West Java’s 2018 Regional Elections: Reform, Religion, and the Rise of Ridwan Kamil

Eve Warburton*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ridwan Kamil won West Java’s recent gubernatorial election with 32.8 percent of the popular vote. He is a moderate Muslim figure with a reputation for effective and innovative leadership.

- There was a late surge in support for the candidate backed by Prabowo Subianto’s Gerindra party, PKS and PAN; but ultimately the national opposition coalition was defeated, and PKS lost control over a strategic province.

- During the election campaign, there was no dramatic swing towards sectarianism and no deep ideological polarisation. However, conservative religious appeals and Islamist-themed slurs did feature, particularly in the final days before the vote.

- Ridwan learned from last year’s Islamist mobilisation during Jakarta’s gubernatorial election, and insulated himself against sectarian campaigns by cultivating conservative allies and Islamising his image.

- These elections indicated a broad constituency for clean, effective leadership; but they also confirmed that a pluralist political identity brings electoral risk. Ridwan projected a fresh reformist identity, while signalling his support for a conservative Islamic agenda - an approach that seems to foreshadow Jokowi’s strategy in the lead up to 2019.

* Eve Warburton is Visiting Fellow in the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
INTRODUCTION

On July 6, Indonesia’s electoral commission confirmed Ridwan Kamil’s victory in the West Java gubernatorial election with 32.88 percent of the popular vote. Bandung’s popular mayor ran a slick and sophisticated campaign. He was always considered the favourite, and was widely recognised as an effective and innovative leader. Ridwan is also a personal ally of President Jokowi. So, many observers framed West Java’s election result as a victory for reformist politics, and a boon for President Jokowi leading into the 2019 presidential elections.

But others saw what transpired in West Java in very different terms. Ridwan only narrowly defeated Sudrajat, a Prabowo ally backed by Gerindra, Partai Keadilan Sejaterah (PKS) and Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN), the Islamist-allied coalition that remains out of government at the national level and opposed to Jokowi. Sudrajat and his running mate, Syaikhu, made a stunning comeback in the final days of the campaign to take 28.7 percent of the vote, after months of polling below 10 percent. The PKS machine was mobilised only at the last minute, and prominent conservative Islamic figures got on board in the final days to boost Sudrajat’s performance. An intensification of Islamist-inspired smear campaigns against Ridwan and other candidates also worked in favour of Sudrajat. Some politicians and pundits view the late swing as proof of the opposition coalition’s mobilisational capacity, and suggest that West’s Java’s electoral dynamics may portend Indonesia’s looming legislative and presidential elections, set for April of 2019.

This paper examines the contours of West Java’s gubernatorial election, what it means for 2019, and what it tells us about Indonesia’s democracy more generally. The results have few practical implications for President Jokowi’s electoral chances next year. While Ridwan is indeed a Jokowi ally, governors generally do not have a significant bearing upon national election results. And while the late swing to Prabowo’s coalition was an impressive feat, it tells us little about how well the coalition might fare nationally, outside of this PKS stronghold.

However, West Java’s election does illustrate a tension that seems to characterise Indonesia’s current political moment: alongside the rise of technocratic reformists like Ridwan, we also find the rise of divisive, Islamist-themed identity politics. Last year’s sectarian campaign against Ahok, Jakarta’s Christian Chinese governor, cast a shadow over West Java. While there was no Islamist mobilisation or comparable level of polarisation, malicious Islamist-themed slurs, many of which targeted Ridwan Kamil, were a persistent feature of these elections. To protect himself from Islamist attacks, Ridwan projected a fresh reformist identity while also signalling support for a conservative Islamic agenda. This approach responds to the post-Ahok political atmosphere. It foreshadows Jokowi’s campaign in 2019, and Ridwan’s own plans for 2024.
THE CONTEXT

West Java is Indonesia’s most populous province and one of its most homogeneous. Of the 43 million people living in West Java, 97 percent are Muslim and a large majority are Sundanese. Politically, however, West Java is diverse. For the past decade, the province has been governed by Ahmad Heryawan (Aher), a member of the Islamist political party, PKS. The western parts of West Java, like Bekasi, Depok, and Cianjur, have long histories of Islamist activism and are home to many conservative Muslim groups and Salafist organisations. These tend to be the districts where PKS performs best. Bandung, however, is an eclectic, cosmopolitan capital city, and its popular mayor (2013-2018) and governor elect, Ridwan Kamil, has generally been viewed as a moderate Muslim. Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDI-P), the party with the most pluralist and secular platform, also enjoys support here – in 2014 PDI-P won the most seats in the provincial parliament. Politics in West Java are, thus, diverse, competitive and difficult to predict.

