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Indonesia's 2018 Regional Elections

Pilkada Serentak: Role of Identity Politics

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

Simultaneous regional elections – Pilkada Serentak– will be taking place in Indonesia on 27 June 2018. Candidates are widely expected to campaign using ethno-religious symbols to win votes, particularly in five key gubernatorial races.

Commentary

INDONESIA WILL be holding its annual regional elections on 27 June 2018. This year, elections will be held simultaneously in 17 provinces and in 154 districts and cities throughout Indonesia. Of particular interest is the gubernatorial elections in five provinces of West Java, Central Java, East Java, North Sumatra, and South Sulawesi.

Approximately two-thirds of Indonesia's population (174 out of 261 million) are estimated to live in these five provinces, making them politically significant. Regional elections in these provinces are also considered as a political barometer for the 2019 general election. Whoever is elected governor – and their sponsoring parties – can influence next year's legislative and presidential campaigns within their provinces through their control of the provincial bureaucracy.

Attempt to Define Elections

At last year's gubernatorial election in Jakarta, incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) was defeated in a landslide after the Defending Islam rallies organised by a coalition of conservative and hardline Islamist groups. Since then many observers are predicting that Islam will play an equally significant

role in this year's regional elections – particularly in the five key gubernatorial elections.

Former Defending Islam participants have formed associations such as the Presidium of the 212 Alumni (referring to the largest rally held on 2 December 2016) and the National Movement to Guard Rulings of Islamic Clerics - *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa (GNPF) Ulama*. They have made it clear that they will be endorsing and campaigning on behalf of candidates who they perceived are observant Muslims.

These they defined as those who will “act in the interests of Indonesian Muslims” and will reject any effort to “criminalise the ulama” – referring to the Indonesian government's attempt to prosecute key rally leaders such as Habib Rizieq Shihab and Muhammad al Khatthath.

GNPF Ulama has issued a call for its supporters not to vote for candidates from parties that are members of President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) coalition but to vote for those backing his likely opponent Prabowo Subianto in next year's presidential election. These parties are Gerindra and two Islamist entities – the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Mandate Party (PAN) affiliated with *Muhammadiyah* – Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation.

Accordingly, it has endorsed gubernatorial candidates backed by Prabowo and his coalition partners, such as retired Lieutenant General Edy Rahmayadi, a candidate in the North Sumatra provincial governor race, and Sudirman Said, who is running for governor of Central Java province.

Local Dynamics Matter

In turn, these candidates have begun to use Islamic rhetoric and symbols in their respective campaigns. This is especially so in North Sumatra, where General Edy Rahmayadi has touted his Islamic credentials as a cadre of both Gerindra and PKS parties. In addition to GNPF Ulama endorsement, he is also backed by local Islamic groups within the province, such as *Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*.

Edy's opponent is Djarot Saiful Hidayat, Jakarta's former deputy governor who served under then governor Ahok. Djarot is seeking support primarily from ethnic Batak and Chinese living in the province, who are predominantly Christian. Since 64 percent of the province's population are Muslims, while 36 percent are non-Muslims, the North Sumatra gubernatorial election has the potential to become the most divisive gubernatorial race this election season, if both candidates choose to play the identity card in their respective campaigns.

In the Central Java race, Sudirman Said recently created a controversy when he visited and received an endorsement from Rizieq Shihab, who is now living in self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. This is notwithstanding Sudirman's earlier efforts to seek support from both ethnic Chinese and Christians living in the province. He is challenging incumbent governor Ganjar Pranowo, who comes from the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) party, which is affiliated with President Jokowi.

Islamic Factor Muted Elsewhere

However, the Islamic factor in other key gubernatorial races is more muted. In West Java, Ridwan Kamil, the former Bandung mayor who is now a gubernatorial candidate, was earlier accused of being both a 'secret Shi'a' and an 'ally of non-Muslims' in negative campaigns attacks. However, he has since touted his own Islamic credentials. The fact that he is facing three other candidates in the race has also helped to cool down the campaign's rhetoric.

In East Java, Islamic identity almost played no role whatsoever. This is because both candidates in the race, Saifullah Yusuf and Khofifah Indar Parawansa are senior members of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) – Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation. Saifullah is also supported by PDIP as well Gerindra and PKS.

The fact that these parties - which have become bitter rivals nationally - are supporting the same candidate in East Java might contribute to the relative absence of ethno-religious issues in this particular race. There is also a lack of identity issues in South Sulawesi, where all four candidates are considered to be observant Muslims, while Gerindra and PKS are supporting different candidates.

In the aftermath of last year's heated Jakarta election, observers have predicted that Islamic symbols and identity politics will become significant again both in this year's regional elections and in next year's presidential election. Conservative Islamic groups such as GNPf Ulama are clearly trying to define the tone of the elections by endorsing certain candidates who use religious symbols in their respective campaigns.

However, identity politics have not become salient in every gubernatorial election. Local demographics, political dynamics, and decisions by candidates whether or not to play the identity card will determine the degree by which it may or may not become an issue in a specific region.

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