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A Preliminary Assessment of Indonesia’s Simultaneous Direct Elections (*Pilkada Serentak*) 2015

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On December 9, 2015, local direct elections (*pilkada*) were held in more than 260 Indonesian regions. While the results of these elections are unlikely to affect policy-making at the national level, their implementation provides a valuable opportunity for assessing the status of democratic consolidation in Indonesia.
- Focusing on the performance of candidates and political parties, the dynamics of the political campaigns and the electorate’s voting behavior in North Sulawesi, East Java and North Sumatra, this paper discusses the processes of electoral competition, campaign management, and voters’ attitudes towards vote-buying and political patronage.
- Overall, incumbency proves to be a crucial asset in electoral competitions, as challengers find it hard to gain the same degree of visibility as incumbent office holders and to convince voters that they are better alternatives.
- Political parties continue to be outshone by candidates and their campaign teams (*tim sukses*), and they mainly act as gatekeepers to the nomination ticket.

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- Voters were quite disengaged in this round of local elections, as turnout was low despite socialization efforts. Such low participation may be due to recent corruption scandals and to the overall poor quality of candidates.
- Lack of interest and the poor socio-economic conditions of many voters also meant that they could be manipulated with vote-buying, although the effectiveness of this practice is not uniform across the cases.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2005, Indonesians have elected mayors, district heads and governors directly. While some see these elections as a cornerstone of the processes of democratization and regional autonomy, others have suggested that they have failed to increase transparency and strengthen accountability. Despite their deficiencies, however, local direct elections, known in Indonesian as *pilkada*, are strongly supported by Indonesian voters, who appear to prefer them to indirect elections through local legislative councils.¹

On December 9, 2015, local direct elections were scheduled for the first time simultaneously in 269 regions, comprising 224 districts, 36 cities and 9 provinces. To be sure, the outcome of these elections is unlikely to have substantial implications for national policy-making. On one hand, preliminary results indicate that incumbents were able to secure re-election in most regions.² On the other hand, the link between national and local politics remains weak, as local electoral competitions are shaped almost exclusively by local political dynamics. However, observing this wave of *pilkada* is a valuable opportunity to assess the status of Indonesian democracy, as these elections serve as indicators of how political parties function, of the capacity of government institutions to enforce the rule of law during the campaign, and of how voting behaviour shapes electoral outcomes. Furthermore, *pilkada* elections provide new evidence on various issues that have long been known to challenge Indonesian democracy, such as corruption, political financing, candidate quality, vote-buying, and public participation.

This paper analyses *pilkada* elections in three Indonesian regions, namely North Sulawesi, East Java and North Sumatra. East Java is a politically and economically dynamic region, while North Sumatra is an important site due to its ethnic and religious diversity. North Sulawesi was in turn chosen for its high levels of political fragmentation, competitiveness and participation. Manado, in particular, is an important economic centre in Eastern Indonesia, and one of the few major cities in the archipelago with a predominantly Christian population in a Muslim-majority Indonesia. For each location, we analyze fieldwork data collected in the two weeks prior to Election Day. We focus on a range of issues pertaining to three main areas of electoral politics: the role of candidates and political parties, the dynamics of campaign management and communication, and voting behaviour. We conclude by discussing commonalities and differences across the three field sites, as well as utilizing these elections to reflect on the current state of Indonesia's democracy.

MANADO: A BATTLE BETWEEN TWO INCUMBENTS

A total of eight *pilkada* were scheduled in the province of North Sulawesi for December 9, including four districts, three cities and the provincial governor's race. Among these,

¹ An attempt by the House of Representatives to abolish *pilkada* in late 2014 was reversed after unprecedented public uproar against the bill.

² Wahyu Sabda Kuncahyo, "Pilkada Serentak 2015 LSI: Mayoritas Petahana Menang Pilkada", *RMOL*, 10 Desember 2015, (<http://www.rmol.co/read/2015/12/10/227671/LSI:-Mayoritas-Petahana-Menang-Pilkada->).

mayoral elections in Manado, a Christian-majority municipality of about 400,000, caught national prominence for a controversy surrounding former mayor and ex-convict Jimmy Rimba Rogi.³ While this dispute led to the last-minute postponement of the elections, an episode that aptly illustrates persisting tensions in some Indonesian regions between national regulations and local-level preferences, the electoral campaign in Manado offers valuable insights into the relations between local elites and political parties. Initially, parties appear to be at the margins of politics. In candidate selection, partisanship is neglected in favour of other factors, most importantly the electability of the candidate and his ability to contribute financially to the campaign. While incumbent Vicky Lumentut, a highly-educated career bureaucrat, is a stalwart and provincial head of the Demokrat Party, both his challengers switched parties shortly before the elections. Harley Mangindaan, vice-mayor and son of former minister and North Sulawesi governor Evert Ernest, joined Gerindra after losing the battle for Demokrat Party endorsement to the incumbent mayor. Hanny Joost Pajouw, formerly a Golkar cadre with experience in the private sector, joined PDI-P after it became clear that his party would endorse Rogi for mayor. Candidates are also driving coalition-building among parties, as coalitions are functional to each candidate's election bid.

In other respects, however, political parties play a key role in local politics. First, they remain the gatekeepers of the political selection process, as independent candidatures are challenging due to existing regulations.⁴ Second, political parties offer a decisive contribution to campaign management. While Jakarta-based consultants are occasionally hired, almost all campaign executives are recruited among Manado party cadres and their personal connections. Furthermore, parties can mobilize a capillary, grassroots-level network of sympathizers and volunteers to work for the campaign, a crucial resource for political communication. Candidates supported by political parties thus enjoy a significant advantage over independents.

As for the campaign strategies followed, differences across the three candidates can be identified. The incumbent's attempt to secure re-election emphasized candidate qualities such as competence and intelligence and an eight-point policy programme advertised in various campaign materials and events. The programme was varied, but it focused on proposals to consolidate the incumbent's popular social policies (such as free universal healthcare and a scheme for the elderly and disabled) and to strengthen his image as a "*pro-rakyat*" (pro-people) leader. The vice-mayor also tried to claim credit for popular incumbent policies, but his campaign highlighted two additional factors to differentiate his profile. First, it capitalized on the prestige of his family name, touting this lineage as evidence of

³ Rogi's term was abruptly terminated in 2007 by a nine-year reclusion sentence on corruption charges. After being admitted as a candidate by the local office of the Electoral Commission (KPU) despite his legal standing as free on parole, Rogi's candidacy was voided by a directive from KPU headquarters. However, on the day before the election, the State Administrative Court of Makassar accepted a complaint filed by Rogi's representatives, ordering that the mayoral elections in Manado be postponed until further notice.

⁴ Out of the 23 candidates running for office in North Sulawesi, only five were independent, three of which were from the city of Bitung, an extreme outlier in terms of number of candidates.

the candidate's leadership qualities.⁵ Second, it underscored the candidate's wife's Sangir background, targeting more aggressively the sub-districts where this community is concentrated.⁶ Against these two strong contenders, the third challenger tried to improve his electoral prospects by adopting a critical stance on some incumbent policies and by associating his name to that of the popular PDI-P gubernatorial candidate, now governor-elect Olly Dondokambey. For all candidates, campaign communication tactics included a mix of grassroots initiatives, traditional media advertising, engagement through social media, and attempts to obtain endorsements from religious leaders.

Interviews with local political elites and professionals also allow the drawing of some inferences about prevailing patterns of voting behaviour in Manado. First, while there is anecdotal evidence of vote-buying, local politicians are increasingly skeptical of its effectiveness due to the common practice of accepting material benefits from candidates and then voting according to one's own preferences. Second, candidate attributes such as leadership, integrity and competence are a pivotal driver of voter preferences, especially when compared with partisan affiliations, which appear to be marginal. As for identity-related factors, they are acknowledged to play a role in voting behaviour, although rarely a decisive one. Finally, the case of Manado signals that policy-based voting may be more prevalent in Indonesian local politics than previously thought. Public policy was a powerful tool for the incumbent to shape voting behaviour, and the very strong incumbent performance in this wave of *pilkada* suggests that Manado may be representative of a national trend in this regard.

