Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Too Close To Call:
Whoever Wins, Must Win Decisively

By Leonard Sebastian

SYNOPSIS

Opinion polls and ground feedback show contrasting readings of who is more likely to emerge victorious in this week's presidential election. Whoever wins must win decisively to avoid a problem of legitimacy.

COMMENTARY

THE CURRENT political mood in Indonesia is deeply polarised. On the surface, the 2019 presidential election seems like a tame and rather low-key event. The televised debates have been monotonous with neither presidential nor vice-presidential candidates rigorously contesting each other over Indonesia's future direction.

The opinion polls conducted by Jakarta-based pollsters have predicted a potential landslide win for the incumbent Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') at an advantage of about 20 percentage points over his opponent Prabowo Subianto. More recent polls suggest the gap is narrowing. A recent poll by Litbang Kompas shows Jokowi likely to win 49.2 per cent of the vote, surpassing 37.4 per cent for Prabowo. My most recent travels show a huge discrepancy between polling and actual conditions on the ground. The presidential election on Wednesday (17 April) will be closer than expected.

Many Aiding Prabowo But Who is Campaigning for Jokowi?

President Jokowi had formed a coalition but in reality, none of the parties in his coalition seemed to be campaigning for him. More troubling was that candidates from his own party, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (or PDI-P), were not campaigning for the president and ignoring directives from the party elite.

Political parties enjoy the coattail effect from both presidential candidates. PDI-P, Gerindra, Golkar, PKB, Demokrat, PKS and NasDem are projected to pass the threshold of fourper cent of all votes to gain representation in parliament. But local candidates do not see benefits. The majority of candidates recognise how personality politics can be polarising for voters at the local level and prefer not to identify with a presidential nominee.

Prabowo does not seem badly disadvantaged. His supporters are more militant. There are larger numbers of volunteers working independently, using their own funds, and mobilising others on the basis of religion and economic populism to support his candidacy. *Operasi Subuh* (Dawn Operation) initiatives were expected by groups aligned to Prabowo like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Forum Umat Islam (FUI) and Alumni 212 to bring people from the *kampung* and the townships out to the polling booth – operations employed in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

Discontent Over Economy

The economy figured prominently in this election. Annual economic growth has been hovering at five per cent, not the seven per cent Jokowi promised back in 2014, while investment has not materialised at the rates expected. Indonesia's economy expanded by 5.1 percent year-on-year in 2017, up from 5.0 percent growth in 2016, while fourth-quarter growth came in at 5.2 percent.

According to the independent SMERU Research Institute, 90 million Indonesians remain vulnerable to poverty. Many workers and small business people interviewed expressed disappointment that despite the investment in infrastructure, tangible benefits to people on the street seemed minimal.

Jokowi's plans for hand-outs, whether the issuance of a "pre-work card" providing benefits to the unemployed, promised subsidised food for poor families or a programme to ensure higher education for high-school graduates, seemed to have hit a road block due to a lack of implementation.

Jokowi's track record in infrastructure development has been commendable. In only five years, he has built 600 km of roads, compared to former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's 250 km over 10 years. The trouble is toll roads generally benefit people wealthy enough to own a car and pay the tolls.

Social welfare, finance, investment and industrial sector issues featured prominently in the election, and were raised in the fifth presidential debate. The increasing costs of basic commodities featured front and centre, an issue Prabowo capitalised on. In his recent campaign and press conferences, Prabowo spoke at length on reducing the electricity tariff within his first 100 days. Such populist policies will play out well for him in his attempt to reach out to disadvantaged communities and tap into pockets of discontent.

Potent Combination: Identity Politics and Digital Media

The rising political temperature is also a consequence of social media discourse in the

wake of the highly polarising Jakarta gubernatorial election. Supporters shouted slogans as they held placards with "2019 Change President" written on them while campaigning for Prabowo and his running mate Sandiaga Uno ('Sandi') in Jakarta.

