

Elections in Indonesia

Personality Cult and Majoritarian Conservatism

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The organisation of political discourse and the citizen's imagination around the personality cults of leaders and ascendant majoritarianism in Indonesia raises concerns about the health of democracy.

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The 2019 election has proven to be the most complicated election in the history of Indonesia. Held on 17 April 2019, two contestants were competing for the presidency, and more than 2,45,000 candidates were contesting for the 20,000 seats in both national and local parliaments. Involving approximately 193 million registered voters spread out among 17,000 islands, and around 8,00,000 voting booths managed by more than 6 million election workers, the five ballots were cast in a single day and then counted manually at each level (from districts to cities, provinces, and the national level). Many argued that this was the biggest direct election in the world, judging by the complicated process, the humongous scale, and the logistical challenge (Bland 2019). Not to

mention, by the end of the process, more than 550 election workers, police officers, and the election watcher have died (Sitepu 2019).

After a long and complicated process, the General Elections Commission (KPU) announced the final result on 21 May. Joko Widodo (Jokowi) won the second term of the presidency by a 10% margin (Tehusjarana et al 2019). As many had predicted, the result sparked a chain of protests up in the Jakarta. People who rejected the decision swarmed around the Election Watch Office (Bawaslu) and demanded them to change the official result. Riots broke in the capital city of Jakarta on 21–22 May, with eight people killed, more than 700 protesters injured, social media limitations, the arrest of around 400 people, including former military officer and politicians, and the police's claim that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was behind the riots (Tehusjarana and Valentina 2019; Human Rights Watch 2019; *South China Morning Post* 2019).

This Indonesian election is vital in several ways. Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world (almost 90% of the population identified

themselves as Muslim, according to the National Statistics Bureau). While gradually democratising since 1998 (after 32 years under authoritarian/military rule) and being portrayed (and promoted) as the poster child of democracy and Islam going hand-in-hand, the recent global wave of populism and the rise of the right-wing conservative groups proved to be a challenge to the fragile democracy in Indonesia.

Context of the Election

Indonesia has a long-standing history of military and Islam being influential factors within a democracy. Issues around these are articulated in every election that has been held in Indonesia. The 2019 election was no exception. Both presidential contestants have been adversaries since the 2014 election. Jokowi, who is the incumbent, has a track record as the mayor of Solo and the governor of Jakarta. He also owns a company that focuses on the furniture business. The challenger, Prabowo Subianto (Prabowo), a former special forces/military general, is also the son-in-law of the leader of New Order, Suharto. His career in the military was over after he was accused of human rights violations during the 1998 political conflict that brought down his father-in-law's regime. In a sense, this was a battle between a civilian against a military leader, highlighting the ongoing importance of the military in Indonesian politics.

To complicate the situation further, Jokowi teamed up with Ma'ruf Amin, a prominent Islamic cleric who is currently the chairman of Indonesia Islamic Cleric Organisation (Majelis Ulama Indonesia). Jokowi–Ma'ruf are constructing their images as populist technocrats, to use Mietzen's (2015) terminology, who are part of moderate Islamic majority. That image was constantly maintained since the 2014 election. Instead of being a nationalist-populist who appealed to the differences against the outsider, Jokowi was portrayed as an ordinary citizen who could change the system by being inclusive. Along with that, Ma'ruf Amin is symbolising an ordinary cleric who has no relationship with the ruling family. Both were substantially creating a

religious–technocrat image that became mainstream among Indonesian voters.

The Jokowi–Ma'ruf coalition consisted of 10 political parties, which mostly have a nationalistic point of view. Only two out of the 10 are Islamic parties. The fact that Ma'ruf Amin was chosen seconds before declarations indicates that Jokowi coalition was eager to obtain Islamic voters. Before declaring Ma'ruf Amin as the vice-presidential candidate, there was a widespread rumour that Mahfud MD (a former chairman of Constitutional Court and an Islamic scholar) would fill up the post. It turns out Ma'ruf Amin was chosen, despite his more conservative views compared to Mahfud MD. This decision is another sign that Islam, especially the more conservative faction, is gaining ground in Indonesian politics.

