Indonesia's Presidential Debates: The Score Midway Through

By Irman G. Lanti

SYNOPSIS

Indonesians will be going to the polls next month to elect their next president. Meanwhile, the three candidates and their vice-presidential running mates have participated in three nationally-televised debates organised by the General Election Commission. Public surveys conducted following the debates indicate that the popularity standings of the candidates have not changed much. Two debates remain to be held and if they do not produce a decisive outcome, it is likely that the election will go on to a run-off.

COMMENTARY

Next month, Indonesia will be having its fifth direct presidential election since its experiment with the system in 2004. This election is considered important for the country's future as Indonesia will be having a new president after a decade-long presidency under Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi).

This has turned out to be a contentious election because of the controversial circumstances surrounding the choice of Gibran Rakabuming Raka (Jokowi's son) as the running mate of Gen. Prabowo Subianto (the current Defence Minister who also ran against Jokowi in the previous two elections). The controversy revolves around the ruling of the Constitutional Court – headed by the Chief Justice who happens to be Gibran's uncle-in-law – that lowered the minimum age of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates from 40 to 35, effectively allowing the 36-year-old Gibran to run for office.

Despite this overhanging shadow, the Prabowo-Gibran pair has consistently been leading in public opinion surveys, which is most likely due to the high regard Indonesians have for Jokowi. The pair's popularity is around 45 per cent, quite close

to the threshold of 50 per cent that is needed to win the presidential election in one round.

However, the surveys also indicated that there are many voters still undecided. One survey by *Kompas Daily* in early December showed that 28.7 per cent of voters were still unsure who they will vote for. This figure was considered exceptionally high as the election was then merely a couple of months away. That was why the presidential and vice-presidential debates became important.

Outcome of the Debates Held so Far

Thus far, two presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate have taken place out of three presidential and two vice-presidential debates scheduled by the General Election Commission. These debates cover politics, human rights, the economy, foreign relations, and security and defence.

The first presidential debate was held on 12 December 2023 with Anies Baswedan emerging quite strong. He was confident and well-prepared, and demonstrated a good grasp of politics and human rights. Ganjar Pranowo also made a strong appearance and was able to defend his position well while discomfiting the other candidates, especially Prabowo Subianto, with difficult questions. Compared with the other two candidates, the latter appeared defensive and often let his emotions get the better of him.

The immediate impressions of Indonesian netizens who watched the debate, as recorded by Drone Emprit, a website specialising in analysing the content of social media postings, indicated that Anies received 64 per cent of positive sentiments, Ganjar received 58 per cent, and Prabowo at a distant 39 per cent.

The second debate held on 22 December 2023 was for the vice-presidential hopefuls. Focused on economic issues, many analysts had predicted before the debate that Gibran would face an uphill task given his lack of experience (having only served as the Mayor of Solo for two years) in contrast to Ganjar's running mate, the senior professor and Coordinating Minister of Politics, Law, and Security, Mahfud MD; and Anies' running mate, the seasoned politician and head of the traditionalist Muslim PKB party, Muhaimin Iskandar.

Surprisingly, Gibran not only proved masterly in the art of debating, but he was often on the offensive. His public speaking style was quite similar to his father's, which burnished his image as the ideological descendant of the revered Jokowi. On the other hand, Mahfud was not able to ruffle Gibran despite many attempts, while Muhaimin appeared to be rudderless and ineffective.

The results posted by Drone Emprit after the debate showed that Gibran had received the highest positive sentiments among netizens with 70 per cent, followed by Mahfud with 69 per cent, and Muhaimin with 48 per cent. Whatever ground Prabowo had lost in the first debate was recovered by Gibran in the second debate. Conversely, Anies' achievement in the first debate was undone by Muhaimin.

The third debate held on 7 January 2024 was another presidential debate, this time

focusing on foreign policy, defence and security issues. These should have been easy for Prabowo to handle as he was a retired military officer and the current defence minister. However, contrary to public expectations, Prabowo's performance was dismal as he defended himself from the incessant attacks by Anies and Ganjar throughout much of the debate.

According to Drone Emprit, Anies again received the highest positive sentiments from netizens with 76 per cent, followed by Ganjar with 72 per cent, and Prabowo with 40 per cent.

Conclusions from the Debates

The debates had a relatively high viewership and were expected to reduce the number of undecided voters. However, surveys have shown that the order of popularity of the three candidates remained unchanged after the three debates.

Several conclusions can be inferred from the debates and surveys held so far:

i) First, Prabowo is consistently leading in the polls. This appears to be influenced by the popularity of Jokowi, and the latter's increasing public association with Prabowo and Gibran.

ii) Despite Prabowo's popularity, it does not seem likely that he will win the election in one round.

iii) Anies standing has been rising in the surveys. The mobilisation of the Muslim vote and his consistent positioning against Jokowi seem to be the reason for his rising popularity.

iv) Ganjar has been decreasing in popularity. This is most likely due to the dilemmatic position that he has been dealt with: as a candidate from the PDI-P, the main party supporting Jokowi, while at the same time having to show some opposition to Jokowi.

If nothing dramatic occurs before 14 February, it is likely that the election will go to the second round, with Prabowo and Anies facing each other in the run-off.

Dr Irman Lanti is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Padjadjaran University, Bandung, Indonesia, and a veteran analyst of contemporary Indonesian politics and political Islam in Indonesia. He is currently a Visiting Senior Fellow with the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).