In the lead up to this pilkada, many commentators and politicians framed West Java as a barometer for the national political mood. The province is rich in votes, and with presidential and legislative elections less than a year away, analysts believed West Java could provide insight into how people felt about particular parties and their potential presidential nominees. In addition, the opposition parties at the national level, led by Prabowo’s Gerindra Party and its ally, PKS, maintained their coalition in West Java, and claimed they would emulate the strategies they used to win office in Jakarta the year before. In that gubernatorial election, the opposition coalition’s candidate, Anies Baswedan, allied with the Islamist organisations that mobilised a powerful sectarian campaign against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Jakarta’s incumbent Christian Chinese Governor. Ahok not only lost the election but was charged with blasphemy and thrown into prison.

West Java initially appeared to be an ideal place for the opposition coalition to recreate a Jakarta-style campaign. While there was no Christian candidate, two moderate and pluralist figures had attracted the ire of Islamist groups. Ridwan Kamil’s cosmopolitan image made him vulnerable to attack, and Dedi Mulyadi, the Bupati of Purwakarta, was a militant advocate for Sundanese adat (cultural tradition), which brought him into regular conflict with the more puritanical Islamic groups, including Front Pembela Islam (FPI) (the group which led the campaign against Ahok). The prospect of these nominally pluralist candidates running against Prabowo’s Islamist-allied coalition prompted much speculation amongst analysts that West Java’s pilkada might evoke Jakarta’s polarising election, and foreshadow the dynamics of political contestation in 2019.
THE CANDIDATES, COALITIONS AND CAMPAIGN STYLES

In the end, the final constellation of coalitions prevented a rerun of the Jakarta election. Moderate figures, Ridwan Kamil and Dedi Mulyadi paired up with running mates that provided an “ideological balance” to their ticket. In addition, the opposition coalition nominated a complete outsider who looked uncompetitive for much of the campaign. So West Java’s elections evolved in a fairly typical way – there was no dramatic lurch towards sectarianism and no deep ideological polarisation. Candidates employed conventional campaign strategies of the sort well-documented in the rich literature on Indonesia’s pilkada. As we shall see, however, conservative religious appeals and Islamist-themed slurs were still an important feature of these elections, particularly in the final days before the vote.

Ridwan’s campaign was the most sophisticated. His strong record as mayor of Bandung and his early lead in the polls meant he attracted many investors, and could run a well-resourced team of consultants, marketing experts and logistics coordinators. He also had an impressive communications team to manage his digital profile for millions of social media followers (Ridwan has over 8 million followers on Instagram alone). His campaign team explained, however, that only 30 percent of their work was online. Like all candidates, Ridwan invested primarily in concrete campaign activities – visiting the regions, meeting residents face-to-face, spreading largesse and cultivating support from religious leaders and community organisations. His main campaign message was that West Java needed a young, innovative leader to improve the province’s economy and manage underemployment.

But Ridwan was extremely sensitive to claims that he was too liberal and not pious enough to govern West Java. As mayor of Bandung, he had developed a cosmopolitan persona, with a genteel air and hipster shtick. For these elections, however, Ridwan Islamised that image in order to make himself a more palatable choice for West Java’s large, conservative Islamic constituency.

For example, he consistently emphasised his santri roots, and he went on the haji and documented the journey studiously on this social media profiles. Most importantly, he chose Uu Ruzhanul Ulum, the Bupati of Tasikmalaya, as his running mate. Uu has an underwhelming reputation as Bupati, but he has strong networks into the conservative factions of West Java’s Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community. He is associated with the Miftahul Huda pesantren, whose members organised the “Long March” from Ciamis to Jakarta to support the anti-Ahok protests in Jakarta in 2016. For Ridwan, Uu was the perfect candidate: a pious Muslim figure who could not just deflect accusations that Ridwan was too liberal, but even pull Islamist support away from other candidates such as Deddy Mizwar (explained below), or the PKS-backed ticket. Ridwan’s combination of charisma, a record of effective leadership, and the cultivation of his Islamic credentials put him in the lead for most of the campaign period – albeit narrowly.
The second most popular candidate was Deddy Mizwar, the incumbent deputy governor and former television star in his mid-60s. He ran for governor with the support of Demokrat, and with Dedi Mulyadi of Golkar as his deputy. Deddy Mizwar, meanwhile, had developed close ties to PKS and prominent Islamist networks during his time as deputy governor (2003-2018). He and Dedi believed those networks would be an important source of electoral support; but in fact Deddy struggled to maintain such linkages after PKS threw its support behind a different candidate (see below). Ultimately, Deddy played a passive role in this election. He did little door-to-door campaigning, and did not have a particularly active or impressive social media presence. Even Deddy’s television appearances in interviews and public debates were underwhelming. Still, his star-power and name recognition meant the pair polled well throughout the campaign, sometimes even edging ahead of Ridwan Kamil-Uu. Most polls had both candidates somewhere between 30 and 40 percent in the month or so leading up to the election.

