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Signs of Democratic Contraction and Recentralisation of Power in Indonesia's 2020 Regional Elections

*Ian Wilson and Hui Yew-Foong**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

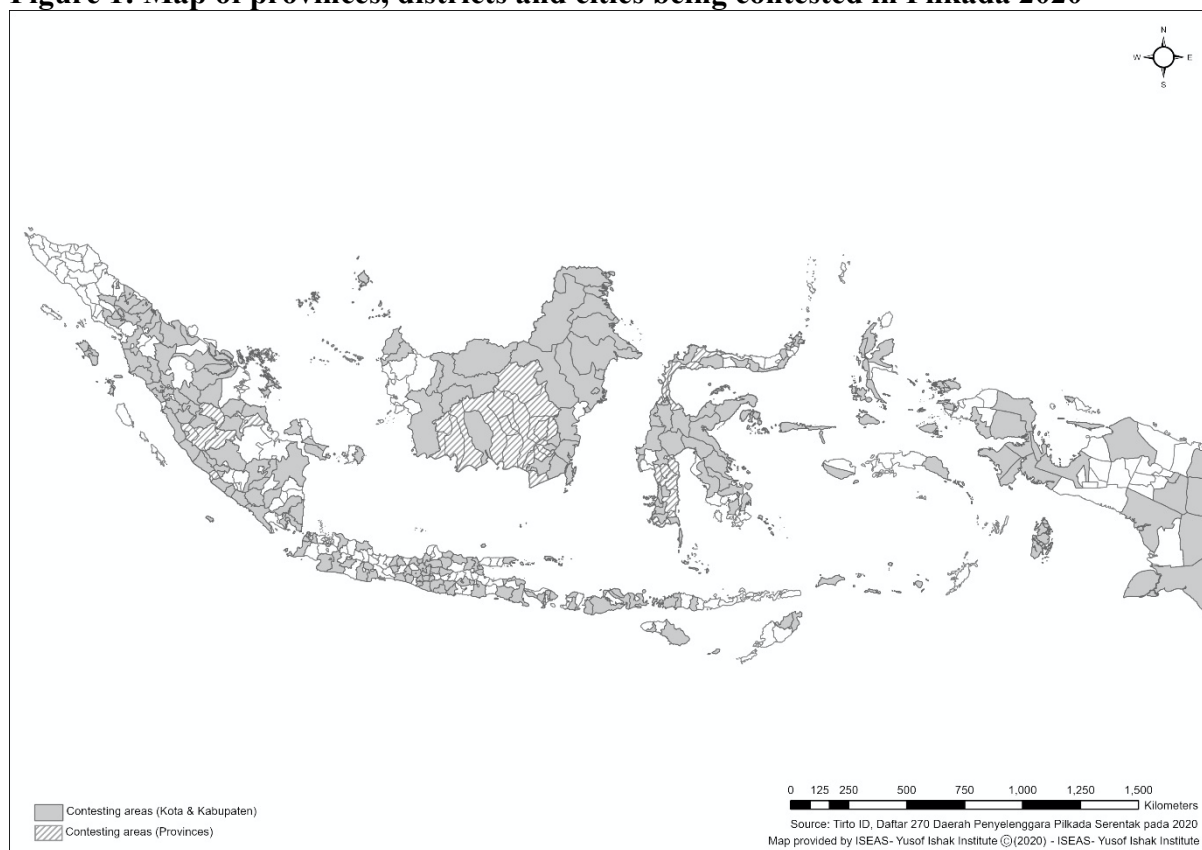
- On 9 December 2020, Indonesia will hold simultaneous regional elections in 270 regions under pandemic conditions.
- With increases in uncontested regions and candidates with political lineage, the space for electoral contestation in Indonesia may be contracting.
- Holding elections under pandemic conditions will not only inflict huge financial and human costs, but also likely see lower voter turnout, limiting the representativeness of the election outcome.
- However, senior national government officials argue that elections-related expenditure will boost local economies hit by the pandemic and electing new regional leaders into place will provide some political certainty under uncertain conditions.
- Under the new Omnibus Law certain regional powers will be recentralised. Political parties capitalising on widespread dissatisfaction with the laws are, however, unlikely to reap significant political dividends in this round of elections.

