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Anies Baswedan: His Political Career, COVID-19, and the 2024 Presidential Election

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The rising popularity of Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan has led his political rivals to fear that he will have little difficulty winning the presidency in 2024 under the current electoral system. They have therefore proposed a return to a non-direct election system.
- Anies was known to be a progressive Muslim intellectual. However, many people wondered whether he had changed after how he conducted himself during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. He allied with the FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) and rode the wave of Islamist populism roused by the 212 movement. His inaugural speech as Jakarta governor in October 2017 hinted at his alignment with *pro-pribumi* sentiments.
- Many people are also doubting his ability as a national leader. Although he is an eloquent orator capable of “hypnotizing” his audience, the lack of development in Jakarta under his leadership is being portrayed by critics as an indication of his incompetence.
- Anies Baswedan can still redeem his image and reputation if he is able to lead Jakarta out of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis provides him with the chance to win hearts and minds, and to be a steppingstone for his bid in the 2024 presidential election.

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INTRODUCTION

The next Indonesian presidential election will be held in 2024. However, political maneuvers with that in mind are already noticeable. Some politicians and civil society groups have already asked for changes to the constitution and the election law, to revert from the current direct election system back to the old indirect one.¹ These groups want the president to be elected via the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), arguing that the current direct system is costly and disadvantages certain candidates in the 2024 election.

The current Constitution stipulates that a president may serve only two five-year terms in office. This means that Joko Widodo has to leave office in 2024. In February 2020, two surveys done by the Indo Barometer and Median show Anies Baswedan enjoying popularity second only to Prabowo Subianto (the runner up for the previous two presidential elections). He ranked higher than Puan Maharani (the daughter of Megawati Soekarnoputri) and Ridwan Kamil (the current governor of West Java), among others.

The COVID-19 outbreak which hit the country at the beginning of March may have drawn attention away from the presidential elections, but the way officials have been responding shows that the 2024 presidential election is not far from their minds. Some have applauded Anies' responses, while others have criticized him.² This article traces Anies Baswedan's rise in national politics and analyses his performance as the governor of Jakarta, particularly his handling of COVID-19, and discusses whether criticisms of him have weakened his electability or enhanced it.

THE RISE OF ANIES BASWEDAN

Anies Baswedan is the grandson of AR Baswedan, who was in 2018 posthumously declared a national hero for his contribution to the country's struggle for independence. As an Indonesian of Hadhrami origin, AR is remembered for his efforts to integrate the various Arab communities in Indonesia into one national identity. He led them to pledge loyalty to Indonesia and to fight for the nation's independence.

Anies' rise to national fame began not long after he completed his PhD at the Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the US. He was not immediately involved in the national political hurly-burly after his return to Indonesia in 2005, and instead worked for a few years at the Indonesian Institute (TII) and the Partnership or *Kemitraan* and was then appointed in 2007 as rector of Paramadina University.³

It was during his time as the rector that he initiated a movement for young-educated people to teach in remote and peripheral areas and to spread awareness on education. This was called *Gerakan Indonesia Mengajar* (GIM), supposedly modelled after the "Teach for America" (TFA) movement.⁴ This programme was intended to inspire and motivate children in elementary schools. Not only was it successful in creating awareness on the importance of education for those living in remote areas, but it also made the young-educated and urban people cognizant of the diversity of Indonesia. The programme enhanced Anies' reputation nationally as someone who cares about people's education. However, some regarded it as just an image-building initiative by him, and this assumption was further strengthened by his involvement in deeper political hurly-burly when he applied

to the presidential convention held by the Democrat Party in 2014. Although he failed to be nominated, his participation enhanced his public image.

Anies' political journey continued with him joining Jokowi's campaign team for the 2014 presidential election. For his support of Jokowi, and given his *Gerakan Indonesia Mengajar* movement, and his background as Paramadina University rector, Anies was appointed Minister of Education and Culture after Jokowi won.

Anies was known for being academic and rational in his approach. His political speeches, for instance, were full of data and historical perspectives, often emphasizing unity and optimism, and underlining the strength of Indonesia's multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious constitution. This approach gained much popularity. In March 2011, for instance, Duncan Graham, an Australian journalist, underlines the views of political pundits that "Anies Baswedan has got 'the right stuff' to be a future president".⁵

What works against Anies Baswedan is not his past or his intellectual capability, and he is unequivocal in his religious or political vision. Instead, it is his difficulty in translating ideas into policies, and pushing them through complex administrative structures. After leading Paramadina University for more than five years, for example, the university remains stagnant and could not increase its student numbers beyond 2,000. There was no significant infrastructural development and, academically, the university lagged behind other universities in Jakarta. Apparently, he was distracted by his *Gerakan Indonesia Mengajar* (GIM), which has more national resonance.