The national opposition coalition, Gerindra-PKS-PAN, formed a weak ticket. Prabowo nominated Sudrajat for governor. He was a friend and former military general, with no name-recognition and few political credentials. A PKS cadre and former deputy bupati of Bekasi, Ahmad Syaikhu, was picked as Sudrajat’s deputy. The pair ran a lacklustre operation for much of the campaign. They reportedly had little in the way of financial resources, so their branding, digital presence and general electoral footprint felt relatively small for the duration of the campaign. Sudrajat is an unengaging orator and made little impact during televised debates. Syaikhu, meanwhile, is a respected ustad from Bekasi, and the PKS cadres interviewed for this study were confident that the party’s network of Islamic schools and mosques would help mobilise support for their candidate. But the polls positioned the pair as outsiders. Even Sudrajat’s attempt to piggyback on Prabowo’s popularity in West Java, and leverage his name during campaign events, had no obvious impact on their electability.

Meanwhile, PDI-P nominated an even more uncompetitive candidate. After negotiations with Ridwan Kamil failed, PDI-P went out on its own and chose TB Hasanuddin, head of PDI-P’s West Java branch and a former military general, who consistently polled last for the duration of the campaign.
ISLAMIST-THEMED BLACK CAMPAIGNS

The coalitional dynamics described above prevented a highly polarised election. The frontrunners, Ridwan Kamil-Uu and Deddy-Dedi, were on ideologically-mixed tickets, and the Gerindra-PKS-PAN coalition looked weak. There was no unified or coherent Islamist alliance that might launch a sectarian campaign against one particular pair. So, in general, campaign rhetoric and public debate were neither incendiary nor polarising.

Yet Islamist-themed slurs and black campaigns simmered away in the background. Dedi Mulyadi, for example, was accused of being musyrik, and rumours spread that he visited Sundanese dukun (shaman) and practiced an impure form of Islam. Ridwan faced accusations that he was Shi’a, that he had expanded Christian churches around Bandung, and that his liberal orientation made him an enemy of the ummah. The most dangerous rumour, however, concerned Ridwan’s sexuality. At worst he was accused of being homosexual, and at best he was alleged to enjoy support from LGBT groups. Indonesia’s LGBT community suffers immense (and increasing) discrimination, and this particular smear campaign was the source of much anxiety for Ridwan and his team.

No one knew the precise source of these black campaigns. Rumours were spread via online networks, but also through pamphlets and posters. People on the ground often compared the content and style of the smear campaigns with the work of the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), which had generated some of the most aggressive anti-Ahok material during the Jakarta election. Most people involved in Ridwan and Dedi’s campaigns believed Gerindra and PKS were the most likely source; but in fact it was unclear which party or pair were to blame.

Whatever the source, Ridwan in particular took the black campaigns seriously. While Dedi chose to ignore the slanderous material, Ridwan believed that if left unattended those Islamist attacks would erode his electability. So he addressed them directly. For example, in one long social media post, Ridwan denied accusations that he had expanded Churches or that he was secretly a Shi’a. He proclaimed homosexuality to be a sin, and emphasised that while mayor of Bandung he had closed down gay social spaces. Ridwan even apologised for criticising FPI in the past, and assured the public that he had embarked on a spiritual change (berhijrah). He also claimed to have provided material support for protestors who took part in the mobilisations against Ahok in Jakarta the year before. Rather than condemn these sectarian-themed rumours, Ridwan signalled his Santri credentials, and indicated his willingness to embrace a more conservative Islamic position.