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INTRODUCTION

On 9 December 2020, Indonesia will hold simultaneous regional elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah* or Pilkada) across the nation. A total of 109,569,111 eligible voters will elect 9 provincial governors, 37 city mayors and 224 district heads or regents. They will get to choose from 734 pairs of registered candidates, of which the overwhelming majority has been nominated by political parties (667), while a smaller number (67) is running as independents.¹

Figure 1: Map of provinces, districts and cities being contested in Pilkada 2020



Elections in 25 regions will however be effectively uncontested with only single candidates running (*calon tunggal*), all of whom are the incumbent. This reflects (1) the tendency of political parties to form “grand coalitions” around a single popular candidate, (2) increasingly centralized candidate selection processes, and (3) the high financial costs of running, which, arguably, is constraining the diversity and quality of candidates.²

Another shaping factor is the persistence of what is known as dynastic politics. Most notably, family members of Indonesia’s most prominent politicians, including the president, vice-president and defence minister, have thrown their hats into the political ring of regional elections. The expanding influence of political families begs the question whether their ambitions will squeeze out others without political lineage, thus further contracting the space of electoral contestation.

Women continue to face significant challenges of adequate representation in Pilkada elections, with just 155 running in 2020, a slight increase from 94 in 2018. This compares with the 1,313 men registered to compete.³ Widely held conservative societal attitudes, the male-dominated culture of political parties and difficulties in securing financial patronage have all been identified as key reasons for this situation.⁴

In contrast to previous Pilkada, this year's elections are being held against a backdrop of significant social, economic and political upheaval. Foremost is the widespread devastating impact of Covid-19. At the time of writing, confirmed cases nationally have crossed the 500,000 mark while deaths have exceeded 17,000, with many health experts suggesting the actual number may be significantly higher, hidden by low testing rates.⁵ The social and economic impacts have been equally devastating, plunging Indonesia into its first recession since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998 and giving it its highest rates of unemployment and underemployment in a decade.⁶ Adding to this, the passing of a controversial national "Omnibus" law package, ostensibly aimed at fostering job-creation through encouraging foreign investment, has triggered widespread protest and unrest with concerns that it will, at this time of great economic uncertainty, undermine workers' rights and conditions and the authority of local governments.⁷

TO HOLD OR NOT TO HOLD

Despite the still largely uncontrolled nature of the pandemic, the national government has remained committed to pushing ahead with the Pilkada in 2020.⁸

Various interest groups have voiced opposition to the decision, from medical experts and social and religious groups to government organisations. The country's two largest Islamic organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, both key allies in Jokowi's 2019 successful re-election bid, have argued that the elections should be pushed back to 2021 due to the substantial public health risks.⁹ NU's chairman Said Aqil Siroj has suggested that the significant financial and human resources required for holding the Pilkada would be better allocated towards battling Covid-19.¹⁰

The two bodies responsible for the running and oversight of elections have also been divided, with the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU) supporting the holding of elections in 2020, while the General Elections Supervisory Agency (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, Bawaslu) initially recommended it be delayed.¹¹ Polls have indicated strong public support (up to 74%) for further postponement due to concerns with election-related spikes in Covid-19.¹²

The national government has largely ignored these concerns, highlighting instead the "constitutional" and "strategic" importance of pushing ahead.¹³ President Joko Widodo went so far as to state that it was imperative to hold the Pilkada on time in order to "guarantee the constitutional rights of the people, the right to vote and to be elected".¹⁴ Considering the well-documented illiberal tendencies of the administration, including it openly questioning the very future of direct regional elections, one has to ask why the "constitutional right to vote and be elected" seemingly overrides the public's "right to health"?¹⁵ There are both economic and political explanations for this.

The pandemic has required significant additional allocation of funds for Pilkada health protocol logistics, such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for election officials and Covid-19 educational material, making it one of the most expensive elections to date.¹⁶ As a result of this massive infusion of funds, Minister of Home Affairs Tito Karnavian has argued that the Pilkada would provide an important stimulus to regional economic growth amid the recession.¹⁷

Regardless of the trajectory of the pandemic – and there are strong indications that the situation can get worse – postponement of the Pilkada to 2021 would cause a considerable further cost blow-out that the national government, obsessed with economic recovery, is keen to avoid.