His weak performance managing Paramadina seemed to be replicated when he was Minister of Education and Culture. After 20 months in office, President Joko Widodo replaced him with Muhadjir Effendy. Later, when he became Jakarta's governor, he was often criticized for being more "a man of words" than "a man of works".

JAKARTA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION AND THE SOCIAL DIVIDE

The Jakarta Gubernatorial Election in 2017 was the watershed between Anies Baswedan as a moderate and progressive Muslim and Anies Baswedan as a politician who is willing to compromise positive values for political gains. He was also willing to trade the multicultural principle for government positions. His actions during the election created mixed responses not only from the general public, but also from his previous allies and close friends, including those in Paramadina University. Anies went to Rizieq Shihab, a controversial religious leader of the 212 rallies, to seek political endorsement. His alliance with Rizieq Syihab contributed to his triumph in the election, when he defeated the incumbent governor Ahok, who had received the highest votes in the first round.

Anies Baswedan's inaugural speech as governor of Jakarta reflected his new populist bent. He adopted the use of the word "pribumi" (native) to differentiate and stratify Indonesian citizens. The word connotes the economic gap in Indonesian society and underlines that some of those who struggled for Indonesian Independence are not tasting the fruits of their sacrifices. He said:

In the past, all of us, the *pribumi* [natives], were oppressed and defeated. Now we are independent. It is time for us to become the hosts in our own country. Do not let Jakarta be like what is written in the Madurese saying: *etek se bertelor, ayam se rameh* [The duck lays the eggs, but the chicken broods].⁶

The use of the word “pribumi” here can lead to an assumption that Anies supported “nativism”. Distinguishing “duck” from “chicken” was a claim that certain groups had hijacked or disproportionately taken the benefits of independence that should be received more by the natives. This statement can also lead someone to an understanding that Anies was seen to be drawing a contrast between indigenous Indonesians and Indonesians of Chinese origins.

Anies performance as Jakarta governor has been receiving mixed appraisals. He broke his promise to stop the Jakarta-bay-reclamation, the subject of his criticism of Ahok expressed during the campaign and in the inaugural speech. Flooding in Jakarta, which happens almost every year, is a difficult problem to deal with and probably has no quick solution. But while Ahok tried to mitigate the floods by deploying “yellow armies” (people responsible for cleaning the rivers and other places in Jakarta), normalizing the rivers, and building reservoirs, Anies decided to cover polluted rivers with a black screen during the ASEAN Games, plant plastic trees along the main roads, build a bamboo statue near Monas (National Monument) which cost hundreds million Rupiah, and organize the Formula E electric motorsports championship which destroyed the green area in the southern part of Monas in the process. Perhaps, he can argue that developing the city is not solely about its infrastructure, but also its inhabitants, i.e. human beings. As his motto reads: “Maju Kotanya, Bahagia Warganya” (making a developed city and making its people happier).⁷

GABENER (BAD GOVERNOR) VS. GOODBENER (GOOD GOVERNOR)

It is not easy to review and judge Anies’ successes and failures in Jakarta. The flood of news from supporters and opponents, including social media buzzers, hold contrasting views about him. Perceptions of him can be summarized in how two opposing camps call him either *gabener* (not right or bad governor) or *goodbener* (very good or good governor).

Anies Baswedan’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major cause for starkly differing views about his leadership qualities. He was the first government official in Indonesia to close tourist attractions, to urge people to stay at home, and to partially lockdown Jakarta. Expectedly, he was criticized and condemned for this by many, including government officials.⁸ One social media influencer and politician opined that his policies merely generated fear in people.⁹

