Indonesia’s 2018 Regional Elections: Between Local and National Politics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 27 June 2018, 171 provinces, districts, and towns in Indonesia will hold simultaneous regional elections (Pilkada).

- The proximity of these Pilkada to the 2019 presidential election means that national political figures are more engaged than usual in local campaigns.

- However, overall, these local elections are not the national ‘barometer’ that some analysts have claimed. The results will have few implications for what transpires in 2019.

- The national opposition coalition has not emerged as a compelling or effective force in these Pilkada, despite those parties’ stated ambitions.

- Fears of an upswing in sectarianism following the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election have, so far, not been realised; though mobilisation of ethnic and religious identities continues to feature prominently in local campaigns.

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INTRODUCTION

The next round of Indonesia’s regional elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah*, Pilkada) will take place on 27 June 2018. Around 152 million voters across 171 regions will elect their governors, regents and mayors.

For over a decade, the conventional wisdom amongst analysts has been that Pilkada are largely local affairs that have little bearing upon national politics. However, this year’s Pilkada will take place just months before nominations for Indonesia’s presidential election, scheduled for 19 April 2019. Along with choosing a president, Indonesians will also vote for their local and national parliamentarians. Pundits and politicians believe that this year’s regional elections will be unusually coloured by national politics.¹

In this paper, we ask whether political competition at the national level is shaping electoral dynamics in the regions, and vice versa. In particular, we examine whether new patterns of coalition-building have emerged at the local level in response to the political parties’ objectives leading into 2019. We sketch the unfolding campaigns in some of the country’s most strategic provinces, provide a sense of which candidates are winning and why, and assess the extent to which national politicians and political calculations have affected these evolving campaigns.

We suggest these Pilkada are, for the most part, not the national “barometer” that some analysts have claimed.² For one, party coalitions at the national level are not reflected in most districts where elections are being held. Prabowo Subianto’s Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and the National Mandate Party (PAN) did set out to form a solid opposition coalition. In several strategic provinces, however, their efforts have been undercut by intra-elite conflict, logistical problems, and a collection of uncompetitive candidates. The exception is North Sumatra, where, as we shall see, national coalitions have played out locally and there is strong competition between a Prabowo ally and the candidate backed by Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), the party of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi).

To be sure, the proximity of these elections to 2019 means national political figures are unusually present on the ground, as they try to boost their parties’ electability, and their own personal profile. Ultimately, however, these Pilkada will be won or lost by local political figures on local issues, and history tells us their results will have few implications for what transpires in the 2019 presidential and legislative elections.

AFTER DKI JAKARTA

In the past, regional head elections have, in general, neither reflected nor influenced the national political map. Across Indonesia’s districts, cities and provinces, political party coalitions are generally formed based on local contingencies and calculations, and bear little relation to coalitions at the national level.
This time, however, a group of national party leaders declared a new approach to the Pilkada. In December 2017, Sohibul Iman of PKS announced that his party would establish a “solid” coalition with Gerindra and PAN in the coming Pilkada. He stated that, “we’re motivated to continue what we achieved in the second round of the Jakarta DKI election,” and suggested the coalition had 2019 in its sights as well.3

Sohibul was referring to how Gerindra, PKS and PAN – core members of the coalition that supported Prabowo Subianto’s bid for the presidency in 2014 – formed an effective political alliance to defeat Jakarta’s incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or Ahok), in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.4 A loose network of Islamist leaders and organisations, led by the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders’ Front, FPI), unleashed a fierce sectarian campaign against Ahok, who is both ethnic Chinese and Christian. They accused Ahok of committing blasphemy and demanded that he be put on trial and imprisoned. As a result, the coalition’s candidate, Anies Baswedan, won the election decisively and Ahok was subsequently jailed for two years and six months.5

After Jakarta, the Gerindra-PKS-PAN coalition suddenly looked formidable once more. Islamist organisations, and particularly FPI, had also proven their worth as an electoral asset.6 Opposition parties and the Islamist network claimed their alliance would continue beyond Jakarta’s election, into the 2018 Pilkada, and then on to the 2019 presidential elections.7

These developments were important for several reasons. First, it suddenly seemed plausible that Prabowo’s allies could run similar campaigns and potentially win office in local elections around the country. The outcome in Jakarta also proved a boon for Prabowo personally – his electability reached its highest point since 2015.8 Both prospects concerned President Jokowi.

