

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Indonesia's 2019 Elections: The Key Issues**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Jokowi-Ma'ruf (Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin), representing the incumbent president, is running on a solid record of infrastructure development and economic management.
- Nevertheless, Jokowi is relying on support from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, to mobilize voters in populous Java, and on his running mate, Ma'ruf, to neutralise misinformation that casts him as anti-Islam.
- Prabowo-Sandi (Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno), although trailing in the polls, has the advantage in appealing to two key constituencies: middle-class millennials and conservative Muslims.
- Polarization between government and opposition supporters has led to a heated campaign atmosphere in certain key areas, such as Central Java.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's 2019 legislative and presidential elections, to be held simultaneously on April 17, have been dubbed the "world's most complex poll."<sup>1</sup> 192 million people are eligible to vote at some 800,000 polling stations across the archipelago. In contrast to this logistical complexity, electoral competition revolves around a few central themes: the state of the economy, incumbent president Jokowi's (Joko Widodo) record on infrastructure development, the role of Islam in politics, and the prospects for millennial voters who face the challenge of rapidly changing economic and technological circumstances. The election will also hinge on a number of key battlegrounds where the rival campaigns have focussed their efforts. The following provides an overview of what issues may decide people's votes on the day.

## THE ECONOMY

Both candidate pairings are running as economic nationalists, with an emphasis on restricting foreign involvement in the exploitation of Indonesia's vast natural resources. On the campaign trail, Jokowi has promoted his government's acquisition of controlling stakes in the Freeport gold and copper mine and the Mahakam and Rokan oilfields, in the face of the opposition charge that he is a "foreign lackey" (*antek asing*).<sup>2</sup> Prabowo, meanwhile, has struck an even more militant tone in campaigning against foreign interests in Indonesia's economy, although it is not clear if such rhetoric would be matched by policy in a prospective Prabowo government.

Indeed, Prabowo's running mate, Sandiaga Uno, has largely campaigned as a centrist on economic policy, emphasising the need to create jobs and to stabilise rising household commodity prices. Sandiaga has made positive statements about investment from China, in stark contrast to the anti-Chinese rhetoric that emerges at times from his broader campaign. As he explained in an interview with ISEAS researchers: "We completely understand that China is going to be the number one economy in the world, and that we need investments from China. On the international front, we are definitely very friendly, and we want to attract investments."<sup>3</sup>

For Jokowi, his record of economic development—focusing on infrastructure and social services—is the core of his campaign in 2019. In terms of infrastructure development, Jokowi has highlighted his record over the last four and a half years of building roads, bridges, railways, and airports across Indonesia. His success in the area of transport infrastructure was illustrated mid-campaign by the well-timed opening in Jakarta of Indonesia's first Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system.<sup>4</sup>

## ISLAM

In a country where 87 percent of its 260 million population are Muslims, it is impossible to avoid the issue of Islam in the elections. It is, therefore, not surprising that both candidate pairings have sought to position themselves as champions of Islam and to appeal to Indonesia's Muslim majority.

During the campaign, both camps have played the Islamic card and politicised religion. In fact, this phenomenon began in 10 August 2018 when Jokowi decided to pick Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. While Jokowi uses Ma'ruf to show that he is not anti-Islam, Prabowo in turn makes an ally with clerics from the National Movement to Safeguard the Ulama Fatwa (GNPF) who successfully helped Anies Baswedan defeat Basuki Tjahaja Purnama in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

Competing Islamic narratives are used by both Jokowi's and Prabowo's camp, and they revolve around "santri traditional vs. santri millennial", "Nusantara Islam vs. trans-national Islam", and presidential candidate who chooses ulama as his running mate vs. presidential candidate endorsed and supported by *ijtima ulama* (consensus of ulama). Despite Jokowi's stated desire not to mix religion and politics, he has relied on his conservative cleric running mate, Ma'ruf Amin, to counter Islamist attacks against his religious credentials and to ensure that Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization of which Ma'ruf is its former supreme leader, mobilises voters in the crucial provinces of Central and East Java.

Because of Ma'ruf Amin's appointment as Jokowi's vice presidential candidate, NU has a lot at stake in this election. NU leaders have gone all out in supporting Jokowi and trying to convince the members of this organization that this election is more than a five-yearly democratic process. It is presented as an ideological war and a matter of life and death. The leaders of NU at all levels have not hesitated to acknowledge and declare their involvement in the political hurly-burly.