EAST JAVA: INCUMBENCY AND AMBIGUOUS VOTERS

There were 18 direct elections conducted in East Java. Three of these are discussed in the following paragraphs, namely the city of Surabaya, and the districts of Malang and Sidoarjo. Electoral campaigns in these three regions clearly show the importance of incumbency in electoral competition. At the same time, voters are increasingly disengaged and uninterested, partly because their involvement in the campaign had been limited by new electoral rules. As such, elections in these three regions reflect trends similar to the other areas, where parties continue to fail in nurturing attractive candidates, and low electoral turnout signals low interest among voters.

The three regions in East Java indicated that some experience in local bureaucracy or as party politicians, afforded candidates visibility and adding to their electability. The two pairs of candidates in Surabaya, three in Malang, and four in Sidoarjo all have these backgrounds. The process of determining candidates depends on parties' central leaders as well as the electability or popularity of the candidates at the local level. As such, the pairing up of candidates typically reflects the effort to combine various bureaucratic and

⁵ Ex-governor Evert Ernest Mangindaan, the candidate's father, is commonly credited to have been a strong, civic-minded leader who ensured peace and prosperity at a time when neighbouring provinces such as Central Sulawesi and Maluku were torn by large-scale ethnic violence.

⁶ The same heritage, however, was also asserted by Mor Bastiaan, the incumbent mayor's running mate.

organizational backgrounds to expand the support base. To name some examples, in Surabaya, Tri Rismaharini is a professional-bureaucrat and Wisnu Sakti Buana provides the party politician background; in Malang, Dewanti Rumpoko is a PDIP politician and her partner Masrifah Hadi has a strong Nahdlatul Ulama background. Similarly, in Sidoarjo, candidate Ustman Ikhsan is a local bureaucrat and his partner is Tan Mei Hwa, a Chinese Muslim preacher.⁷ In the process of pairing candidates, the effort to appeal to as wide a constituency as possible was clear.

While parties and local politics determined candidacy, they have rather limited influence in the actual running of the candidates' campaigns in East Java. Most parties have to build alliances with others in promoting the candidates, particularly as there is a shortage of eligible candidates.⁸ Campaigns were designed by teams (commonly known as *tim sukses*/success team), consisting of party politicians, professionals, and even consultants. Some notable trends can be seen in the methods used. Instead of the conventional mass rallies, candidates focused on small-scale *blusukan* (going direct to the small constituencies) where they opted for face-to-face interaction with voters. In addition, there was selective use of social media to reach the technology-savvy constituencies, and limited use of print media to reach the more general constituencies. In terms of the role of the parties' grassroots, they were influential in determining which specific constituents needed to be engaged by the candidates, although it was not always apparent which grassroots members (numbering in thousands) could actually bring in the votes.

Typically, the candidates' platforms and programs were rather generic and abstract, with a lot of focus on populist aspects such as education and health. In terms of funding, the candidates' teams said that while parties would usually donate some, most of the funding came from the candidates and other undisclosed sources. There was also a clear trend of professionalization, as campaign activities were carefully designed under consultation with local experts on politics and also survey bureaus.

On voting behaviour, a few trends could be observed. Firstly, incumbency proved crucial for the three sites studied in East Java, as all the winners were incumbents. This clearly points to the difficulty faced by challengers in offering a better alternative, perhaps due to their lower visibility or the actual efficacy of the incumbents. Slogans such as 'Surabaya move on', and 'New Malang' offered by challengers simply did not work. Secondly, the low voter turnout (about 40-50 percent) points to the increasing apathy of voters. While the string of corruption cases against various parties had played a role in creating this apathy, the greater control of campaign by the Electoral Commission may also have contributed to the loss of sense of belonging – as voters were much less involved compared to the 2014

⁷ There were two pairs of candidates for Surabaya, where Risma-Wisnu had to compete against Rasiyo-Lucy. Malang had two pairs of candidates other than Dewanti-Masrifah, the incumbent regent Rendra-Sanusi and Nurcholis-Mufidz. Sidoarjo had three other pairs of candidates, Hadi Sutjipto-Abdul Kholik, Saifullah-Nur Ahmad Syaifuddin, and Warih Handono-Imam Sugiri.