Concerned with consolidating their regional power bases through top-down candidate selection processes, political parties have been largely unanimous in supporting the holding of elections without delay, mindful also of the growing costs and risks of postponement.¹⁸ The Secretary General of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDI-P), Hasto Kristiyanto, for example, argued that it is essential to maintain “certainty” and “legitimacy” in a “time of crisis”.¹⁹

There is much to suggest that the electoral legitimacy and mandate of winning candidates may be reduced compared to previous elections. Voting in Indonesia is not compulsory, but Pilkada have generally maintained relatively high levels of participation. In 2018, for example, over 73% of all registered voters participated, albeit with substantial variations between regions.²⁰ The unprecedented combination of a pandemic, economic recession and low levels of public trust in the process has led to widespread speculation that this Pilkada could see historically low voter turnout.²¹

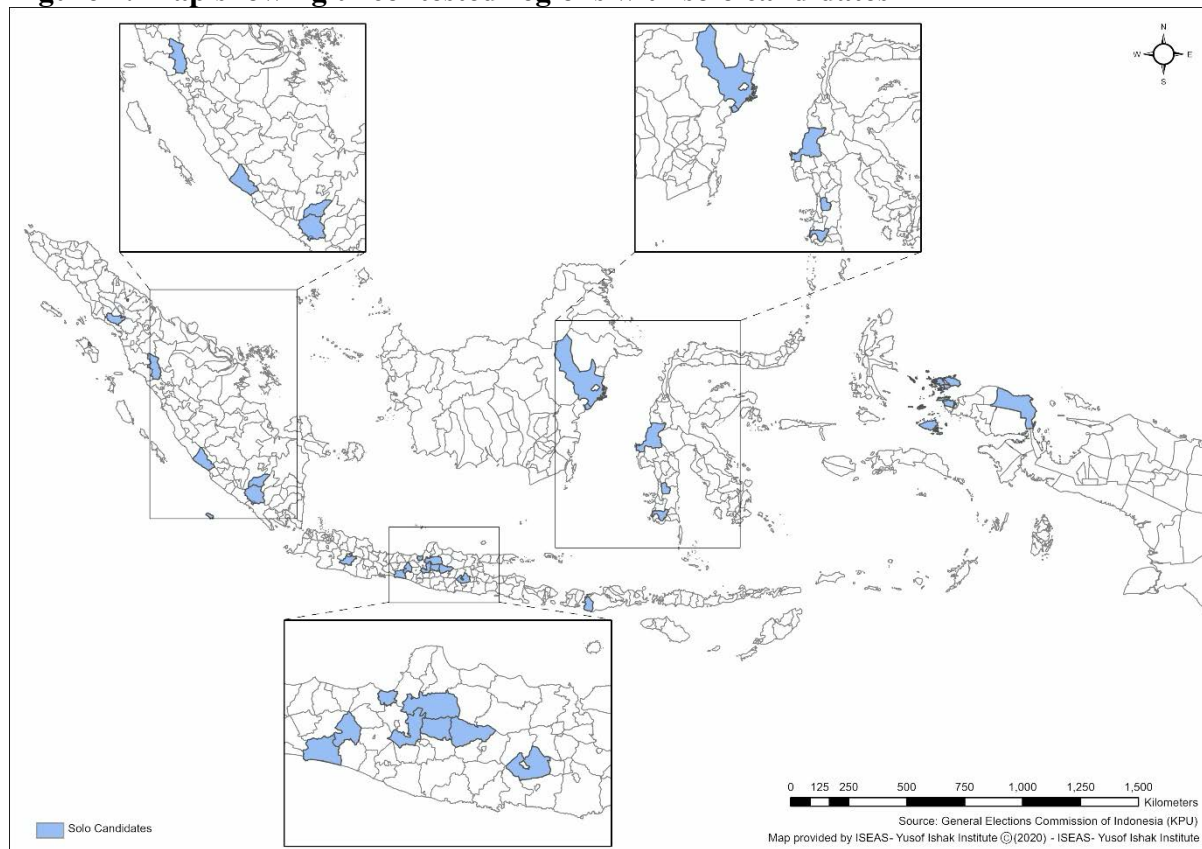
SOLO CANDIDATES AND THE EMPTY BALLOT BOX

One phenomenon that raises the question of whether the direct election of regional leaders continues to guarantee democratic representation in Indonesia is the increasing number of solo candidates breezing through the Pilkada uncontested. As mentioned, there are 25 such candidates for this Pilkada, an increase from 9 in 2015 and 16 in 2018.