Ma'ruf Amin has declared that the election is "not merely a matter of electing a president, but it is an ideological war to protect *ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah*" (Sunni Islam, as interpreted by NU). Other NU *kyais* in the Munas of Alim Ulama in Kota Banjar West Java on 27 February–1 March 2019, have warned NU members about the rise and threat of the ex-Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and Wahhabism, which they associate with the Prabowo-Sandi-led opposition. If the opposition wins, one *kyai* stated, they could eliminate NU, destroy the graves of ulama, and prohibit the tradition of NU. The need to become part of national decision-making (*ashabul qoror*) is also emphasized by Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of NU. "We are the more correct group on the matter of religion and nation, but we are not the decision makers," said Siradj. "Therefore, we must *become* the decision makers".

The narrative and rhetoric of fear used by some *kyais* are also equally used by some spokespersons in the Prabowo camp. A controversial video-clip, widely distributed on social media, features Neno Warisman, a former singer who became Deputy Chairperson of the Prabowo-Sandi campaign team. In the video, during the 212 Munajat prayer event held at the National Monument (Monas) in Jakarta on 21 February 2019, Neno read a poem which included a prayer: "Do not abandon us [but] give us victory, because if You [God] do not give us victory, we are worried O Allah, we are worried O Allah, that there will be no one to worship You anymore." The prayer was widely criticized as appearing to threaten God.

The issue of *Penghayat Kepercayaan* (followers of traditional faiths) is also used by some Prabowo supporters to generate fear that if Jokowi wins, the future of "official religions" in Indonesia will be in jeopardy. Another issue used by the opposition to attack Jokowi is the

legalization of same-sex marriage. Joko Widodo has repeatedly rejected the accusation that he will legalize same-sex marriage if he is re-elected.

The use of Islam and Islamic identity politics in the 2019 increases the risk of societal polarization over what role Islam should play in the state. How much society is already polarized over religion, and whether it is an enduring condition or a short-term phenomenon related to the election, is a matter of much debate among election observers.

## **MILLENNIALS IN 2019**

Given Indonesia's large youth population, millennials have become a strategic target to be won over in the concurrent presidential and legislative elections. While millennials are far from homogenous, they tend to be politically apathetic. Thus, there is no guarantee that they will cast their votes on polling day despite their active participation on social media. The presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs have attempted to woo millennials through signalling but have proposed only limited specific policies for the constituency.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, Jokowi-Ma'ruf's camp promised that their new cards would benefit millennials, such as the Indonesian Smart Card (KIP Kuliah) and Pre-employment Card (Kartu Prakerja)<sup>6</sup>, which will provide university tuition fees and unemployment benefits. Similarly, Prabowo-Sandiaga promotes a Home for Work Readiness (Rumah Siap Kerja) programme, which trains graduates to become entrepreneurs.

Meanwhile, political parties have nominated millennial legislative candidates to attract millennial and first-time voters, thus capitalizing on their innovative ideas or proposed programmes. But according to the Community Forum Concerning Indonesian Parliament (Formappi), millennial candidates aged 21-35 still represent only around 21 percent of the total 7,968 legislative candidates.<sup>7</sup>

The opposition vice-presidential candidate Sandi Uno has done the most to position himself as the choice of millennials. Youthful in appearance and a successful entrepreneur, Sandi has campaigned across Indonesia with a deft social media presence and a series of Youth Entrepreneur Summits (YES), designed to appeal to millennial voters.

## **WEST JAVA BATTLEGROUND**

The province of West Java, the largest electorate in Indonesia, has emerged as perhaps the most important battleground in the 2019 elections. In 2014, Jokowi lost there to Prabowo by almost 20 percentage points. The religiously conservative population is sceptical of Jokowi's Islamic credentials, and misinformation such as hoax reports that the Jokowi government will ban the call to prayer or restrict religious education has been blamed for lowering support for the government in the province.<sup>8</sup>

The Jokowi-Ma'ruf campaign hopes to gain votes in West Java to offset potential losses elsewhere in the country through a strategy of emphasising conservative running mate Ma'ruf Amin and by drawing on support from incumbent West Java governor Ridwan Kamil, a Jokowi ally. Ridwan Kamil had consequently been reported to election supervisory

agency Bawaslu for using his position to help the Jokowi campaign, but he was eventually cleared of the charge.<sup>9</sup> Jokowi-Ma'ruf also hope that a massive door-to-door, online-offline campaign employing thousands of volunteers, will bring up the vote in key areas in the province.

