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| Author(s) | Arifianto, Alexander Raymond; Chen, Jonathan |
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Indonesia's 2018 Regional Elections

West Kalimantan: Identity Politics at the Forefront

By Alexander R Arifianto and Jonathan Chen

Synopsis

The West Kalimantan gubernatorial election is slated to be one of the most tenuous and polarising elections for the 2018 simultaneous regional elections – pilkada serentak. Historical tensions among different ethnic groups along with accusations of nepotism against the outgoing governor, have made the election in this province more contentious.

Commentary

THE WEST Kalimantan gubernatorial race is likely to be one of the most tenuous contests for the 2018 simultaneous regional elections (*Pilkada Serentak*) in Indonesia, slated to be held in 17 provinces and 154 districts and cities on 27 June 2018. Home to approximately 5.4million residents, the province's population is divided into a number of ethnic groups. According to the 2010 Indonesian population census the largest groups are the Dayaks (35 percent of the province's population), Malays (34 percent), Chinese Indonesians (8 percent) and Madurese (6 percent).

The province had suffered from several ethnic-related violence in the past few decades. In 1967, a conflict between the Dayaks and the Chinese killed up to 3,000 people and forced up to 117,000 Chinese from rural villages to resettle in larger cities like Pontianak and Singkawang.

More recently in 1999, violence broke out between a coalition Dayaks and Malays against the Madurese in the regency of Sambas, resulting in 118 deaths and up to 30,000 Madurese refugees.

The Contention

The province's history has made it to the top of the list of election watchdogs as it is considered a province highly vulnerable to possible election-related violence. The Indonesian Electoral Monitoring Agency (*Bawaslu*) has ranked the province as the third most vulnerable province in its 2018 Index of Regional Elections Vulnerability, due to the high likelihood of "campaigns based on ethno-religious sentiments (SARA), false accusations, hoaxes, and deliberate attempts to divide voters along ethnic and religious lines."

This year's gubernatorial election features three candidates. The first is Karolin Margret Natasa, the regent (*Bupati*) of Landak, who is also the daughter of Cornelis, the outgoing governor. She is backed by the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDI-P) and the Democrat Party. The second candidate is Sutarmidji, Mayor of Pontianak (backed by a coalition led by Golkar Party, United Development Party, PPP, and Prosperous Justice Party, PKS), while the third is Milton Crosby, former *Bupati* of Sintang (backed by Gerindra and National Mandate Party (PAN)). While Karolin and Milton are Dayaks, Sutarmidji is a Javanese, who is closely aligned with the Malay community.

Many non-Dayaks are unhappy with Cornelis who was perceived to favour ethnic Dayaks during his decade-long tenure as West Kalimantan governor, based on his appointments to the provincial government agencies (*kepala dinas propinsi*) and his generous support for Dayak cultural institutions and festivals.

Those interviewed indicated that Cornelis should have served as the governor for all West Kalimantan residents instead of acting like a 'tribal chief' (*kepala suku*) for a particular ethnic community. For this reason, many of the critics chose to support either Sutarmidji or Milton in the election instead of Karolin, who is seen as 'daddy's daughter' and if elected, could potentially form a political dynasty.

Involvement of Third Party Actors

The gubernatorial campaign became much more intense following the involvement of Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which staged a series of protests in May 2017 to support the election of a 'Muslim governor'. This organisation has had a presence in West Kalimantan since the early 2000s. FPI has found support and sympathy amongst some local notables and conducts vigilantism and racketing activities in the name of restoring public morality within the province, much to the disapproval and objection of the other communities.

In response, Cornelis as governor then took a hard line against the FPI, issuing a decree banning the group and threatened its members with violence if they dared to organise another protest in the province. His actions however only created further tensions not just between him and FPI, but also with numerous local ethnic-based groups in the province, most notably the Association for a United Malay People (*Persatuan Orang Melayu* or POM).

On 7 June 2018, POM reported Cornelis to the police amid allegations that he had

given a speech that insulted the province's Malay community, calling them "colonisers of the Dayak people". Cornelis strongly denied the allegation and counter-reported Ulfa Nilawati - the owner of the Facebook account where a video that showed him allegedly delivering the speech first appeared - to the police as well.

Tensions among different ethnic communities in the province have been growing since the video was posted online. Several Facebook accounts owned by self-proclaimed Sutarmidji supporters have declared a 'war' against the Dayaks, which was responded in kind by a number of hardline Dayak associations supporting Cornelis and his daughter. This increases the possibility of violence between the supporters of each candidates on the eve of the election.

Need For Continued Vigilance

West Kalimantan is more vulnerable to ethno-religious conflict due to its history and the demographic make-up of the province. With an abundance of natural resources, it is also the setting for intense competition for both economic and political power among various groups oftentimes drawn across ethnic lines. The fact that many non-Dayaks felt that Cornelis was monopolising power as governor and not sharing it with them is a cause for concern. The involvement of third party actors had further contributed to a rise in tensions by stoking the flames of ethnic and religious sentiments, making this election one that is highly polarized.

While the conflict is contained and not expected to spread to other Indonesian provinces, the Indonesian government and its security apparatus must remain vigilant to prevent it from turning violent. They should also remain neutral in the election and work together to reconcile conflicting parties, advising them to make peace whatever the election results may be.

Alexander R Arifianto PhD is a Research Fellow and Jonathan Chen is an Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This is part of a series on Indonesia's simultaneous regional elections.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg