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Who Wins Jakarta Election: Does it Matter?

By Leonard C Sebastian

Synopsis

The Jakarta gubernatorial election tomorrow will be a test of pluralism and political Islam. It is also a litmus test of Indonesia's moderate multiculturalism versus a hardline Islamism.

Commentary

THE SECOND round of the gubernatorial election this week on 19 April 2017 is slated to be a tight race between the incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok and former Education Minister Anies Baswedan. The latest polling by a research outfit indicated that Anies had a slight edge at 47.9 percent over Ahok at 46.9 percent with 5.2 percent of voters undecided.

This election will be a litmus test of the strength of Indonesian pluralism. If Ahok prevails he will become the first elected Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, demonstrating that the capital's voters have chosen pluralism over racial and religious affiliation. In the first round contest among three pairs of candidates, Ahok had garnered some 43 percent of the vote despite an ongoing blasphemy case against him and huge protest rallies by hardline Islamists who attacked him on both racial and religious grounds. His rival, Anies Baswedan received 40% of the vote while the third candidate Agus Haryamurti Yudhoyono, secured only 17%.

Choice between Pluralism and Political Islam

This has been a polarising election, which was not just about choosing the Jakarta governor but had become a larger choice between pluralism and the possibility of hardline political Islam deepening its roots in the world's most populous Muslim

nation. Both Ahok's rivals, Anies and Agus, had wooed the support of hardline Islamist groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which were against non-Muslims holding high office in Indonesia.

Some observers say whether pluralism or Islamic radicalism wins will be captured in the results of the Jakarta election. Whoever wins, the capitulation of the largest moderate Islamic organisations in Indonesia to the Islamist wave is a trend that worries those who advocate democratic pluralism.

Should Ahok be returned as Jakarta governor it will bode well for President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) should he run for re-election in 2019 (possibly with Ahok as running mate). Should Anies win with the support of Muslim groups in Greater Jakarta, it will signify the entrenched position of Islamist groups with their hardline political Islam inclinations.

Religion as Fundamental Issue

The fundamental issue in the Jakarta election was religion. The emergence of hardline Islamic movements in recent years, whether through promulgation of shariah laws or realisation of more conservative attitudes constitutes a new phase of the relationship between state, democracy and Islam.

Hardline political Islam has long had a following in Indonesia, bubbling beneath the surface. Followers of more radical groups such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and Front Hisbullah Bulan Bintang have gradually grown in strength. But extremist Islam tends to rear its head sporadically with tragic results, and the occurrence of terror attacks and bombings increasing in recent years.

In a way the seven-million strong protest against Ahok over end-2016 was a reminder of the sway that hardline Islam has over segments in Indonesia. The FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab's prominent direction of the events in November and December was deemed a victory for the Islamists over the moderate leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia.

Carry Over To Presidential Elections 2019?

The brief outrage over Ahok's comments belies a deeper-seated influence political Islam has over Indonesian politics and its persistent pursuit or promotion of Sharia over the years. Such perspectives are gaining wider acceptance.

If Ahok is found guilty of blasphemy the ruling has the potential of galvanising radical Islam and deal a setback for moderate Islam, which has traditionally characterised Islamic practice in Indonesia. NU and Muhammadiyah, with their long tradition of Islamic moderation and propagation of Islamic principles and values in line with Indonesian culture and local wisdom, would be cast as passive onlookers.

Their public agenda of the compatibility of democratic values with Islamic doctrines will be further strained. Their role in promoting plural and moderate Islamic values in

domestic and foreign policy will be conscribed. And this trend may be carried into the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections.

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