Second, the coalition’s claim that it would “copy and paste” the strategies used in Jakarta implied that the 2018 Pilkada would be tainted by divisive and sectarian campaigns. Such an outcome would buck the trend of regional elections in Indonesia, where for the most part candidates running for office have sought multi-ethnic and multi-religious tickets, and appealed to broad cultural and ethnic constituencies.9 Analysts began to talk of an “Ahok” effect, and predicted an upswing in political polarisation and exclusivist identity politics.10

The notion of a solid national opposition coalition campaigning for control of regional governments was also a new development in the context of Indonesia’s democratic politics. Against this backdrop, there has been much talk in the media that these Pilkada constitute a barometer for the national political mood less than a year out from the presidential and legislative elections.

So, has the opposition coalition emerged as a compelling force in these regional elections? What implications might this phenomenon have for Indonesia’s national political
landscape? And should we see the 2018 Pilkada as a kind of political bellwether leading into 2019?

**THE OPPOSITION COALITION FALLS FLAT**

Overall, there is little evidence of a coherent, well-organised, or formidable opposition coalition campaigning across the country. Instead, skirmishes between elites, friction between the Islamists and the coalition parties, and other practical problems have prevented a re-run of what took place in Jakarta.

No clear patterns have emerged that reflect national coalitions: opposing parties PDI-P and PKS have come together in 33 regions to nominate candidates, PDI-P is working with Gerindra in 48 regions, and PAN in 58; PAN, Gerindra and PKS, meanwhile, maintain their alliance in only 40 regions.11 In some of the most strategic provinces where the opposition coalition did manage to stick together, it still failed to nominate a competitive candidate.

For example, in the Central Java gubernatorial race, the opposition coalition made a curious decision to nominate former minister for energy and mineral resources, Sudirman Said, as their candidate. While generally seen as a clean and hardworking official, Sudirman does not cut a charismatic political figure. Meanwhile, the incumbent Governor, Ganjar Pranowo, is amongst the country’s most well-known and popular regional leaders. Central Java is also PDI-P heartland, the party to which Ganjar belongs. Sudirman, and the conservative Islamic coalition that stands behind him, are facing almost certain defeat; a recent survey shows Sudirman polling at 21%, while Ganjar’s electability stands at a formidable 72%.12

Gerindra, PKS and PAN have maintained their political union in West Java too. Initially, this seemed an ideal place for the opposition coalition to recreate a Jakarta-styled campaign. Prabowo won decisively in West Java in the 2014 presidential elections, and he continues to poll well here compared to many other parts of the country. West Java is also almost entirely Muslim, and widely viewed as one of the more conservative regions in the country.13 The prospect of an Islamist-inspired campaign seemed even more likely when Bandung mayor, Ridwan Kamil, announced that he would run for governor. Ridwan’s cosmopolitan image made him vulnerable to attacks by conservative Islamic elements. Dedi Mulyadi was also slated to run. Dedi was the Bupati of Purwakarta, and his promotion of Sundanese culture there brought him into regular conflict with the region’s Islamic leaders and radical groups like FPI. And, at an early stage, Gerindra’s coalition seemed ready to back Deddy Mizwar’s candidacy, the incumbent deputy governor, for whom Islamist groups had expressed support.

But several factors muted the prospects of a sectarian campaign. Gerindra failed to back Deddy Mizwar, allegedly due to intra-elite conflicts and deals that Deddy made with former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s (SBY) Partai Demokrat (Democrats).14 For reasons not entirely clear, Prabowo instead chose to nominate Sudrajat, a friend and former military general with limited name recognition and no instinct for political campaigning.
The coalition again backed an uncompetitive candidate, with Sudrajat polling at around 10% on most reliable surveys. PDI-P also failed to get behind a strong candidate. When Ridwan Kamil refused to accept Megawati’s choice of running mate, PDI-P went out on its own, and nominated TB Hasanuddin, head of PDI-P’s West Java branch and a former general, whose electability is even weaker than Sudrajat’s. The frontrunners, meanwhile, are locked in a tight contest, with some surveys placing Ridwan Kamil-Uu Ruzhanul Ulum in the lead, and others suggesting Deddy Mizwar-Dedi Mulyadi have edged ahead.\textsuperscript{15}