²² Officially permitted since 2015, the phenomenon of single candidacy elections reflects the growing use of incumbency to consolidate power, establish dynasties and otherwise create disincentives for, or directly intimidate, potential political rivals.²³

An example of how regional and national elites sought to consolidate power through solo candidates can be seen in the mayoral election for Makassar in 2018. The popular incumbent Ramdhan “Danny” Pomanto was disqualified due to a legal infringement, leaving newcomer Munafri Arifuddin, who was connected to major regional business interests and the then Indonesian Vice-President, as the sole candidate. Munafri would have become the new mayor, except that there were more votes cast for the empty ballot box than for Munafri, as a sign of non-confidence in his candidacy.²⁴ In this roundabout way, Pomanto retained his position, albeit as a caretaker mayor until the Pilkada results are out this year. However, this was an exceptional case where the incumbent, marginalised by the elites, made a

comeback through the empty ballot box. This is unlikely to be the case for the 25 uncontested regions that have incumbents standing as solo candidates in the upcoming Pilkada.

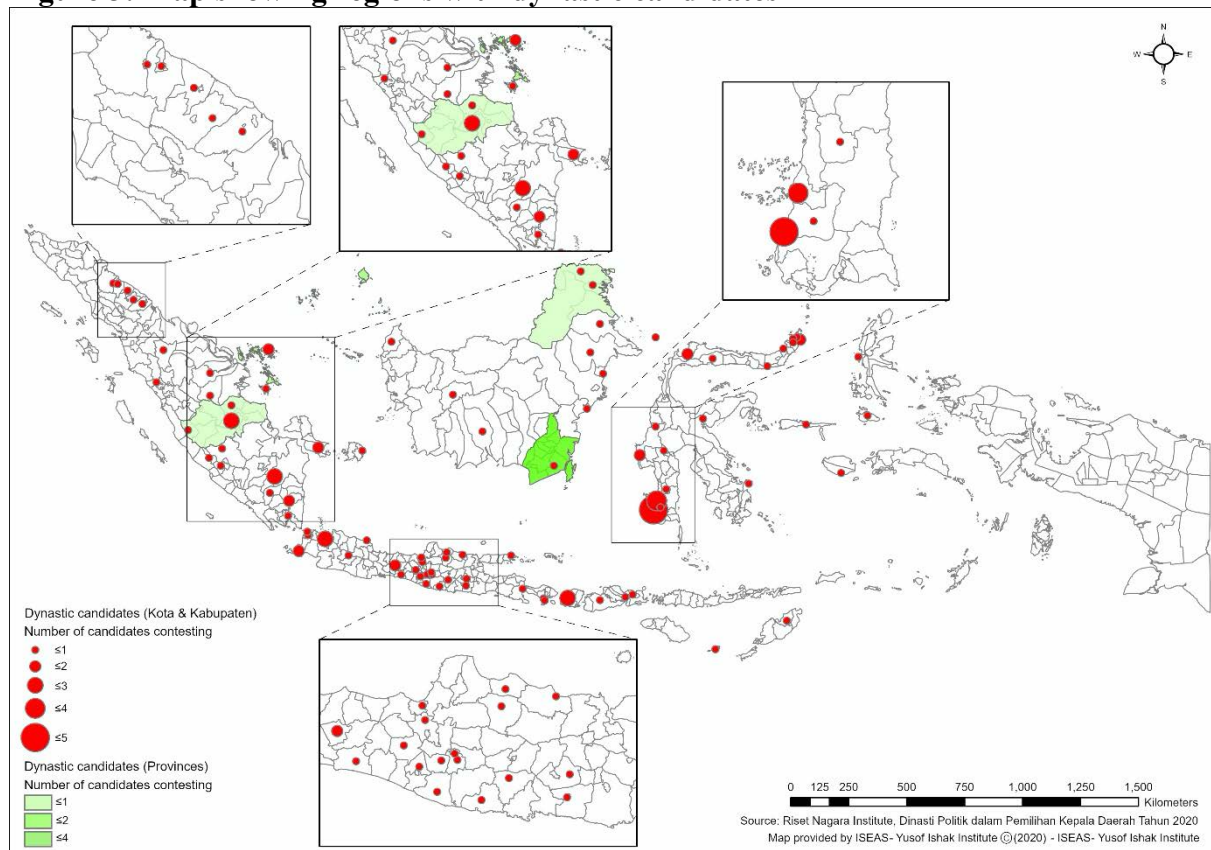
Figure 2: Map showing uncontested regions with solo candidates