THE LATE SUDRAJAT SURGE

West Java’s election was largely a two-horse race between Ridwan Kamil-Uu and Deddy Mizwar-Dedi Muyadi. Throughout June, in the weeks leading up to election day, some survey
experts even claimed the election was too close to call. Then, on June 27, as the votes came in, quick count results revealed a very different picture. While Ridwan maintained the lead with about 33 percent, Deddy-Dedi had slipped to third place, and Sudrajat-Syaikhu had surged ahead with around 28 percent of the vote. The national opposition coalition’s ticket had made a dramatic comeback, tripling the number of votes that polls had predicted.

The results prompted immense speculation in the media, first about why the polls had missed widespread support for Sudrajat-Syaikhu, and secondly, about how the pair had managed to mobilise this support despite running a weak and seemingly ineffectual campaign. The answer to both questions seems be a last-minute, intense mobilisation of PKS networks in the final stages of the campaign. Up until this point, the PKS base had been relatively passive and fragmented. Many were dissatisfied with Sudrajat’s nomination over Deddy Mizwar, a figure whom they trusted and wanted as their gubernatorial candidate. There was limited money flowing from either Gerindra, PAN or PKS during much of the election as well, so campaign activities were modest.

All of this changed when Aher stepped down formally from his position as governor on June 13, and he was able to become directly involved in the party’s campaign activities. First, a fresh tranche of funds flowed through PKS networks, reportedly from Aher himself. This money was used to organise a mass distribution of *sembako* or basic goods, like rice, eggs, and cooking oil, across poorer neighbourhoods, primarily in districts known as PKS strongholds. Logistical teams working on the ground for Ridwan Kamil and for PKS both emphasised the importance of this last-minute investment to the mobilisation of people in the days leading up to voting day.24

Second, PKS initiated an effective digital campaign as well. PKS cadres were told to flood their networks with text, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram messages calling on their family and friends to support Sudrajat and Syaikhu. The messages framed the vote as a religious rather than political act. Importantly, messages included videos and voice recordings from influential and conservative Islamic figures like Mama Dedeh and Hana Ataki, urging their followers to vote for Sudrajat and Syaikhu.25 According to many involved in this election, the spread of Islamist-themed slurs against Dedi and Ridwan also intensified.26 It is difficult to measure how much effect these black campaigns had on voters’ decisions. But certainly people on the ground spoke of the smear campaigns as consequential, and as being far more vicious than in previous elections.

Analysts also speculated that Sudrajat-Syaikhu’s use of the motto, “#2019ChangePresident” (#2019GantiPresident), helped elicit support from Prabowo loyalists who, until the final weeks of the campaign, had shown up in surveys as supporting either Ridwan Kamil or Deddy Mizwar.27 But most post-election commentary, including from people involved in the campaigns, attributed the result primarily to the PKS machine. The combination of new funds, the last-minute distribution of material goods, the digital campaign and public support from
influential Islamic figures, and the intensification of black campaigns, all rallied the conservative Islamic base in West Java and produced a remarkable swing in favour of Sudrajat-Syaikhu.

LESSONS FROM WEST JAVA

What lessons does the West Java election hold for 2019? If PKS can mobilise such support for an unpopular candidate, and with relatively few material resources, can the opposition coalition present a credible threat to Jokowi in 2019? This is certainly how some analysts and politicians are framing the election results. Others, have emphasised that Ridwan’s victory means Jokowi now has an ally in West Java, who might help him campaign and secure votes in a province he lost back in 2014.

Ultimately, both propositions overstate the implications of these regional election results for 2019. West Java is one of the few provinces considered a PKS stronghold, where the party’s machinery is particularly effective. In most parts of the country, the Gerindra-PKS-PAN alliance would find it difficult to replicate such an impressive mobilisation in favour of an unpopular candidate. More generally, pilkada results have historically had little bearing upon Indonesia’s national political map, and voters’ behaviour at the local level does not predict their national preferences. Further, Jokowi’s electability and public approval are strong and continue to improve each month, regardless of the pilkada results.

This election was, however, emblematic of a deepening tension within Indonesia’s democracy. The success of leaders like Ridwan Kamil implies a broad popular constituency for responsive, technocratic leadership. He is part of an impressive new generation of local politicians which includes Risma in Surabaya, Nurdin Abdullah in South Sulawesi and, of course, President Jokowi, who rose to prominence through direct local elections as well.

