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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

What Will Happen After the Polls?

By Irman G. Lanti

SYNOPSIS

Indonesians will go to the polls this week, on 17 April, to vote for the country's president. This will be a repeat of the 2014 presidential contest when Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto first clashed. The lead-up to the elections has been marked by unprecedented divisiveness. Will Indonesians breath a sigh of relief after the elections or will the polarisation ossify?

COMMENTARY

INDONESIANS WILL go to the polls this Wednesday, on 17 April 2019, to cast their vote for the fourth direct presidential election in the country's history. Voters will elect their choice directly, without having to go through the legislature. Since the start of *Reformasi* in 1998, elections have always been an exciting affair. But Indonesians may have never seen an election that is so divisive and polarising as this year's.

The election itself is a repeat of the previous one in 2014 which saw the nationalist Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') facing the former general Prabowo Subianto who is backed by Islamist parties. Jokowi won the 2014 presidential election by a margin of around 6%. In the interim, many things have happened. The Jokowi government seems to have fallen out of favour with the Islamists who in recent years seem to be growing more assertive.

The Ahok Effect

The momentum for this growing influence was triggered by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ('Ahok'), then Governor of Jakarta and previously the running mate of Jokowi, when Jokowi ran for the governorship of the capital city in 2012. Basuki made a comment

about a verse in the Quran that forbid Muslims to vote for non-Muslim as leaders. The verse itself was the source of long debate among Muslim scholars for hundreds of years, but the Islamists saw this as an opportunity to rally public support against Jokowi who was seen as an ally of Ahok.

The Islamists comprised groups such as the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front), and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and are supported by Islamist political parties such as the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS). Hundreds of thousands of Muslims from all over the country gathered in the National Monument (Monas) Square in Central Jakarta on 2 December 2016 to demonstrate against Ahok who was accused of blasphemy. This gathering came to be known as *Aksi Bela Islam 212* (or the 212 Defending Islam Action). Since that fateful day, Indonesian politics has not been the same.

Jokowi was increasingly portrayed as anti-Islam. This portrayal was most likely behind his decision to get Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative cleric from Nahdatul Ulama (NU), as his running mate. But even this decision has not improved by much Jokowi's image among many Muslims. On the other hand, the secular Prabowo chose Sandiaga Uno, a young businessman with no religious background, as his vice-presidential candidate, against the wishes of the Islamist clerics; yet his image as the "defender of Islam" has continued to soar. Amid the divisiveness and polarisation, what can we expect to transpire in Indonesia in the period following this week's elections?

What To Expect Post-17 April

Contrary to some results published by a number of research institutions that predicted a Jokowi (or Prabowo) victory by a comfortable margin, the elections will likely end up in a nail-biter. Any vote difference below the figure of three million (the psychological mark of 2% of votes) will cause an almost immediate recourse by the losing party to the Constitutional Court. It is probably more likely that the vote difference will be around 1 to 2 million, if not less.

But the process in the Constitutional Court will take some time (up to mid-June), and in the interim the situation in the country will remain tense, with each side claiming victory. What will be daunting is not what will happen inside the courtroom, but outside. Both sides are likely to mobilise their supporters for street demonstrations.

We might see a repeat of 212, probably on a wider scale as actions may also spread to the rest of the country rather than be confined to Jakarta. This will divide the country even further. Although it is unlikely that we will see another massive Reformasi movement that brought down President Suharto in 1998, governing will become a challenge given the circumstances.

What We Can Expect in the Medium Term

Even if Indonesia survives this, divisiveness and polarisation will continue to colour Indonesian socio-political life for the foreseeable future. Judging from the verbal war of politicians from both camps, openly and behind closed doors, politics has increasingly become a zero-sum affair in Indonesia. The victorious will do everything

in their power to ensure that the space for their opponents will be restricted and that resources are allocated to the winning side.

If Jokowi is re-elected, the government aided by NU, where Ma'ruf Amin hailed from, will go on the offensive to promote the so-called Islam Nusantara as a counter narrative to the rising influence of the Islamists in the society. The Islamists will then devise strategies that will seek to undermine the second Jokowi administration while they continue to expand their voters' base, in ways that no doubt mimic the strategy that has been effectively employed in recent years.

If Prabowo wins, his administration will have to fulfil its campaign promises and meet some demands from the Islamists. Although, it is less likely that this will comprise a state-sanctioned effort of Islamisation, or a turning of Indonesia into a *khilafah* or caliphate, the space for further *dakwah* or Islamic missionary activities by these groups will expand or at least be unimpeded by the state.

We have seen this during the last few years of the Jokowi administration, which some see as undermining the vision of Indonesia as a pluralist nation. Groups such as the HTI which had been banned by the Jokowi government, can be reinstated or allowed to be revived under a different name. There may also likely be a purge of the military (TNI) and the Police (Polri) of elements that are deemed close to Jokowi.

Jockeying for 2024

Whoever wins, what we will definitely see post-election is the immediate preparation for Presidential Election 2024. If Prabowo loses by a small margin, the Islamists will receive a boost in their confidence that they will take over in 2024. They will immediately search for candidates to position. The strongest at the moment seems to be Anies Baswedan, the current Governor of Jakarta, who defeated Ahok by using an Islamist platform.

On the other hand, the nationalist and traditionalist factions of Indonesian politics will have to find a candidate for 2024 no matter the outcome of the elections. Jokowi will not be able to run again due to the constitutional two-term presidential limit. There are a number of candidates who can be forwarded from the nationalist side, including Ganjar Pranowo, the Governor of Central Java and Tri Rismaharini, Mayor of Surabaya.

From the traditionalist side, the name of Khofifah Indar Parawansa, the Governor of East Java, seems to be often mentioned. It remains to be seen if Indonesian politics will be further consolidated along these *aliran* (streams of political thinking) that one day will find a new equilibrium. Or will the dynamics and tensions that we see today ease and fade away?

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