THE BLIGHT OF DYNASTIC POLITICS?

Dynastic politics, whereby several members of the same family, related by blood or marriage, are involved in politics, particularly electoral politics, have come to be seen as the new normal in Indonesia.²⁵ Indeed, while candidates from political families amounted to 86 for the three simultaneous Pilkada in 2015, 2017 and 2018 combined, the upcoming Pilkada in December alone will showcase 124 such candidates.²⁶ Of these, there are 22 incumbents and 102 newcomers. Nine are running for governor or deputy governor, 87 are running for district head or deputy district head, and 28 for mayor or deputy mayor. The provinces most prone to featuring such candidates are South Sulawesi (12 candidates), North Sulawesi (11 candidates), Central Java (10 candidates) and East Java (nine candidates).

Figure 3: Map showing regions with dynastic candidates



Besides the sheer numbers, the influence of dynastic politics has entered the limelight of this Pilkada due to the involvement of family members of Indonesia’s top politicians, including President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, Vice President Ma’ruf Amin and Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto. Jokowi’s son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, will be contesting the mayor’s seat in Surakarta, where Jokowi first launched his own political career. Over in Medan, Jokowi’s Batak son-in-law, Bobby Nasution, will vie for the position of mayor. In the city of South Tangerang, Prabowo’s niece is in a team engaged in a three-corner fight that involves Ma’ruf Amin’s daughter.

The spotlight, of course, is on the first family, with many asking if Jokowi, whose meteoric rise as an outsider to oligarchic politics serves as a sign that Indonesian democracy is inclusive enough to allow someone without political lineage to enter the fray of regional and national politics and succeed, is now grooming his own political dynasty. While Gibran is popular in his own right,²⁷ his path to candidacy through the PDI-P ticket displaced popular PDI-P party stalwart and local branch preferred candidate, Achmad Purnomo, who is also the incumbent deputy mayor.²⁸ In Medan, Bobby won the PDI-P’s support to be mayoral candidate in spite of becoming a cadre only in March 2020.²⁹ As with other direct elections in Indonesia, visibility and electability seem to have taken precedence over party mechanisms in producing viable candidates.³⁰ It remains to be seen if the president’s political capital will rub off sufficiently on his family members to reap the votes needed to put them into office.

Over in South Tangerang, the contest is shaping up as one between elite families at the national and regional levels. Besides Prabowo's niece Rahayu Saraswati, who is running for deputy mayor, and Ma'ruf Amin's daughter Siti Nur Azizah, who is running for mayor, there is Pilar Saga Ichsan, who is contesting the deputy mayor's seat. Pilar hails from the Ratu Atut family, which has been influential in regional politics and includes a sitting district head, a former governor and a former mayor. However, what decides the match may be more the sway of incumbency than the political pedigree of candidates, as Benjamin Davnie, the current deputy mayor that Pilar is paired with, has been leading the opinion polls by significant margins.³¹

A NEW KIND OF CAMPAIGNING

As the extent of the pandemic became apparent, the KPU considered fast-tracking the introduction of e-voting. However, with a 2020 timeline, the logistical hurdles were considered too substantial and it was decided to proceed with manual voting but with electronic vote capitulation.³² A raft of regulations have been introduced to govern candidate registration, campaigning and voting in line with Covid-19 protocols.³³

