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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Prabowo Subianto: Reluctant Yet Strong Contender

By Alexander R Arifianto

SYNOPSIS

Prabowo Subianto enters the 2019 Indonesian presidential election with less elite support and financial resources compared to incumbent president Joko Widodo. However, he has gained strong backing at the grassroots level by tapping the mobilising power of the conservative Islamic figures and organisations.

COMMENTARY

PRABOWO SUBIANTO enters the 2019 Indonesian presidential election with lukewarm elite support as well as lack of financial resources to fund his campaign. This is in contrast to his opponent – incumbent president Joko Widodo (Jokowi) – who has gathered endorsements from the majority of political parties, national and regional politicians, retired military officers, and other notables.

Having entered the presidential contest in every election since 2004, Prabowo does not seem to spend a lot of time on the campaign trail this election and also does not have the large pool of campaign aides he used to have in previous elections. Instead, Sandiaga Uno, his vice presidential running mate, has been travelling widely across Indonesia to give stump speeches and pay visits to markets, mosques, and other campaign sites. Sandiaga, a 49-year-old businessman who is one of the richest in Indonesia, is also presumed to have provided much of the financing for Prabowo's campaign.

The Seemingly Lacklustre Campaign

Observers have noted that unlike in previous elections, neither Prabowo nor his

brother Hashim Djojohadikusumo, has committed significant financial resources from their own coffers this time.

Indeed, Prabowo seems to have difficulty raising funds from big donors – tycoons and large corporations – which tend to favour the status quo and throw their support behind Jokowi. A gala dinner held in Jakarta in late November 2018 to raise money from a group of Chinese Indonesian tycoons collected less than 500 million Rupiahs (S\$47,990) – a paltry sum compared to fundraising activities conducted by him during the 2014 presidential election.

The lack of funding and enthusiasm for the Prabowo campaign has stagnated his popularity ratings. Tempo magazine reported last month that even in surveys commissioned by his own campaign team, Prabowo’s electability hovers around 20 to 32 percent – a far cry from Jokowi’s.

However, writing off Prabowo’s chances might be a premature move, as he still commands strong support at the grassroots level, mainly from conservative Muslim activists and organisations that were part of the 2016/17 Defending Islam movement against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. They constituted Prabowo’s hardcore supporters who have tirelessly worked to support his campaign and are responsible for his strong showings in a number of key provinces.

Links with the Defending Islam Movement

Prabowo’s core supporters come from modernist-oriented, theologically conservative Muslim clerics, activists, and organisations. They include not only hardline Islamist organisations like Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Islamic Followers Forum (FUI), but also activists of more mainstream Islamic groups like Muhammadiyah; Daniel Anzar Simandjuntak, former chairman of Muhammadiyah’s youth wing who now serves as the campaign’s chief spokesperson.

He is also backed by two Islamist parties – the National Mandate Party (PAN) affiliated with Muhammadiyah and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

These activists were linked together by their activities with the 2016/17 Defending Islam movement under the *GNPF Ulama* banner and in the #2019ChangePresident (#2019GantiPresiden) movement that gained steam last year. While the latter movement is technically separate from the Prabowo campaign, it has a clear aim to replace Jokowi in the 2019 general election and has unambiguously endorsed Prabowo’s presidential bid.

Finally, Prabowo has gained the support of many former government officials and retired military officers who used to be part of the Jokowi administration but have now been sidelined for one reason or another. They include Sudirman Said (former Minister of Energy and Natural Resources), Rizal Ramli (former Coordinating Minister of Economic Affairs), and retired General Gatot Nurmantyo (former TNI Chief of Staff).

Having these former senior officials on board give the Prabowo campaign more clout to attack Jokowi’s policy (particularly his economic policy) as a failure as well as giving legitimacy to Prabowo’s proposed “People’s Economy” (*Ekonomi Kerakyatan*), which

is promoted as an alternative to the liberal economic policies adopted by the administration.

Identity Politics Remains Salient

However, as Prabowo's strongest supporters are the conservative Islamic activists and organisations, his campaign continues to base its strategy on attacks questioning Jokowi's Islamic credentials and his policies that allegedly undermine the interests of the majority of Muslim followers (*ummah*) in Indonesia.

That is why the campaign has tacitly supported Islamic mobilisation efforts – including by the Action to Defend the Oneness of God (*Aksi Bela Tauhid*) conducted in October and November 2018 to protest the alleged burning of a flag containing the Islamic article of faith by an activist of Ansor – Nahdlatul Ulama's youth wing. In other demonstrations the campaign's involvement is more overt.

Prabowo appeared as a keynote speaker in the second anniversary of the Defending Islam movement on 4 December 2018 at Jakarta's National Monument park, in front of an approximately one million protesters.

Prabowo's campaign supports these rallies in order to energise its primary base and constituency. At the same time, however, it assures identity politics continue to play an important role during the election campaigns, promoting further polarisation and divisions within the Indonesian society.

Nevertheless, the tactic works to assure Prabowo is leading in the polls in a number of key provinces with significant numbers of observant Muslim population (for instance in West Sumatra and Banten) or is running neck-and-neck with Jokowi in others (for instance in West Java, North Sumatra and South Sulawesi).

Notwithstanding Prabowo's lacklustre enthusiasm and financial support, this does not mean he does not stand any chance to win in April's general election. Prabowo has many hardcore supporters who are highly committed and dedicated to carry him to victory. They can potentially make up for his lack of other resources in order to stage a potential upset in the coming presidential election.

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