So far, fears of a sectarian-styled campaign in West Java have not been realised either. The leading candidates each chose a running mate that can provide an ‘ideological balance’ to their ticket: Ridwan Kamil chose Uu Ruzhanul Ulum, Bupati of Tasikmalaya and a pious Muslim figure, and Deddy Mizwar teamed up with Dedi Mulyadi.\textsuperscript{16} There’s much talk on the ground of Islamist-inspired hoaxes and black campaigns that, for example, claim Dedi is \textit{kafir} (an unbeliever), or that PDI-P’s candidates are anti-Islam, spread mostly via WhatsApp groups and other social media. But overall, Islamist forces have been unable to launch a targeted or effective smear campaign against any one of these pairs of candidates.

Meanwhile, in East Java, attempts to nominate an opposition coalition candidate failed entirely. Islamist groups associated with the anti-Ahok campaign promoted La Nyalla Mahmud Mattalitti, one of their own affiliates. However, Gerindra did not back his nomination because, according to La Nyalla, he failed to pay the “political dowry” of Rp 40 billion (US$2.92 million) that Prabowo had requested.\textsuperscript{17} Instead Gerindra and PKS both threw their weight behind Saifullah Yusuf, the incumbent deputy governor already nominated by PKB and PDI-P.

In North Sumatra, however, the Gerindra-PKS-PAN triad may prevail. With 9.2 million potential voters, North Sumatra’s gubernatorial election is the hottest battleground outside Java, and the local contest is far more coloured by national politics.\textsuperscript{18} The opposition coalition nominated former military commander for North Sumatra and close Prabowo ally, Edy Rahmayadi, who partnered with a charismatic young politician, Musa Rajeckshah. This pair is in the lead, with a recent CSIS poll showing Edy at 44.8%. But the race is tight, and the PDI-P backed candidate, Djarot Saiful Hidayat is not far behind, with 36.6% support.\textsuperscript{19}

The ingredients are there for a sectarian campaign. Djarot is the former Jakarta vice-governor and is considered an ally of both Ahok and Jokowi, and his running partner, Sihar Sitorus, is Christian. On the other hand, Edy and Musa have formed an all-Muslim ticket. North Sumatra is an ethnically and religious heterogeneous province with a large Christian population, and past Pilkada here have been marked by religiously-charged campaigns. So far, however, candidates have shown restraint.

\textbf{A LOCAL STAGE FOR NATIONAL POLITICIANS?}

The proximity to 2019 has coloured these local elections in other ways. National political figures are more involved than usual, for example. National politicians who want to run,
either for president or vice-president, have tried to leverage these Pilkada to boost their own image.

For example, Agus Yudhoyono of the Democrats and Muhaimin Iskandar of PKB have spent time in the field, ostensibly to promote their parties and local candidates; but these men are also trying to improve their name recognition and personal appeal. The goal is to improve their poll figures and gain traction in negotiations over vice-presidential tickets. Prabowo has also made several Pilkada appearances across the country. At times, these events have played out more like a scene from Prabowo’s own campaign, fuelling speculation about his probable presidential nomination.

Some local candidates have also explicitly tied their campaign to presidential hopefuls in a bid to improve their own electoral chance, despite warnings from the Electoral Supervisory Agency that such practices are not allowed. At the end of a public debate in West Java, for example, Sudrajat implored voters to choose him as governor and help defeat Jokowi in 2019.

Party leaders have, in some cases, also linked these Pilkada to the upcoming legislative elections. 2019 will be the first year that legislative and presidential elections are run simultaneously, and politicians are worried that legislative campaigns will be eclipsed by the presidential race. Jokowi’s bid for re-election will advantage PDI-P in 2019; but for other parties the impact of simultaneous elections could be disastrous. In this time of uncertainty, the Pilkada seem to matter more in the eyes of national politicians. Victory in these Pilkada would be an asset for parties leading up to the 2019 legislative elections, providing them with access to government resources, money and business networks, all of which can help their candidates’ legislative campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Speculation that this year’s Pilkada will have unique implications for the 2019 elections – and vice versa – appear to have been exaggerated. First, in strategic provinces on Java, where the national opposition coalition had laid out a plan to replicate its success in Jakarta, campaigns are evolving in a relatively routine way. The Gerindra-PKS-PAN alliance has been unable to sustain its momentum, and the electoral alliance with right-wing Islamists has, over the past year, atrophied due to intra-elite conflicts and logistical problems.