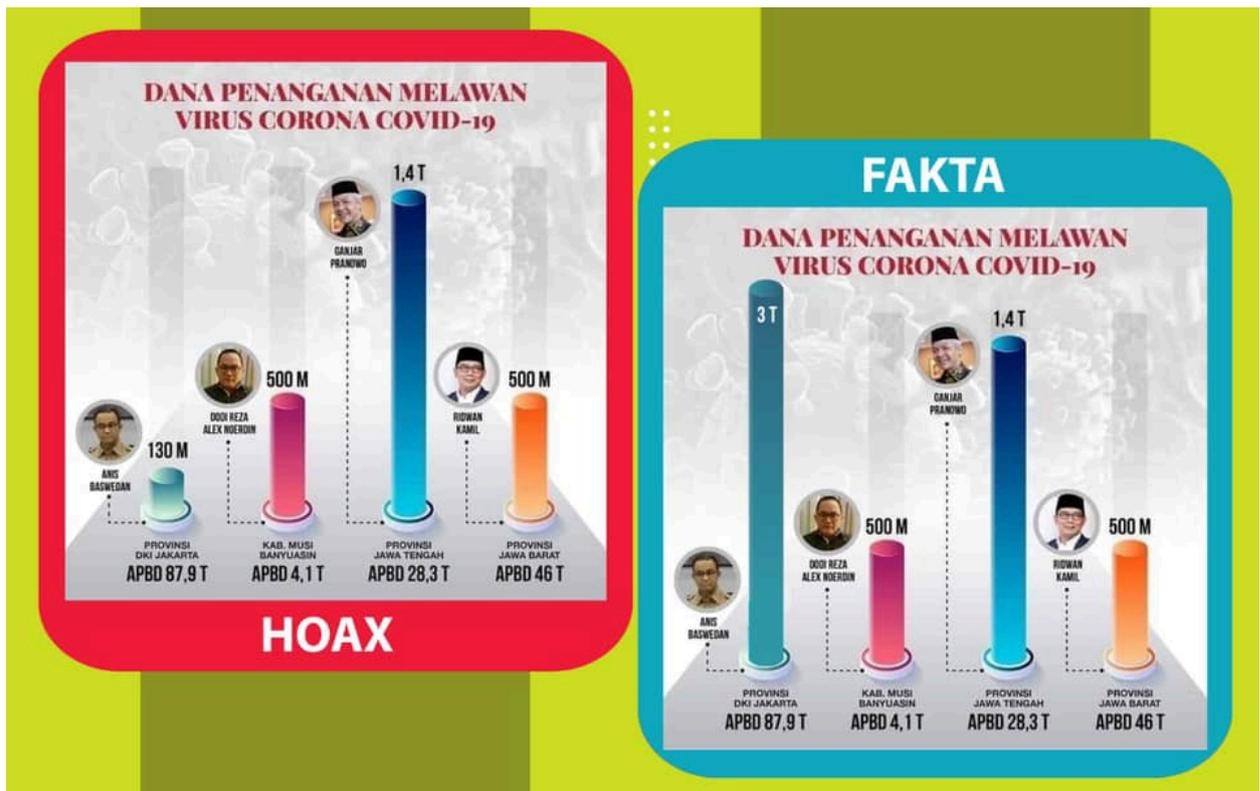


Figure 1 Illustration on splitting views on Anies Baswedan in social media. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/FaktaAnies/photos/a.2116953718604394/2324441681188929/?type=3&theater>

At the same time, Anies was praised for his decision to close the city’s main tourist attractions to stop the spread of the virus. But when he reduced the frequency of public transportation on the first day of social distancing in the capital city, he was broadly condemned. That day, 23 March 2020, many had to wait for buses and trains that only arrived every 20 minutes. The crowding should have been expected and was counterproductive as far as stopping the spread of the virus was concerned.¹⁰ Although he quickly reversed the policy, Anies was broadly “cyberbullied”. The briefing he gave to government officials in response to this situation was leaked and further angered the people. He had called the impact “efek kejut” (shock effect).¹¹ The limitation of public transportation had an unexpected negative impact.

Some of Anies’ other policies received commendations though. He converted a few city-owned hotels into accommodation for medical staff. Staying at the hotel instead of going home meant they could avoid infecting their families. He also called for volunteers to help the medical staff, who were being overwhelmed by the disease. However, few responded. This could be due to the danger of being infected by the virus, or to a declining trust in Anies.

CONCLUSION

Before becoming Jakarta governor, Anies was considered an inspiring leader whose speeches could mesmerize his audience. His article “*Tenun Kebangsaan*” (national woven fabric) on social media was widely shared.¹² At that time, he confidently said that “the

leadership needed by Indonesia nowadays is a type of leadership that can inspire a movement, a leadership that can revive the spirit of mutual cooperation ... a leader can inspire a movement if he is TRUSTED”.¹³

Unfortunately, Anies lost the trust of some people who were previously his supporters. 42% of Jakarta people did not vote for him in the 2017 elections. This happened after he rode on the caravan of the 212 movement and befriended controversial preacher Rizieq Syihab.¹⁴ Anies was dragged into identity politics, and was consciously employing racially divisive tactics during the campaign. Once a polarization occurs, it is not easy to be healed, and the use of it also jeopardizes the image of a good politician.

