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Indonesian Presidential Election 2014: Tipping Point?

By Jonathan Chen

Synopsis

While the presidential election looks like it was Joko Widodo's to lose just two months earlier, recent polls have painted a strikingly different picture with Prabowo Subianto fast closing the gap. Which candidate is more likely to tip the scale to victory?

Commentary

The Indonesian presidential election on 9 July 2014 looks set to be culminating in a dead heat. A mere three percentage point separates the two contesting presidential candidates, with 10 percent of undecided voters that have not made up their minds on who to vote for. The latest results from Indo Barometer, conducted between 16 and 22 June 2014, showed that the gap between Jakarta governor Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and former military commander Prabowo Subianto had narrowed considerably. Support for the Jokowi-Jusuf Kalla duo had almost plateaued at 46 percent while the Prabowo-Hatta Rajasa pair surged to 42.6 percent.

Other recent surveys including those of Lembaga Survei Indonesia and Pol-tracking Institute have also indicated a similar trend. Both camps are confident that they have succeeded in tipping the scales in their favour during the last week of intensive campaigning.

No clear winner for now

Such a situation is quite unprecedented for Indonesia. Past elections have all yielded clear winners. In the 2009 presidential election, the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY)-Boediono pair won with a convincing 30 percent margin over the second place Megawati-Prabowo duo. In 2004 following two rounds of elections, the SBY-Kalla pair eventually emerged on top with more than 20 percent of national votes over the Megawati-Hasyim Muzadi pair.

As both Jokowi-Kalla and Prabowo-Hatta sought to pull away from one another, three aspects shaped the current presidential elections and may play a crucial role in giving the final push towards electoral success. These aspects include image projection, Islamic credentials and the respective party machineries of their coalitions. The former two focus inherently on the candidates themselves while the latter is on the competence of the overall coalitional efforts.

Image projection

Throughout his campaign, Jokowi projected an image of one that is “honest and clean with a down-to-earth simplicity.” Preferring to stick with his signature checkered shirt from his previous governorship campaign in Jakarta, he built affinity and rapport primarily with a *blusukan*-style approach (impromptu visits) including allusions to his non-elite roots. In one instance he even referred to himself as having a “kampung face” – an indication to his electorate that he is indeed like one of them.

Prabowo on the other hand excelled at projecting a decisive and commanding image. While he may not resemble the “man of the people”, he most certainly stood out for his extravagant displays of power and pomp. Clad in classic white Sukarnoist attire and a *peci* (traditional Islamic cap) he invoked Indonesians’ nostalgia for a more authoritarian leadership.

The vastly contrasting images and personalities of both candidates were often paired up for comparison. While some may find Prabowo’s flagrant displays of authority and power distasteful, Jokowi’s tried-and-tested formula of folksy conviviality may not be enough to seal the deal.

Islamic credentials

With the majority of Islamic parties throwing their support behind Prabowo, his coalition appeared to be well-represented within the Muslim camp. Although Prabowo is often seen associating with various Islamic groups and *kyais*, his purported Islamic credentials probably stem more from black campaigns and fiascos that have plagued the Jokowi campaign.

Being the victim of a malicious *ad hominem* tabloid attack that had cast serious doubts on Jokowi’s ethnicity and Muslimness as well as painting him as a stooge invariably put the Jokowi campaign team on the defensive. This has been compounded by the fact that a campaign member had previously called for the removal of the religion status on the national identification card. To dispel unwarranted rumours and regain the majority Muslim vote, Jokowi pledged his recognition of the state of Palestine and went on an umrah (minor pilgrimage) to Mecca during the three-day cooling off period before the election.

Nonetheless a recent survey by Indo Barometer had indicated that most Indonesians who identify themselves as Muslim will cast their vote for the Prabowo-Hatta coalition. With the Jokowi campaign preoccupied with fire-fighting it remains to be seen whether the damage has been done. This may be complicated further by the characterisation of Jokowi as a “nominal” Muslim (*abangan*) which may be a liability to him.

Party machinery

With the competition culminating in a neck-and-neck race the influence of material wealth and resources may be pivotal in tipping the balance.

In a recent report verified by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), Prabowo is reported to be the wealthiest among the presidential and vice presidential candidates (US\$148 million). Coming in second place is Jokowi’s running mate Jusuf Kalla, whose wealth is less than a third of Prabowo’s (US\$38 million). Tycoons in each camp may have attempted to influence the voting in their favour. Already the Jokowi team had rolled out a comprehensive nine-point plan to improve the lot of Indonesians.

More substantially, much is also dependant on having a superior party machinery that is well-connected and organised. The Prabowo camp certainly had greater options with a bigger coalition comprising well-organised parties like Golkar and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Compared with the Jokowi campaign team, Prabowo’s team appeared to be more efficient with clear and sustained messages playing to its strengths.

Election Aftermath: A pyrrhic victory?

With Jokowi still the front-runner, the balance may yet be in his favour. The narrow margins between Jokowi-Kalla and Prabowo-Hatta however may not bode well for either administration coming into power.

For one, it will be an election that has a high likelihood of ending up without a clear, resounding winner. Secondly, the political configuration among the candidates that had since polarised into two clear camps may come back to haunt the respective presidencies. Thirdly, both presidential aspirants may have to deal with the baggage they carry – Prabowo being seen as a Sukarnoist character with an authoritarian streak and a contentious human rights record; and Jokowi being seen as a “political lightweight” indebted to Megawati, daughter of Sukarno.

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