This has presented challenges for Pilkada campaigning that historically has relied on mass events such as rallies, convoys, fairs and entertainment and sporting activities as means by which candidates generate enthusiasm while operating as opportunities for distributing material incentives. Some candidates have developed innovative approaches to campaigning, such as Gibran, who adapted the informal *blusukan* meet and greet made famous by his father using a mobile "virtual box" to interact with prospective voters.³⁴

Old habits, however, die hard. Despite social-distancing regulations and with threats of financial sanction, delayed confirmation and even disqualification for candidates, upwards of 43 per cent of campaign activities have remained face-to-face, with only 11 per cent conducted via social media.³⁵ By mid-November, 71 Pilkada candidates in 21 provinces had tested positive for Covid-19, with four fatalities.³⁶ Thousands of election officials have also tested positive.³⁷

Online campaigns have been susceptible to hoaxes, disinformation and so-called "black campaigns" spread through paid influencers or "buzzers".³⁸ The Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) also identified risks of widespread vote-buying due to the combination of an altered campaigning landscape, the conditions of the pandemic, and increased economic hardship.³⁹ Of particular focus is the potential for politicisation and misuse of Covid-19 *Bansos* social assistance funds by incumbents seeking re-election.⁴⁰

Recovery from the economic impact of Covid-19 has emerged as a common Pilkada campaign theme while, with few exceptions, the outlining of programmes for managing the spread of the virus has been largely absent.⁴¹ In Mojokerto, Bandung and Kediri, for example, candidates have stressed the importance of regional government support for small and medium enterprises as the local engine for kickstarting economic growth.

Omnibus Law and recentralising authority

Early predictions of identity-based polarisation or even conflict as a flow-on from the 2019 presidential elections have not been realised, perhaps muted or rendered strategically disadvantageous by the conditions of the pandemic. The recently ratified national Omnibus Law has, however, cast a long shadow, altering the kind of executive authority that any newly elected regional leader will hold.

In several key areas, the Omnibus Law returns decision making power to the central government. This includes removing substantive regional government control over spatial planning, such as the issuing of environmental impact assessments and minimising regulatory authority over the operations of mining companies.⁴² It also weakens the role of district and city-level governments in determining minimum wage levels, despite significant regional variations.⁴³

This undermines what has been an important component of negotiations between local candidates and trade unions and various sectoral and societal groups, including farmers and the urban poor. The loss of governing authority over these areas will not just weaken regional governments, but also negatively impacts politically and economically marginal groups who have been using decentralised electoral democracy to leverage for concessions.⁴⁴

For their part, the two political parties that voted against the Omnibus Law legislation, the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) and Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat, PD) are seeking to capitalise on widespread dissatisfaction with the Omnibus Law, claiming that this will translate into increased Pilkada electoral success for their respective candidates.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Much has been said about democratic decline under the Jokowi administration and we can see further evidence of this in the 2020 Pilkada, such as the increases in “kotak kosong” elections, an outcome of the use of incumbency, often in coalition with oligarchic interests and political party leaderships, to suppress democratic competition. These are not new trends, but they have become far more pronounced. The overall outcome is a deeper consolidation of political dynasties, compounded by candidate nomination processes driven by party elites in Jakarta, which disenfranchise grassroots members.

The electoral outcomes of the Pilkada, whatever they are, will likely do little to counteract this. Even if independent or grassroots candidates are successful, they will encounter reduced capacity to deliver on any substantive policy programme. This perhaps helps explain why so few candidates have offered any such programme.

This Pilkada is shaping up to be the country’s most expensive regional elections to date, both in financial and human terms, and perhaps also its least participatory and representative.⁴⁶

¹ See <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/1713510/ketua-kpu-743-bakal-pasangan-calon-kepala-daerah-daftar-pilkada-2020>

² According to one city mayor candidate, the running asking price from political parties to gain their nomination is Rp 10 billion (SGD \$950,000), adding “there is no discussion of ideology. What’s discussed is money”. <https://batampos.co.id/2020/07/20/modal-maju-pilgub-butuh-rp-100-m-pilbup-bisa-habiskan-rp-30-m/> . In some instances, central party leadership intervention in candidate selection has led to branch splitting. See <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20201120215747-32-572628/gaduh-pdip-surabaya-merasa-dipecah-belah-jenderal-polri>

³ <https://theconversation.com/womens-electability-rises-in-indonesias-2018-local-elections-101274>

⁴ See Sally White & Edward Aspinall (2019), ‘Why good women lose elections in Indonesia’, *New Mandala*, 03 December.