Digital media has become an important space for Indonesians to debate potent identity issues - like what it means to be *pribumi* and the place of Islam in Indonesian politics and society. The politicisation of religion is creating the assumption that Prabowo-Sandi better represents Islamic political interests.

The selection of Kyai Ma'ruf Amin was supposed to help Jokowi gain ground with conservative Muslims. Yet, the strategy has not worked. A large proportion of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) voter base in Central and East Java that voted for Jokowi will no doubt vote for him again.

But the Ma'ruf Amin factor has seemingly little impact in a conservative Islamic province like South Sulawesi which Jokowi won in 2014. There is a large number of voters that will very likely now switch to Prabowo-Sandi.

Polarisation is also fuelled by black campaigning, anti-Chinese xenophobia and hoax news which have resulted in the digital public sphere promoting alternative discourses. Most Indonesians are not well-informed about public affairs and easily take to misinformation that goes viral. This was evident in the Ahok blasphemy case.

High Approval Ratings, But Regional Challenges

The surveys conducted by pollsters indicate a high approval rating for Jokowi for his achievements. However, this may not necessarily secure victory for him. In the Jakarta gubernatorial election, Ahok had a high approval rating. Much will revolve around public perceptions of the state of the economy. Although Jokowi has kept inflation under control, the perception of a large segment of those interviewed was that the government has not been doing a good job.

Jokowi seems stuck. Despite five years of careful policy planning, especially in the economic field, his popularity rating still hovers around his 2014 result of 53 per cent. Jokowi won the 2014 election by a margin of 8.4 million votes. He is vulnerable in provinces with large, dense urban populations where voter mobilisation by the other side is a more straightforward affair – South Sulawesi, Banten and West Java and Jakarta – and could easily lose the election there.

Jokowi is expected to win in Central Java but the margin of victory will be slim. Even in Surakarta, Jokowi's hometown, the race will be close. The key to his securing a second term of office lies in East Java.

There he must win at least 65 to 70 per cent of the vote to negate Prabowo's projected gains in Java and the outer provinces, especially West Java and South Sulawesi where in 2014, the Jusuf Kalla factor was a significant advantage for Jokowi. In Java, Jokowi has a strong presence in the rural areas while Prabowo is more dominant in the urban centres.

Jokowi is vulnerable in many cities in East Java particularly the Tapal Kuda areas –

Jember, Situbondo, Madura and even Surabaya. The Madurese, a significant ethnic group in East Java, is expected to vote for Prabowo following the advice of prominent local religious leaders there.

Undecided Voters, Religion Hold Final Say

In the final analysis, it is not what surveys say that matter but voter perceptions, particularly the orientations of undecided voters. The advice of local leaders, whom Indonesians tend to consult, will be a critical determining factor. A growing number of Indonesians are spoiling their vote (a phenomenon known as golput) – almost 29 per cent in the 2014 presidential election.

If the golput factor is high among millennials, it will affect Jokowi more than Prabowo. A large proportion of the millennial population have attended *rohis* (*kerohanian Islam* or Islamic spirituality) classes in high school and are now deeply Islamic. Wildly popular preachers who use social media to discuss trending topics, including Ustaz Hanan Attaki and Ustaz Abdul Somad, have millions of youths following them.

Such forces are creating a vibrant marketplace for religious advice, challenging the positions of older, established players in this space, including the NU and Muhammadiyah. Their audiences, especially women, will be drawn to Sandiaga Uno and his campaign image as a 'post-Islamist leader' that combines Islam with economic management.

For all these reasons, the headline race will be close. If the winner gains a narrow win, the closeness of the result, coupled with potential election irregularities, due to the General Elections Commission (KPU)'s lack of familiarity with managing a new five-tiered election system, may lead to the loser issuing a legal challenge against the outcome, while trying to delegitimise the KPU.

While the national KPU is professional and neutral, officials at provincial and local KPU units might be swayed by political and financial considerations. The likelihood of fraud cannot be dismissed in a complex election system involving millions of voters as well as agents. This means that unless Jokowi wins decisively, he could be saddled with a significant legitimacy problem.

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