This does not mean that such an alliance cannot be rebuilt or sustained at the national level when it comes time to nominate presidential and vice-presidential candidates in August of this year. So far, Prabowo remains the only figure capable of challenging Jokowi (though even his chances are slim), and Jokowi’s detractors continue to frame their opposition in populist-nativist terms. Any campaign against the incumbent president will probably draw upon support from the country’s Islamists. The regional dynamics described above, however, demonstrate how difficult it is to maintain a solid coalition within Indonesia’s highly fragmented and fluid political system, particularly when it comes to Pilkada.
Second, presidential hopefuls have not had any clear or obvious bearing upon the direction of local elections. For example, Jokowi’s popularity continues to grow across the country, including in provinces where Gerindra candidates are leading (like North Sumatra)\(^{21}\), and where PDI-P candidates are likely to fail (like West Java).\(^{22}\) Instead, those leading the Pilkada competitions are well-resourced and popular local figures. The rich literature on Indonesia’s Pilkada demonstrates that regional elections are personalistic and candidate-centred rather than party-centred, and the most successful political figures are those that can mobilise material resources, and leverage a wide range of social, religious and cultural networks.\(^{23}\) Varied regional histories matter immensely too: in places like West Kalimantan, old communal conflicts and entrenched ethno-religious dynamics inform campaigns and electoral outcomes\(^{24}\); in South Sulawesi, local dynasties continue to dominate the electoral landscape, regardless of what takes place at the national level.\(^{25}\)

Finally, history shows that voters’ regional preferences are not good predictors of what will happen in presidential elections. The famous case is President Yudhoyono’s defeat of Megawati in the PDI-P heartland of Central Java in the 2009 presidential elections. In 2014, Jokowi also beat Prabowo in provinces dominated by Golkar and PAN. In fact, there is so little historical evidence of a strong connection between regional head elections and national elections that Burhanuddin Muhtadi, one of Indonesia’s leading pollsters and political analysts, has suggested that victory in these Pilkada is of more psychological than practical significance for political parties and national politicians.\(^{26}\)

The looming 2019 elections have indeed coloured these Pilkada, and given them an air of national political import. The results, however, will be a reflection of voters’ local preferences, not their national ones. And while party leaders might see these Pilkada as a means to enhance their chances in 2019, these hopes are probably misplaced.

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This group called themselves Alumni 212, which signifies the date, 2 December, which was when Islamist groups, with backing from senior national elites, organised massive street mobilisations against Ahok. See the IPAC report on this topic at: http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2018/04/Report_44_ok.pdf.


See SMRC’s survey from June 2017: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7ldGGHEr1pqbFFJsZVAtV3BmSDA/view.


A Populi survey conducted in late April found Ridwan to be in the lead with 41% while Dedi was on 38%. A different survey conducted at the same time by CSIS found Dedy was in the lead with 41%, while Ridwan was further back at 33%. Ridwan-Uu are backed by PPP, PKB, NasDem, and Hanura. Dedy-Dedi are backed by Golkar and Democrats.


‘5 Pengakuan Mengagetkan La Nyalla soal Uang Politik Gerindra’ (‘5 Shocking Confessions by La Nyalla Regarding Gerindra’s Money Politics’),


In West Java in April 2018, Jokowi’s popularity reached 55.9% while Prabowo’s was only at 14.1% https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/04/23/08051871/survei-kompas-jokowi-559-persen-prabowo-141-persen , accessed 22 May 2018.

Aspinall, E. and W. Mas’udi (2017) ‘The 2017 Pilkada (Local Elections) in Indonesia: Clientelism, Programmatic Politics and Social Networks’ Contemporary Southeast Asia 39(3)


See interview with Muhtadi here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcEl_7mVXkA.