Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

State of Play:
Who Will Win in Largest Single-Day Elections?

By Alexander R. Arifianto

SYNOPSIS

Indonesia will conduct its general election on 17 April 2019. A simultaneous election of the presidency as well as the national and regional legislative chambers, it is the largest single-day democratic election in the world.

COMMENTARY

INDONESIA'S GENERAL election next week, on 17 April 2019, is not just about electing the country's next president; it is also going to elect the country's national parliament or House of Representatives (DPR), Regional Representative Council (DPD), and Regional Legislative Councils (DPRD). In addition to the presidential contest between incumbent president Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') and his contender Prabowo Subianto, the legislative elections are contested by 16 national political parties and by approximately 245,000 candidates competing for 20,000 national and regional legislative seats.

While the presidential contest between Jokowi and Prabowo is stealing the headlines of most media outlets and commentators, developments in the legislative elections deserve some attention as well. What is the current state of play in both the presidential and legislative races?

Presidential Contest: Dead Heat

Opinion polls continue to show President Jokowi having a comfortable lead over Prabowo. The latest survey of Indikator Politik – one of the more reliable Indonesian polling agencies – shows him with a 55 versus 37 percent lead over his challenger. A

survey by Kompas Daily released last month shows the president with a 49 versus 37 percent lead over Prabowo – a narrower lead compared to the Indikator survey.

However, there are strong indications that the two candidates' electability ratings might be closer than predicted by opinion polls. Firstly, there is a significant number of undecided voters – between 8 to 15 percent are predicted by most surveys. Given their sizable number, they can significantly impact the election's outcome – especially if Prabowo manages to close his gap with Jokowi during the final days of the campaign.

Most significantly, however, the Prabowo campaign seems to be better in playing the ground game necessary to mobilise prospective voters during the eight-month long campaign season. The RSIS Indonesia Programme's research in key battleground provinces like Central Java, East Java, West Java, and South Sulawesi indicates Prabowo's campaign volunteers (*relawan*) are mobilising round-the-clock in vote-rich suburbs and hamlets. This has significantly narrowed his electability gap against Jokowi in these battleground provinces.

Meanwhile, the Jokowi campaign at the grassroots level is often less cohesive and fraught with infighting among the different coalition parties. Campaign volunteers often did not receive materials like posters and flyers for weeks, if not months, something that the Prabowo campaign apparently does not have issues with given its cohesiveness.

However, Prabowo might be overplaying his hand by relying on *relawan* from conservative and hardline Islamic backgrounds to promote his campaign messages. A public rally staged by these groups in the Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta on 7 April created a strong public backlash, including from former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who decried the 'extreme ideological and political polarisation' promoted by rally participants.

Jokowi might seize on this backlash by promoting himself as a nationalist who will stand against the 'identity politics' of Prabowo, thereby winning over the support of pluralist-leaning undecided voters.

Complications of the DPR Race

Indikator Politik also released its survey of political parties' electability ratings – which predicts parties that will be represented in the new DPR – which will have 575 members and will commence its term on 1 October 2019. Indonesia's Election Law prescribes that only parties which manage to win a minimum of four percent of casted votes are eligible to be represented in the DPR.

President Jokowi's Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) has the largest electability rating of about 24 percent, while Prabowo's Gerindra Party is predicted to be the second largest party in the DPR with a rating of 11.7 percent. The Golkar party – founded by Indonesia's former strongman Suharto – is likely to emerge as the third largest party with 11.5 percent rating.

However, these polls tend to ignore the fact that when it comes to legislative elections

most Indonesians are voting for figures (*tokoh*) rather than for political parties. That is why most parties are recruiting established politicians and their families, religious leaders, and celebrities as their legislative candidates.

Underdog parties like National Democrat (Nasdem) Party and National Mandate Party (PAN) might be getting more votes than predicted in opinion surveys because of their savviness in recruiting candidates with widespread name recognition.

Secondly, new parties like the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) and Working (Berkarya) Party are targeting segments of voters that are disenchanted or ignored by established parties. PSI has explicitly targeted young millennials in its campaign and is also seeking to attract support from women, Chinese Indonesians, and non-Muslim minorities. This strategy is aimed at peeling off support from PDIP – which has adapted a more pro-Islamic posture in order to bolster Jokowi's image among pious Muslim voters.

Black Swan Factors

Meanwhile, Berkarya – founded by Suharto's son Tommy – uses the appeal of nostalgia for the late strongman's three decades rule to divert support from Golkar Party. It also has poached many senior Golkar politicians and cadres to become its legislative candidates – with the intention of wooing voters who normally voted for Golkar to its side.

By targeting segment of voters who are alienated from established parties, both are hoping to obtain electoral support that are sufficient to carry them above the electoral threshold. Whether this strategy bears fruit or not remains to be seen on the polling day.

While most surveys are predicting a victory for President Jokowi in the presidential race and a strong showing for established parties like PDIP, Golkar, and Gerindra in the legislative races, the candidates' grassroots campaign strategies, their coalition's cohesiveness, and missteps during final campaign days are 'black swan' factors that are making this year's election outcome harder to predict than previous general elections.

At the end of the day, only one survey matters in determining Indonesians' choice of president and legislative candidates. It is the ballot that will be casted by its 193 million eligible voters on 17 April 2019.

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