On the other hand, Prabowo chose to team up with Sandiaga Uno, a young billionaire who became a symbol for a successful millennial leader. As an ex-military general, he built his character as an assertive, decisive and nationalistic persona, which is a normal populist stance. In his campaign, he often emphasised ultranationalist economic rhetoric that would be beneficial to the deprived while shutting the door for foreigners. Supported by his vice-presidential candidate who had an entrepreneurial background, this was his primary campaign nationwide.

According to Arifianto (2019a), what made Prabowo a strong contender was that his ultranationalistic view, to some extent, met the interest of the conservative-religious section. Even though none of them have a strong religious background, they still managed to gain conservative Islamic acceptance from the groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and GNPf Ulama that later would become their core supporters. Finally, Prabowo gained the support of many retired military generals. This cooperation was a unique situation where the military and conservative Islamic groups joined nationalist-populist rhetoric against Jokowi who was dubbed as a pro-Chinese, liberal/foreign agent, and a threat to Indonesia and Islam.

Both groups dwell in the realm of intersection between nationalism and Islam. They have proved that in the last

two elections, Islam has become substantially crucial for political purposes. This notion is what set up the election to be a sharply polarising one.

Populist–Personality Cult

Indonesian politics in the post-Suharto period has turned into a charisma-based exercise rather than being focused on the development of the political party's platform and programmes (Fionna 2016). The two latest elections confirm this. Jokowi is praised for his persona, as a down-to-earth ex-carpenter and a capable technocrat, and Prabowo for his classic anti-foreign rhetoric and neo-authoritarian persona (Mietzner 2015). The two things are repetitively articulated creating two bases of fanatical supporters, who cynically called each other as *cebong* and *kampret*. *Cebong* is a term for the tadpole, while *Kampret* is a cynical term for bat. The two camps have turned social media into a “holy war zone” to determine who is going to be the national saviour for the next five years. Most political elites aggravate this condition. They are no better than the ordinary people in social media debates; attacking personality and family, amplifying the stigma, and not offering any policy alternatives. For example, Jokowi was attacked in social media with an accusation of being a member of the banned Indonesian Communist Party (*Jakarta Post* 2018). This rumour has been denied repeatedly by him. Ma'ruf Amin was once rumoured to have been hospitalised, and so not considered as suitable for the position due to his health condition (*Tempo* 2019). On the contrary, both Prabowo and Sandiaga, whose names were in the Panama and Paradise Papers, were attacked by questioning their morality as leaders (Hariyanto 2019). Unsubstantiated accusations are an everyday occurrence in people's social media timeline, mainstream media reportage, and television broadcast.

The worst part of this personality cult is that for their supporters it is getting personal. The political dispute over social media is now penetrating their real lives. Idris, a Sampang district resident, was shot in the chest after he made a comment confronting a Prabowo supporter on Facebook (Retaduari 2019). Many couples,

family and friends also fought over who the ideal candidate is to lead Indonesia for the next five years (Putri 2019).

It is sad to watch how hegemonic polarisation between Jokowi and Prabowo has affected ordinary citizens. It is not a new phenomenon, yet it gained its momentum back in 2014 when the first contest between the two began.

Since 2014, no one in Indonesia has been immune to hoax exposure. Most people have read these hoaxes primarily through family/friends/workplace WhatsApp groups, or Twitter and Facebook posts. Jokowi was once accused of being a fake Muslim, a member of the communist party, and a Chinese descendant with no apparent evidence. Jokowi's mother has clarified this message as a hoax (Kami 2018). These types of hoaxes are being spread by every section of society, including the political elite. Amien Rais, once a prominent reformist figure and a professor, often made groundless accusations such as the 2019 election being full of fraud without any further explanation or evidence (Taher 2019).

The rise of fake news, not only in Indonesia, has been a worrying development. Nonetheless, the Indonesian government's response by limiting access to social media could also be considered as a way to suppress the freedom of speech. In doing so, Jokowi's government is actually propagating, albeit inadvertently, the narrative produced by his opponents: that he is against Islam and the welfare of the Indonesian people.

Islamic Conservative Movement

One might trace the roots of sectarianism and racism well before the 2019 election, in the 2014 general election and the Jakarta gubernatorial election of 2017. The 2014 election was notable for the rise of religious vigilantes like the FPI which rejected secular democracy and stood up for what it called foundational return to Islam within Indonesian constitutions (Wilson 2015). Along with the FPI, there was also an organisation called Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), both close to Prabowo. Later, some political parties were interested in teaming up with them. The only party to have kept its distance

from both these groups is the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the one that supported Jokowi as the presidential candidate (Wilson 2015).

