

*The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

No. 059/2023 dated 18 August 2023

## Indonesian Presidential Election: The Race Is Heating Up

*Alexander R. Arifianto*

### SYNOPSIS

*The Indonesian presidential election race is now entering a critical stage as all three presidential candidates finalise their coalition partners and vice-presidential nominees. **ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO** argues that Prabowo Subianto is an early frontrunner in the race, while his two opponents, Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan, are struggling to attract coalition partners and viable vice-presidential nominees.*

### COMMENTARY

On 13 August 2023, Indonesia's defence minister, Lieutenant-General (retired) Prabowo Subianto, [formally announced the names of the political parties](#) that have agreed to endorse his presidential candidacy. Prabowo's large support coalition is anchored by four political parties: his own Gerindra party, which controls 13.6% of the seats in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR); Golkar (14.8% of DPR seats); the National Awakening Party (PKB) – affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation (10% of DPR seats); and the National Mandate Party (PAN) – affiliated with Muhammadiyah, the country's second largest Islamic organisation (7.6% of DPR seats).

### Prabowo: A Formidable Early Frontrunner

Altogether, the parties in Prabowo's coalition control 46% of the seats in the DPR, much larger than those that support his two opponents – respectively Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo and former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan. The fact that Prabowo seems to have [the tacit endorsement of outgoing President Joko "Jokowi"](#)

[Widodo](#) has bolstered his standing in the presidential contest. His third presidential contest – which was considered a long shot just several months ago – [is now considered to be very formidable](#), with Prabowo currently leading in most reputable opinion polls.



Apart from his large support coalition which currently controls 46% of the seats in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR), Indonesia's Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto seems to have the tacit endorsement of outgoing President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, bolstering his standing and establishing him as an early forerunner in the presidential election race. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Prabowo's candidacy might become even more invincible if Gibran Rakabuming, Jokowi's eldest son and the current mayor of Solo – is chosen as his vice-presidential running mate. Recent media reports state that Gibran and Erick Thohir – minister of state-owned enterprises – are [the two remaining vice-presidential aspirants](#) on Prabowo's shortlist.

Whether Gibran is allowed to stand for election as Prabowo's running mate depends on a case pending in the Constitutional Court which [calls for lowering the minimum eligibility age](#) of presidential and vice-presidential nominees to 35 years of age. The court is expected to rule on the case within the next few weeks.

Should the court allow for Gibran's vice-presidential candidacy to proceed, it would make the president's endorsement of Prabowo all but official. It would also mark a remarkable transformation of the two men's political relationship – from fierce opponents in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections to allies in an election which [Jokowi hopes will secure his political legacy](#) as Indonesia's most successful post-*Reformasi* president.

Now that Prabowo has announced the names of political parties that have agreed to support his presidential nomination, pressure is increasingly building within Ganjar and Anies's campaigns to make formal announcements on their respective coalition partners and vice-presidential nominees by the deadline of 11 October for filing their candidacies.

## **Ganjar: Backed Only by PDIP?**

This is particularly the case for Ganjar. So far only [his own party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle \(PDIP\), is firmly backing his nomination](#), with most parties that were part of Jokowi's large rainbow coalition endorsing Prabowo's candidacy instead. Even the United Development Party (PPP), which has tentatively agreed to be part of Ganjar's coalition, is said to be reconsidering its options. Its youth wing, the Ka'bah Youth Movement (Gerakan Pemuda Ka'bah), [decided to endorse Anies's candidacy](#) on 13 August. If PPP switches its allegiance to Anies, PDIP would be the only parliamentary party that endorses Ganjar.

Since PDIP is the largest political party represented in the DPR, with its control of 22% of the seats, it is entitled to nominate its own presidential candidate without any support from other parties represented in the DPR. Nonetheless, the failure to attract the support of other major political parties represented in the DPR would be yet another blow not just for the Ganjar campaign but also for the PDIP.

This scenario is eerily similar to what happened to PDIP after the 1999 general election. While it managed to hold 33% of the seats in the DPR and emerge the largest party represented in parliament, [Megawati, its chair, lost the subsequent presidential election](#) to the late Abdurrahman Wahid, who was backed by all the other parties represented in the DPR. What this situation implies is that while the PDIP remains the largest party in parliament today, its chosen presidential candidate would have great difficulty winning next year's presidential election.

## **Anies: On Life Support?**

For Anies, the primary challenge is to ensure that all the parties that have pledged support for his nomination actually back him when he officially files his candidacy. Anies is trying to show that his presidential candidacy is still viable despite most polls [showing that he is running in third place](#), behind Prabowo and Ganjar.

Anies seems eager to campaign in East Java province, which has a total of 31.5 million eligible voters – the second largest in Indonesia. His [recent visits to various NU pesantren \(boarding schools\) in East Java](#) seem to indicate that he has gained the support of numerous NU *kyai* (clerics) in the province. Anies also made statements indicating that [he will select an East Java-based politician](#) as his vice-presidential nominee. These statements are widely interpreted as pointing to either Yenny Wahid, Abdurrahman Wahid's daughter, or East Java governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa.

Nonetheless, the NU-affiliated PKB's decision to endorse Prabowo instead of Anies is not helping the latter's effort to finalise his vice-presidential nominee. Yenny has denied [she is seriously considering the offer](#) to be Anies's running mate. Currently, [she seems to be courted by the Ganjar campaign](#) as well. Meanwhile, Khofifah [has publicly rejected](#) Anies's offer.

Anies's campaign team recently stated that [they are not expecting to formally announce](#) his vice-presidential pick anytime soon, further underscoring the image that his campaign has trouble attracting potential coalition partners and vice-presidential nominees.

Further complicating Anies's situation, there are widespread rumours that one of Anies's initial backers – the Democratic Party – is manoeuvring to instead back either [Prabowo](#) or [Ganjar](#), depending on who between them offers its leader, Agus Yudhoyono, a better deal. While Anies would still be eligible to be nominated as a presidential candidate if he manages to win PPP's endorsement, his campaign would have lost valuable manpower and financial support without the Democratic Party's backing.

## Concluding Thoughts

While the political wheeling and dealing to lock in coalition supporters and vice-presidential nominee continues, Prabowo continues to have political momentum by finalising his coalition partners. He is seemingly getting close to selecting his running mate as well. His campaign is backed by a sizeable number of parties represented in the DPR and he also enjoys the tacit support of President Jokowi.

Both Ganjar and Anies are now the underdogs of the presidential contest. PDIP has emerged as Ganjar's leading political backer and is most likely the only major political party that backs his presidential nomination. With Anies continuing to struggle to find viable coalition partners and a vice-presidential nominee, he may barely pass the threshold of support from a combined 20% of the seats in the DPR, which is set as a requirement for presidential nomination.

While anything can happen during the three-month official campaign period between November 2023 and February 2024, Prabowo is currently a formidable frontrunner in the contest. It would take a major change in public opinion and political fortunes of the candidates to achieve a different outcome in the first round of presidential election, scheduled for 14 February 2024.

**Alexander R. ARIFANTO** is a Senior Fellow in the Indonesia Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).