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Anies Baswedan and the 2024 Presidential Election: Preserving the Right, Capturing the Middle

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SYNOPSIS

*There has been significant doubt over Anies Baswedan's electability in the 2024 presidential election. However, surveys on Anies's electability in the past two months indicated a slight but steady rise. **IRMAN G. LANTI** and **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** discuss Anies's presidential campaign strategy, its challenges, and opportunities.*

COMMENTARY

After languishing in the polls as a distant third all year round, ex-Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan's bid for the Indonesian presidency has caught a second wind among growing concerns about political dynasties and potential election interference by the incumbent president. Protest voters frustrated with the Indonesian political scene has started to flock to Anies, who is now in good position to compete with former Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo for second place. Having campaigned as an opposition candidate from the very beginning, Anies is better positioned than Ganjar to fly the opposition flag.

Who is Anies Baswedan and how is he positioning his candidacy to expand his supporter base? How can he strengthen his electability moving into the official campaign season? These questions will be addressed in this piece.



Indonesian presidential candidate Anies Baswedan's popularity has been picking up in the latest polls for the 2024 presidential election. However, Anies still has a lot to do to increase his electability. *Image by author.*

Anies: A Reluctant Religious Conservative

Anies hails from a family of Muslim political activists. His grandfather, A. R. Baswedan, founded the Indonesian Arab Party and later joined Masyumi, a modernist Islamic party, in the 1950s. A student activist during his university years in Gajah Mada, Anies was part of the Islamic Student Union (HMI). Subsequently, he pursued further studies in the United States and developed an affinity for progressive issues such as democracy, pluralism, and gender equality.

After returning to Indonesia, Anies became Indonesia's youngest rector at the University of Paramadina, established by Nurcholish Madjid, a prominent progressive Islamic thinker in Indonesia. During his time at Paramadina, he pioneered the "Teach Indonesia" movement, funding young university students for one-year stints in remote regions to serve the local community as teachers. These progressive and reformist credentials led him to eventually join Jokowi's first election campaign in 2014 as campaign spokesperson and subsequently as education minister.

However, his track record as a progressive academic has been marred by the political compromises he made to win the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Anies saw an opportunity to exploit identity politics against incumbent Governor Ahok, a Chinese Christian, to gain the support of conservative Islamic groups. Although Anies later tried to govern Jakarta in an inclusive manner, his main constituents (progressive, minority, and educated voters) remained deeply ambivalent about how he came to power in 2017.

Anies's Coalition: Overcoming Strange Bedfellows

Anies is supported by a three-party coalition consisting of the Nasdem (National Democrat) Party, the modernist Islamic party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera – Justice Prosperous Party), and the traditionalist Muslim party PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa – National Awakening Party). The latest survey results show that Anies is

polling behind Prabowo in key provinces with large numbers of modernist and conservative Muslims (Banten, West Java, and West Sumatra). Anies is only doing well in Jakarta.

This circumstance requires Anies's coalition parties, notably PKB and PKS, to maximise their political machinery to improve the former Jakarta governor's chance of winning the presidential race. [In East Java](#), a province where PKB dominates, Anies is trailing behind the other candidates. There is no clear sign that Anies is attractive to the [traditionalist Muslims in the province](#). Additionally, the inclusion of Mahfud MD, a native of Madura, as Ganjar Pranowo's vice-presidential candidate has toughened the East Java battleground.

Despite the bleak progress, PKB can still overcome the situation by maximising the contribution of its cadre and key figures. [Indikator's November survey](#) indicated that PKB votes are the most fragmented in comparison to PKS and Nasdem in supporting their presidential candidate pair. Thus, internal consolidation, including [the party's influence over local Islamic boarding schools](#), will be key for PKB to maximise its political machinery.

Unlike PKB, PKS has been showing a relatively united front in supporting Anies's candidacy. Nonetheless, PKS does not possess superb electoral dominance. While PKS dominates in the urban areas of West Java and West Sumatra, and owns significant vote share in Jakarta, it is not enough to single-handedly rule them.

On the other hand, the possibility of securing a larger Muslim vote share from the alliance of PKB and PKS remains to be seen. However, these two parties can help secure some Muslim segments that are closely associated with each of them. PKS and PKB were also in the same team back in [the 2009 presidential election](#), when they supported President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's re-election.

Preserving the Right, Capturing the Middle

Anies's coalition seems to believe that for him to win enough votes to head to the runoff election, he needs to consolidate support not just from his Islamist base and voters who disapprove of Jokowi's government (~20-25% of voters) but also from those who like his technocratic track record and progressive ideas.

However, Anies has established [a reputation of being involved with the far right of the Islamic spectrum](#) primarily during his campaign in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Thus, capturing the middle voters will be beneficial in increasing his electability. His quest to gain the middle ground is reflected in the way he supported [religious](#) and [ethnic minorities' activities during his time as governor of Jakarta](#).

He also attempts to portray himself as the face of an educated and modern Indonesian, which contradicts Jokowi's image of an ordinary person (*orang biasa*). Another interesting point is Anies's liberal idea of global citizenship during his [foreign policy speech](#) at a seminar conducted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia. Furthermore, he has been highlighting the current administration's failure in ensuring [inclusive economic development](#).

In addition to his attempt to capture the middle, Anies also entertains his conservative Islamic sympathisers. Recently, two Islamic hardliner groups, 212 Alumni Association (PA 212) and National Cleric's Fatwa Defender Movement (GNPF Ulama), convened the *ijtima ulama* (cleric congregation) and declared support for the Anies-Muhaiman pair. The event hinted at continued relations between Anies and those hardliners. It is implicitly acknowledged that these hardliners have nowhere to go but Anies's camp, as they labelled Prabowo a traitor when he joined Jokowi's cabinet and are against the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP)'s nationalist-secularist ideology. Moreover, the 212 network currently [has no cause to champion and is experiencing a generational shift of charismatic clerics](#), making it a weaker movement compared to the one in 2017.

Momentum and Opportunities

A couple months ago, Anies's idea of proposing change perhaps gained little traction among Indonesians. However, the recent [Constitutional Court](#) saga and Jokowi's political dynasty have provided a small window of momentum for Anies.

Anies may gain additional momentum if he can take advantage of economic populist issues, notably the [widening income inequality](#), and double down on his platform as a progressive technocratic reformer. Regardless of the outcome, Anies's participation in the 2024 presidential election can solidify his voter base, which will come in handy for his future political endeavours.

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