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-55046484>

⁶ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/11/05/unemployment-surges-to-decade-high-as-covid-19-causes-millions-to-lose-jobs.html>

⁷ Max Lane (2020), ‘Protests Against the Omnibus Law and the Evolution of Indonesia’s Social Opposition’ *ISEAS Perspective*, No.128, 9 November.

⁸ Initially scheduled for 23 September the impact of Covid-19 has resulted in a brief postponement to 9 December.

⁹ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200921175129-32-549061/istana-pertimbangkan-usul-nu-dan-muhammadiyah-tunda-pilkada>

¹⁰ <https://en.tempo.co/read/1391218/komnas-ham-nu-muhammadiyah-against-pilkada-elections-amid-covid-19>

¹¹ The KPU’s position was not unanimous, with some commissioners suggesting as late as October that the elections be postponed either entirely or in regions with high infection rates.

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/10/09/11114831/kpu-jika-pandemi-covid-19-makin-buruk-pilkada-memungkinkan-ditunda?page=all>

¹² <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/07/26/majority-of-public-wants-regional-elections-delayed-surveys.html>

¹³ <https://www.liputan6.com/pilkada/read/4315109/kemendagri-pilkada-2020-program-strategis-nasional-harus-disukseskan>

¹⁴ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/09/21/regional-races-cant-wait-until-the-pandemic-is-over-state-palace-says-amid-criticism.html>

¹⁵ In November the Minister for Home Affairs announced that village head elections (Pilkades) scheduled to be held simultaneously with the Pilkada be postponed to 2021, with the argument that they were not supported by adequate health protocol regulations.

<https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/kemendagri-putuskan-tunda-pelaksanaan-pilkades-2020.html>

¹⁶ Over 20.49 trillion rupiah has been allocated and disbursed to the regions. This compares to the 2018 Pilkada which cost Rp 10.5 trillion.

<https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20200922/15/1295156/gara-gara-covid-19-biaya-pilkada-2020-bengkak-jadi-rp2049-triliun>

¹⁷ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200925171342-532-551075/tito-klaim-pilkada-bisa-bangkitkan-ekonomi-2020>

¹⁸ <https://www.gatra.com/detail/news/493671/politik/pilkada-epidemolog-parpol-kurang-peduli-cegah-covid-19>

¹⁹ <https://cirebon.pikiran-rakyat.com/nasional/pr-04822277/pilkada-2020-ciptakan-pemimpin-tangguh-pandemi-pdip-amankan-indonesia-dari-kritis-legitimasi?page=2>

²⁰ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/06/29/21115801/partisipasi-pemilih-pilkada-serentak-2018-capai-7324-persen>

²¹ See <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-5203637/turunnya-jumlah-pemilih-jadi-ancaman-pilkada-2020-saat-pandemi-covid-19>.

²² In elections with only one candidate, voters are given the option of submitting an empty ballot, or ‘kotak kosong’. <https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/349553-calon-tunggal-dan-pilkada-yang-anomali>

²³ This includes concerns over the neutrality of local civil servants in the administering of the Pilkada. <https://finance.detik.com/berita-ekonomi-bisnis/d-5250384/ini-5-instansi-pns-tak-netral-paling-tinggi-di-pilkada-2020>

²⁴ David Binns, “Incumbents with attitude in Indonesia’s local elections”, *New Mandala*, 4 November 2020. <https://www.newmandala.org/incumbents-with-attitude-in-indonesias-local-elections/>.