⁸ Except for PKB candidates in Sidoarjo (Saifullah-Nur Ahmad Syaifuddin), PDIP candidates in Malang (Dewanti Rumpoko-Masrifah Hadi) and Surabaya (for Risma-Wisnu), and a pair of independent candidates in Malang (Nurcholis and Mufidz), other candidates were backed by a coalition of parties.

legislative elections.⁹ In contrast with the legislative round last year where voters were more involved in producing paraphernalia and other campaign materials and putting them on display; *pilkada serentak* featured increased involvement from the Electoral Commission to manage the campaign. While the numbers of debates and mass rallies have been regulated since the 2014 elections, these direct elections saw the campaign paraphernalia (Alat Peraga Kampanye, including the size and locations of the banners) closely regulated. Thirdly, it is increasingly clear that voters have ambiguous perception towards corruption. Although they want clean candidates, they generally will not reject being bribed for votes. While this is clearly a reflection of the poor socio-economic conditions of most voters, it is nevertheless a source of concern for the progress of Indonesia's democracy.

MEDAN: INCUMBENCY AND APATHY

In North Sumatra, 23 districts and municipalities were scheduled to hold direct elections simultaneously on December 9. However, two regions, namely Pematang Siantar (or Siantar city) and the district of Simalungun, ended up in plights similar to that of Manado's, and had their elections postponed by the respective region's KPUs.

The *pilkada* in Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra province, was marked by a very low voter turnout. Of 1,961,471 registered voters, only 527,206 voted, which meant that the city had only a turnout rate of 26.8%, the lowest among all the regional elections this year.¹⁰ According to Medan KPU's Pandapotan Tamba, such political apathy was due to the high number of elections (e.g. presidential, parliamentary, gubernatorial and mayoral elections) taking place within a short time span.¹¹ While these considerations may hold true for this year's *pilkada* in general, low turnout in Medan's case may also be due to disappointment with the many cases of corruption which have engulfed the leadership of both the province of North Sumatra and the city of Medan in recent years.¹² The consequent political apathy, as evident in the abysmal voter turnout, could be interpreted as a "weapon of the weak", conveying the people's disappointment with and distrust of their political leaders.

Focusing on this year's *pilkada* in Medan, there were only two pairs of candidates: the first pair consisted of the incumbent mayor Dzulmi Eldin and Akhyar Nasution, a PDIP cadre; and the second of the relatively less known Ramadhan Pohan, a parliament member from East Java and a Democrat Party cadre, and Eddie Kusuma, a Chinese-Indonesian

⁹ "Angka Golput Masih Tinggi", *Koran Sindo*, 10 December 2015, (<http://www.koran-sindo.com/news.php?r=0&n=3&date=2015-12-10>).

¹⁰ "Partisipasi kota Medan paling rendah", *Republika*, 18 December 2015, (<http://www.republika.co.id/berita/koran/nusantara-koran/15/12/18/nzji064-partisipasi-kota-medan-paling-rendah>).

¹¹ Interview with Pandapotan Tamba, head of Medan's KPU, 10 December 2015.

¹² In the last ten years, North Sumatra has had many elected government leaders brought to custody due to corruption. Among them were two of Medan's former mayors, Abdillah (who won the 2005 *Pilkada*) and Rahudman Harahap (who won the 2010 *Pilkada*), and two of North Sumatra's former governors, Syamsul Arifin (who won the 2008 gubernatorial election) and Gatot Pujo Nugroho (who won the 2013 gubernatorial election).

businessman-turned-politician. The former was supported by eight major parties including Golkar (the official leader of the campaign team, *tim sukses*) and PDIP, while the latter was supported by three parties including the Democrat Party and Gerindra (the official leader of their *team sukses*). The incumbency of the first pair helped boost their popularity in Medan. The fact that the other pair was relatively unknown and did not usually reside in Medan (both lived in Jakarta) made their campaign slogan of “bringing change to governance” sound hollow. Other important facts which did not help the second pair was their past failures in other elections. Pohan, for example, failed in his bid for a national parliamentary seat representing North Sumatra in 2014, and Eddie Kusuma similarly failed in his bid for the national parliamentary seat for Jakarta.