Anies' chances of winning in 2024 depends on various factors. A reconciliation with those disappointed with his close association with the 212 movement and Rizieq Syihab would certainly add to his chances of winning the 2024 presidential election. If he manages to reconcile with his previous allies and supporters and distance himself from hardline groups, his chances of winning the election would increase. Even today, when he is still associated with 212 and Rizieq Syihab and is not really successful in governing Jakarta, his electability is already the highest. The way Jakarta deals with the COVID-19 pandemic is Anies' chance to redeem himself.

¹ “PBNU Usul Presiden Dipilih MPR, Istana: Jokowi Pilih Langsung”, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1278222/pbnu-usul-presiden-dipilih-mpr-istana-jokowi-pilih-langsung>; “Istana: Jokowi Ingin Pilpres Tetap Pemilihan Langsung oleh Rakyat”, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/11/29/19372201/istana-jokowi-ingin-pilpres-tetap-pemilihan-langsung-oleh-rakyat?page=all>; “Indonesia president rejects end to direct votes, relaxing term limit”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-rights/indonesia-president-rejects-end-to-direct-votes-relaxing-term-limit-idUSKBN1Y61D4> (Accessed 13 April 2020)

² “Politikus PDIP: Anies Overdosis kata-kata dalam Mengatasi Wabah Corona, Beda dengan Jokowi yang Bekerja keras”, <https://idtoday.co/nasional/politikus-pdip-anies-overdosis-kata-kata-dalam-mengatasi-wabah-corona-beda-dengan-jokowi-yang-bekerja-keras/>.

³ Between 2005 and 2005, Anies worked at the Indonesian Institute (TII) and the Partnership for Governance Reform, called *Kemitraan* in Bahasa Indonesia. *Kemitraan* is a non-profit organization with a multi-donor trust fund managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

⁴ Zeyu Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor. “Making a Difference? the Effects of Teach for America in High School.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 30.3 (2011): 447-469.

⁵ Duncan Graham, “Anies Baswedan: Looking on the bright side”, *The Jakarta Post*, 17 March 2011. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/03/17/looking-bright-side.html> (Accessed: 3 April 2020).

⁶ Here is his statement in the original language:

Dulu kita semua pribumi ditindas dan dikalahkan. Kini telah merdeka, kini saatnya menjadi tuan rumah di negeri sendiri. Jangan sampai Jakarta ini seperti yang dituliskan pepatah Madura. *etek se bertelor, ayam se rameh*. Itik yang bertelor, ayam yang mengerami.

The full speech of Anies Baswedan can be found at: <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3686897/ini-pidato-lengkap-anies-usai-dilantik-jadi-gubernur-dki> (Accessed, 2 April 2020). The longer translation can be found at: Tom Pepinsky, “Jakarta’s new governor doubles down on identity”, *New Mandala*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.newmandala.org/jakartas-new-governor-doubles-identity/> (Accessed, 3 April 2020)

⁷ Syafiq Basri, *Anies: Tentang Anak Muda, Impian, dan Indonesia*, Bandung: Noura, 2016, pp. 110-111.

⁸ “Ngotot Menolak Lockdown, Jubir Jokowi Malah Sindir Anies: Publik Butuh yang Rasional, Tak Perlu ‘Efek Kejut’”, <https://pojoksatu.id/news/berita-nasional/2020/03/20/ngotot-menolak-lockdown-jubir-jokowi-malah-sindir-anies-publik-butuh-yang-rasional-tak-perlu-efek-kejut/> (Accessed 13 April 2020).

⁹ “Anies Baswedan Dituduh Overdosis Komentari Covid 19, Sekjen Demokrat Membela”, <https://www.timesindonesia.co.id/read/news/256541/anies-baswedan-dituduh-overdosis-komentari-covid-19-sekjen-demokrat-membela> (Accessed 13 April 2020).

¹⁰ Anies has had to ‘fight’ the central government in imposing his policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This competition between the governor and the national government over jurisdiction and policies has become the main feature of contemporary Indonesian politics.

¹¹ “Anies Baswedan: Harus Berani Tidak Populer, Tidak Apa-apa” <https://www.jpnn.com/news/anies-baswedan-harus-berani-tidak-populer-tidak-apa-apa> (Accessed 13 April 2020)

¹² Syafiq Basri, *Melampaui Mimpi: Anies Baswedan @twitterland*, Bandung: Mizan, 2014, p. 138.

¹³ Anies Baswedan, *Merawat Tenun Kebangsaan: Refleksi Ihwan Kepemimpinan, Demokrasi, dan Pendidikan*, Jakarta: Serambi, 2015, p. 244.

¹⁴ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Ethnic Minority Politics in Jakarta’s gubernatorial Election”, *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 39, June 2017.

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