candidacy as the province's governor. However, at the last minute the former parties switched their allegiances toward Khofifah Indar Pawaransa, who eventually won the gubernatorial election with 54 percent of the votes.

Bolstered by this success, Prabowo coalition members seek to replicate it in the 2019 presidential contest. Using both social media and support from religious leaders (*kyai*) who are aligned with them, they promoted 'black campaign' narratives against Jokowi ranging from rumours that he was formerly linked with the illegal Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and that he was not truly a pious Muslim.

They also attacked Jokowi for failing to halt the decrease in the prices of fisheries products, salt and other necessities important to the livelihood of fishermen and farmers living in the coastal regions and in Madura Island.

Prabowo Coalition Gaining Ground

Such attacks are effective in turning popular support against Jokowi in Madura Island and in urban centres like Surabaya. In the latter, residents of hamlets populated by low-income residents – for instance Kenjeran, Tambaksari, and Semampir – have now become strong Prabowo partisans.

In the words of a Jokowi campaign volunteer: "They consider Prabowo to be Indonesia's saviour, while they consider Jokowi as the devil incarnate who will destroy Indonesia. Nothing you say or do would have convinced them otherwise."

Residents of Madura Island are also expected to strongly back Prabowo, despite Jokowi's recent move at lifting toll rates for commuters utilising the Suramadu bridge that connects the island with Surabaya. An internal Prabowo campaign survey provided by a Gerindra Party official estimated a big victory for him in Madura.

Up to 80 percent of Pamekasan voters are planning to support him in the April election, while 70 percent of Sampang voters are planning the same. In Bangkalan and Sumenep districts, Prabowo is leading Jokowi by 55 versus 45 percent.

Meanwhile, an internal survey provided by the Jokowi campaign showed him leading in East Java over Prabowo with 57 percent over Prabowo's 43 percent – only a slight improvement of Jokowi's margin during the 2014 election.

The same survey showed a very tight race between the two candidates in Surabaya, Malang, and the East coast '*tapal kuda*' regions. It also shows Prabowo as a clear winner in Madura Island, while Jokowi a clear winner in the Matraman region and in Blitar and Tulung Agung districts.

Deadheat Battleground Province

While surveys from both Jokowi and Prabowo campaigns are internal polls, both are taken within a month before the general election. Both show an identical result, with a similar breakdown in key battleground regions within East Java.

We can conclude that unlike in 2014 – where Jokowi won handily over Prabowo in the province – the 2019 presidential contest is in all likelihood a clear deadheat in the province.

Like in other battleground provinces such as South Sulawesi, West Java, and Central Java, the presidential election in East Java shows a very tight race between the two leading candidates. Since the election winner in the province is likely going to be elected as Indonesia's next president, we can expect the two candidates to continue their fierce fight for voters in East Java until 17 April polling day.

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