As for campaign methods, both pairs seemed to focus on direct interaction with potential voters by holding free medical clinics in poor areas, going for *blusukan* (i.e. impromptu visits to markets, the harbour, etc.), getting declaration of support from various ethno-religious groups and participating in cultural/sports events. In contrast to past mayoral campaigns, this year’s campaign period featured only one open rally, held by the incumbent. At the same time, this year’s elections were heavily regulated by the local KPUs, such that campaign paraphernalia, for example, banners, were all provided by them in order to make campaigning financially more equitable between candidates. The candidates were still allowed to distribute small souvenirs and brochures, but the production cost for each item was limited to IDR 25,000 (S\$2.5). However, in Medan’s case, the first pair clearly maintained an advantage in their campaign, both in the usage of media, which was well-coordinated and high-tech (due to the presence of a senior media representative on their campaign team), and in the mobilization of local ethnic/interest groups that “voluntarily” put up banners supporting the incumbent candidates.

Accusations of money-politics and the lack of neutrality of the civil service were mostly targeted at the incumbent, although proving this would be difficult. Evidence of gift-giving was however found in poor areas in North Medan, allegedly by both pairs, although the amounts involved were negligible.¹³ Aside from money-politics, other familiar methods such as the usage of ethno-religious sentiments were also not as intensive as in past *pilkada*. However, personal communications with potential voters revealed that they might not vote for a candidate who was of Chinese descent.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed electoral politics in three Indonesian regions, namely North Sulawesi, North Sumatra, and East Java, to shed light on broader processes of democratic consolidation and regional autonomy in Indonesia. An analysis of candidates running for office, their relations with political parties, their campaign strategies, and of voting behaviour patterns reveals commonalities and differences across the three field sites.

¹³ Interview with Henry Sitingjak, head of Medan’s Election Supervisory Body, 10 December 2015.

The behaviour of political elites and the relationship between candidates and political parties in particular appear similar across the three regions. First, although the degree to which party machinery plays an important role during the electoral campaign varies across cases, political parties are the primary gatekeeper of the candidate selection process. Second, in selecting candidates for office, parties mainly seek figures with high levels of electability and the capacity to make substantial financial contributions to the campaign. Partisan affiliations are thus fluid, and party coalition formation is not influenced by ideological factors or partisan alignments in the national legislature. Third, the composition of candidate “pairs” is designed to reach out to multiple constituencies, which typically entails matching candidates with diverse ethnic, religious, professional and partisan backgrounds. These three trends strongly suggest that most of the political agency among political elites lies with prominent local figures with political ambitions rather than with party cadres: while parties have the power of nomination, candidates command the votes.

As for campaign strategies, evidence from the three field sites suggests that the method of “*blusukan*”, or impromptu visits in public places, has become a routine tactic, probably thanks to its direct impact on specific constituencies and its much lower cost compared with conventional mass rallies. Campaign strategies also appear to be more sophisticated and customized with the use of print and social media, which are tailored to the constituencies’ lifestyles and cultural references. Candidates vary in the kind of appeals that they formulate to secure support from voters. For most of them, a focus on personal traits such as integrity, leadership and competence is the cornerstone of the communications strategy. Others choose to complement this approach by also emphasizing identity-related factors or specific policy propositions.

Finally, a few observations about voting behaviour can be drawn based on the analysis presented here. First, low participation is recorded in most regions. While turnout is typically low in local elections in consolidated democracies too, evidence from the field sites suggests that, in the Indonesian case, this may be due to dissatisfaction with the candidates, the low level of trust in local government institutions, and the introduction of new electoral regulations. Second, the incidence of vote-buying varies across regions, and appears to be much more prominent in rural districts in North Sumatra and poorer parts of East Java than in more socioeconomically advanced urban settings such as Manado and Surabaya. Finally, the ease with which most incumbents have secured re-election in this *pilkada* round raises questions about accountability patterns in Indonesian local politics. Further research and survey-based evidence will have to ascertain if the success of incumbents is a mere product of elite entrenchment or if it is instead a sign of increased accountability between politicians and voters.

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