Prabowo-Sandi, meanwhile, rely of the electoral machine of PKS to mobilise voters, with the conservative Islamist party strong on the ground across West Java. Prabowo-Sandi also enjoy the support of key preachers who supported the anti-Ahok 212 movement. Although Gerindra's commitment to its coalition with PKS has been questioned by conservatives, support for the opposition by high profile preacher Ustad Abdul Somad in the last week of the campaign may help to stimulate voter turnout.<sup>10</sup>

## CENTRAL JAVA BATTLEGROUND

Another key battleground province in the 2019 elections is Central Java. The campaign temperature in Central Java reached boiling point when in February 2019 Prabowo-Sandiaga's campaign team set up several campaign posts (*posko*) at Jalan Letjen Suprpto, Sumber, Solo—just 500 metres away from Jokowi's residence. In Jokowi's hometown, Prabowo bagged only 15.7 percent votes in the 2014 election. Ferry Juliantono, the deputy director for volunteer of Prabowo-Sandiaga's national campaign team said the team purposely chose Solo to counterbalance the support for Jokowi. The coordinator of Mega Bintang (Prabowo-Sandi volunteer), Mudrick Sangidoe, called the strategy "*menusuk ke jantung lawan*" (stabbing the enemy's heart).

Prabowo's campaign team firmly believes that support for Prabowo in Central Java has been increasing due to the role of some prominent figures—retired military officers and bureaucrats—in mobilizing voters. Gerindra wishes to debunk the myth of Central Java province as the stronghold of PDI-P and cites the surge of support for their pair of Sudirman Said-Ida Fauziah in the Central Java Gubernatorial Election in 2018. However, local political observers say that the surge in the gubernatorial election is due to support from Muslimat and Fatayat (women wings of Nahdlatul Ulama) for Ida Fauziah who was buttressed by PKB (National Awakening Party), rather than to the mobilization by Gerindra<sup>11</sup> This is understandable since PKB occupied the second position in the number of seats in the regional parliament (DPRD I), while Gerindra only occupied the third place. Nevertheless, the chairman of Central Java Gerindra has denied the role of PKB in the last surge in the gubernatorial election because many representatives of PKB had not attended the polling stations as witnesses.<sup>12</sup>

Identity politics feature strongly in the presidential elections in Central Java, particularly in the city of Solo. Solo has witnessed racial riots since the colonial period and is home to several conservative Islamic organizations. Replicating the success of the large reunion of the Brotherhood of Alumni of 212 Movement (PA 212) at the National Monument (Monas) in Jakarta in December 2018, the PA 212 held *tabligh akbar* (mass Qur'anic recital) on the main street (Jalan Slamet Riyadi) in Solo on 13 January 2019, which was attended by thousands of people. However, Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno did not attend the event. One of the participants of the *tabligh akbar* said that the police conducted security checks and persuaded many people not to join the event.<sup>13</sup>

As part of its campaign to counter the influence of conservative or hardline Islamic organizations, on 23 February 2019, Nahdlatul Ulama held the ninth anniversary of the death of Abdurrahman Wahid (affectionately called “Gus Dur”) or Haul Gus Dur in Solo. There was a parade carrying the motto “Millions of Colours in One Indonesian Soul”, moving along the city’s main roads before concluding at Sriwedari Garden at Jalan Slamet Riyadi. Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo, Solo mayor FX Rudy Rudyatmo, and Gus Dur’s daughter Yenny Wahid joined the 3-kilometer march from Manahan Stadium to Sriwedari Garden.<sup>14</sup> Solo Mayor Rudy who was seen leading the parade, emphasized the event was not a political one as there were no chants and campaign-related attributes, but was rather a commemoration of Gus Dur as a defender of humanity and the father of pluralism.

In parallel to events in West Java, the campaign in Central Java has been marked by the mobilization of heads of districts and mayors across the province by governor Ganjar Pranowo, a Jokowi ally. 31 head of districts have pledged to support Jokowi-Ma’ruf. According to the coordinator of one of Jokowi’s volunteer groups, the mobilization of local leaders remains an effective way to gain support from people, particularly in the rural areas.<sup>15</sup> In a paternalistic society, people living in rural areas still follow the political preferences of their leaders, especially if their leaders are known to bring prosperity and to have improved the welfare of the people successfully.