The HTI and FPI were significant conservative Islamic movements that gained momentum back in 2014 by playing up sectarian and racist issues. The two of them have a different approach to democracy. The HTI condemned democracy as sinful and not in accordance with Islamic values, while the FPI is manoeuvring the dynamics of Indonesia's decentralised electoral system for their own cause (Wilson 2015). The two of them were the main actors back in 2014 in promoting sectarianism and racism in order to gather votes from conservative Islamist voters.

Although Jokowi won the 2014 election, the episode carried on to the next major election, the Jakarta Gubernatorial election in 2017. The incumbent, Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok) and Anies Baswedan (Anies) were competing. Here, racism took over, in addition to blatant sectarianism. Ahok is the first Chinese and Christian governor who has an image of an anti-corruption technocrat, while Anies is a native of Jakarta who has a polite, educated persona. Ahok was once Jokowi's vice governor; on the contrary, Anies was removed from Jokowi's administration as minister of education. As a Chinese, Christian, and Jokowi's supporter, Ahok has faced multiple levels of discrimination in a Muslim-majority Indonesia. He was once labelled as a kafir (infidel) by most Islamist conservative figures (BBC 2017). They then rejected him as the governor on the ground of both his ethnicity and religion. In the end, he was accused of blasphemy after wrongly citing a verse from the Quran during his campaign and sentenced to two years in prison.

The year 2017 was when Islamist conservatives received all the spotlight. Two months after Ahok wrongly cited the Quran in 2016, conservative Islamists gathered in Monas, demanding him to be put on trial. It was known as the 212 movement. After that, they have regularly assembled in Monas, and have claimed to be the voice of Islam in Indonesia. The 2019 election was no different. Prabowo

is still teaming up with the conservative Islamic groups and playing on sectarian and racist issues while giving the conservatives a stage to present themselves to the public. As it was reported, the police have claimed that the post-election riot might have some connections to the radical terrorist group in Indonesia (*South China Morning Post* 2019).

Conclusions

The first takeaway is the fact that Islam has returned to Indonesian politics. For better or worse, the current and future President of Indonesia, the political elites, and all members of society have to realise that it is unlikely that both the moderate and conservative factions of Islamic movements in Indonesia will withdraw from the political arena. It is part of the legacy of Yudhoyono's era when he invited all those forces into his coalition government and allowed conservative Islamic groups such as the FPI or parties such as the PKS to thrive. However, even though conservative Islamic parties such as the PKS have gained more votes (from 6.79% to 8.21%) and seats (an additional 10 seats from 40 to 50), the moderate and traditional Islamic forces have helped Jokowi's second victory. Jokowi's huge victory in Central and East Java (both are the bases of moderate Islamic movements such as Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) helped him defeat Prabowo. The moderate Islamic and the moderate nationalist parties supporting Jokowi also gained more seats in the parliament, restraining the rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia.

However, this division between conservative and moderate Islam has divided and polarised Indonesian Muslims and Indonesian people for the foreseeable future (Arifianto 2019b; Wanto and Sebastian 2019; Sulaiman 2019). Instead of resolution after the election and a return to normal daily life, people are still talking about politics in a polarised manner. On the one hand, it also drove people to the voting booth and raised the turnout to 82%. On the other hand, as Arifianto (2019b) said, this polarisation might take at least a generation to be resolved.

The other take is the decline of the political party system and the rise of

personality cults in Indonesian politics. People have been heavily focused on presidential politics while overlooking the national and local parliamentary elections. The fact that Jokowi's coalition parties won almost 55% of the votes and almost 60% of the parliamentary seats is a disquieting development. Adding to that, the current negotiation with other parties from the Prabowo camp that could join Jokowi's coalition can create a super majority (447 seats, 77% from 575 seats). Meanwhile, people do not really care about the elected legislature that will have a significant say on several regulations, such as the one regarding LGBT (lesbian gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights, religious minority rights, or freedom of speech. By focusing on the personality and forgetting about his policies, Jokowi's policies on neglecting minority rights or persecuting the political opposition will not be criticised, which could hasten the backsliding of democracy in Indonesia.

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