Yet the 2018 pilkada were also marked by a perceptible rise in sectarian-themed black campaigns. Candidates running for office, whether in West Java or elsewhere, confront negative, and often malicious allegations about their faith, sexuality and moral aptitude. Ridwan learned from Anies Baswedan’s victory in Jakarta the year before, and he understood the electoral power of Islamist appeals. Rather than condemn those smear campaigns as sectarian fearmongering, Ridwan chose to preach his Islamist credentials.

Of course, we should be careful not to overstate the implications of West Java’s campaign for Indonesia’s democracy more broadly. This province is known for having a uniquely large conservative Islamic constituency. Still, people on the ground felt the tenor of Islamist slurs was different this time, and far more aggressive than in previous elections.
The message for moderates like Ridwan is that a pluralist identity brings political risk, and conservative signals and Islamist allies are an important source of insulation. President Jokowi is a similarly moderate figure, who continues to face accusations that his politics are unfavourable to Indonesia’s pious Muslim constituency. Ridwan strategically fused his reformist campaign with conservative religious appeals, a tactic that seems to foreshadow Jokowi’s own approach to the 2019 presidential campaign.
This paper benefited immensely from the generosity of people in West Java who were involved in these gubernatorial elections, most of whom wished to remain anonymous. In writing this paper, I had many fascinating conversations with people who know far more about West Java politics than myself, including Thomas Power, Marcus Mietzner, Nava Nuraniyah, Amalinda Savirany and Quinton Temby.


9 See for example, Aspinall, Edward and Wawan Mas’udi (2017) ‘The 2017 Pilkada (Local Elections) in Indonesia: Clientelism, Programmatic Politics and Social Networks’ Contemporary Southeast Asia, 39 (3)

10 His nominating parties – Nasdem, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) and Hanura – played a secondary role in the campaign, which is typical for Indonesia’s regional elections.

11 Uu was also a relatively unassuming politician. Sources on the ground suggested that Ridwan’s principal concern, even more than finding a credible Islamic figure, was finding a deputy who had little ambition of his own. Ridwan wanted complete control over the campaign and, should he win, the provincial government. Interviews with Ridwan Kamil’s campaign team: 22 June 2018

12 Deddy was popular amongst conservative Muslim groups and had originally been the top pick of the local PKS leadership. But he made a deal with Partai Demokrat that irked Prabowo, and the Gerindra-PKS alliance looked elsewhere for a nominee. Demokrat and Golkar struck up a coalition instead, and Deddy Mizwar and Dedi Mulyadi formed their own ideologically-mixed partnership

13 Interview with Dedi Mulyadi: 4 June 2018

14 Author’s campaign observations: 4 June 2018


16 The provincial level PKS members were bitterly disappointed. But the party’s elite had agreed to maintain the coalition with Prabowo in West Java, and to back Gerindra’s nomination.

17 Ustad is a respected Islamic teacher

18 Interview with senior PKS cadre: 6 June 2018

19 For example, an SMRC Poll at the start of June had Sudrajat’s electability at 7.9 percent: http://www.saifulmujani.com/blog/2018/06/22/smrc-ganjar-pranowo-unggul-telak-ridwan-kamil-dan-khofifah-unggul-tipis
This term is used to describe a Muslim who does not obey the instructions and precepts of Islam and all of its components.

21 Interview with Dedi Mulyadi: 4 June 2018; Interviews with Ridwan Kamil’s campaign team: 22 June 2018
22 Ridwan’s team believed the slanderous material could have come from Deddy’s team or the Gerindra-PKS-PAN coalition. Deddy’s team felt it that Ridwan’s team, with its connections to the 212 movement via Uu, was just as likely to spread Islamist slurs as the PKS alliance.

23 Most credible survey institutes had Ridwan Kamil between 30 and 35 percent, and Deddy Mizwar at between 28 and 33 percent.
24 At the same time, Deddy-Dedi’s campaign suffered a financial blow. Conflict broke out between Demokrat and Golkar leadership over who should pay for final logistical costs, like witnesses for the voting stations and the last-minute distribution of goods and money to voters before and on election day.

25 These were two of the several prominent Islamic teachers to publicly back Sudrajat-Syaikhu in the days before the vote.
26 All of this information was gathered through interviews with PKS cadres and Ridwan Kamil’s team.
27 Muhtadi, Burhanuddin, ‘Survei, Hitung Cepat, dan Hal-hal yang belum Terselesaikan’ 2 July 2018. http://m.mediaindonesia.com/amp/amp_detail/169482-survei-hitung-cepat-dan-hal-hal-yang-belum-terselesaikan?_twitter_impression=true