The Prabowo-Sandiaga’s camp was not worried about Ganjar’s move because they believe that the presidential election is “*pesta rakyat*” (people’s party) instead of “*pesta pejabat*” (government officers’ party). To them, there has been great dissatisfaction among farmers and fishermen in the northern coastal areas in Central Java, especially with government policies.<sup>16</sup> Be that as it may, the Ganjar-led campaign raises questions about the mobilisation of state resources in the election.

The polarised atmosphere of the campaign in Central Java has raised concerns about security disturbances. A local political observer has stated that Solo is perhaps the main potential target for security disruption during the presidential election due to its long history of racial riots and the presence of some radical Islamic organizations in that city.<sup>17</sup> He suspects that although militaristic tactics have been carried out to stir fear among people, the people in Central Java are resilient enough to resist this, and in the end, they prefer harmony to conflict. Therefore, the militaristic strategy of disrupting security in Solo and Central Java may not be effective. Similarly, a member of the Solo Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) has stated that there was no violent incident in Solo city during the gubernatorial election in 2018. He opined that people from neighboring cities such as Sragen and Sukoharjo were the ones responsible for carrying out some recent provocative demonstrations in the city of Solo.<sup>18</sup> Thus, he predicted the presidential and legislative elections would be peaceful, in line with the situation affecting past gubernatorial elections.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of the outcome, Indonesia’s 2019 elections are set to be a monumental organisational achievement for the world’s largest Muslim democracy. Tensions between the opposing sides will only intensify if the election is so close as to be determined by a few

percentage points. Yet this scenario is unlikely given the comfortable lead in the polls held by incumbent president Jokowi.

Differences between the candidates may obscure the fact that there is much common ground shared by them. Whoever wins the presidency, economic nationalism will remain central to government policy, while Islam will continue to infuse the public discourse. And millennials will continue to inherit political power in a rapidly changing electoral landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> “RI ready for ‘world’s most complex poll’”, *Jakarta Post*, 12 April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> “RI Rebut Freeport hingga Rokan, Jokowi: Kita Malah Dituduh Antek Asing,” March 10, 2019, *Detik*, <https://finance.detik.com/energi/d-4460965/ri-rebut-freeport-hingga-rokan-jokowi-kita-malah-dituduh-antek-asing>

<sup>3</sup> Hui Yew-Foong and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The 2019 Presidential Election as a Referendum on the Economy: An Interview with Sandiaga Uno”, *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 2019, No. 12, 12 March 2019, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> “Jokowi: Kehadiran MRT Jadi Tanda Peradaban Baru,” CNN Indonesia, 24 March 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190324112246-20-380139/jokowi-kehadiran-mrt-jadi-tanda-peradaban-baru>

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of millennials in presidential election, see Budi Irawanto, “Young and Faithless: Wooing Millennials in Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential Election,” *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 2019, No. 1, 4 January 2019

[https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “Perebutan Suara Millennial Kian Sengit,” *Media Indonesia*, 06 April 2019, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> “Saat Kalangan Muda Berebut Kursi di Parlemen,” *Bisnis Indonesia*, 06 April 2019, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> “Jokowi blames fake news for electability drop in West Java,” *Jakarta Post*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/03/02/jokowi-blames-fake-news-for-electability-drop-in-west-java.html>

<sup>9</sup> “Bawaslu Jabar Hentikan Kasus Pose 1 Jari Ridwan Kamil,” *Detik.com*, February 11, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-barat/d-4422635/bawaslu-jabar-hentikan-kasus-pose-1-jari-ridwan-kamil>

<sup>10</sup> “Prabowo dan Ustaz Abdul Somad Bertemu, Umat Sedang Berharap Besar,” *Viva*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.viva.co.id/pemilu/berita-pemilu/1138863-prabowo-dan-ustaz-abdul-somad-bertemu-umat-sedang-berharap-besar>

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, 11 February 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, 2 February 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, 14 February 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “Parade in Surakarta to Remember Gus Dur,”

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/03/01/j-online-parade-surakarta-remember-gus-dur.html>. Accessed 2 March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, 5 February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, 12 February 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, 12 February 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication, 14 February 2019.

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