²⁵ Yoes C. Kenawas, “Dynastic politics: Indonesia's new normal”, *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 29 September 2020. <https://electionwatch.unimelb.edu.au/articles/dynastic-politics-indonesias-new-normal>

²⁶ Riset Nagara Institute, *Dinasti Politik Dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Tahun 2020* [Political Dynasties in the Regional Head Elections in 2020] (Jakarta, October 2020), pp. 3-4. Separately, Yoes Kenawas estimated that there were 52 “dynastic” candidates in the 2015 Pilkada, and the figure has increased to 146 for the 2020 Pilkada. See <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-dynasty/in-indonesia-making-of-a-mayor-sparks-talk-of-nations-newest-dynasty-idUSKBN27Z0EY>.

²⁷ In the electability polls, Gibran garnered the support of 36.8 per cent of respondents, while his opponent, independent candidate Bagyo Wahyono, trailed far behind at 1.3 per cent. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/08/27/23000051/survei-ipi--elektabilitas-gibran-pada-pilkada-solo-36-8-persen?page=all>

²⁸ David Binns, “Incumbents with attitude in Indonesia’s local elections”.

²⁹ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200312192449-32-482984/bobby-nasution-bergabung-jadi-kader-pdip>

³⁰ Y.F. Hui, “Political figures and political parties: Indonesia after Suharto”, in *3rd ASEAN reader*, edited by K.B. Ooi (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), pp. 27-30.

³¹ <https://voi.id/ja/bernas/14498/alasan-mengapa-tangerang-selatan-begitu-diperebutkan-elite-di-pilkada-2020>

³² <https://pilkada.tempo.co/read/1389282/pengamat-nilai-e-voting-belum-siap-diterapkan-pada-pilkada-2020/full&view=ok>

³³ For example, face-to-face events were limited to 50 people and obtained police approval.

³⁴ <https://www.liputan6.com/pilkada/read/4372532/gibran-sebut-blusukan-dengan-virtual-box-sudah-ditiru-calon-lain>

³⁵ In practice, sanctions have rarely extended beyond written warnings, even for repeat offenders. <https://en.tempo.co/read/1392201/bawaslu-nearly-half-of-pilkada-participants-rely-on-physical-campaigns>

³⁶ <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2020/11/13/pilkada-2020-69-calon-kepala-daerah-positif-covid-19>

³⁷ <https://rmco.id/baca-berita/pilkada/54276/rapid-test-jelang-pilwalkot-gile-1000-petugas-kpps-denpasar-positif-covid19>

³⁸ <https://pilkada.tempo.co/read/1407766/kampanye-pilkada-2020-di-medsos-disebut-rentan-dengan-9-risiko/>

³⁹ Bawaslu, ‘Indeks kerawananan Pemilu (IKP) Pilkada serentak 2020.

⁴⁰ <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20200713/15/1265163/ada-petahana-di-pilkada-2020-mendagri-jangan-pakai-dana-bansos>

⁴¹ <https://akurat.co/news/id-1228855-read-puskapol-ui-kampanye-pilkada-2020-belum-tawarkan-program-soal-pandemi>

⁴² <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20201007150524-32-555508/akibat-omnibus-law-wewenang-pemenang-pilkada-2020-dipangkas>

⁴³ This has made it more difficult for trade unions to find electoral political allies with the will or capacity push back against aspects of the Omnibus Law. In Medan, for example, one of Indonesia's largest trade unions, the Confederation of the All-Indonesian Workers Union (KSPSI), signed a pledge with incumbent mayor Akhyar Nasution to work together; however rather than a detailed political contract, their coming together was more loosely framed as 'working together' to minimise the impact of the Omnibus Law on workers' wages and conditions.

<https://waspada.co.id/2020/11/dukungan-buruh-menjadi-vitamin-kemenangan-akhyar-salman/>

⁴⁴ Ian Wilson (2019), 'Urban Poor Activism and Political Agency in Post-New Order Jakarta', in Thushara Dibley & Michele Ford (eds), *Activists in Transition: Progressive Politics in Democratic Indonesia*, Cornell University Press, pp 99-116.

⁴⁵ It appears unlikely however that this will be enough to attract support in the context of regional elections from the large social base of Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah, both of which also opposed the Omnibus Law. See article on the PKS:

<https://www.gatra.com/detail/news/494303/politik/tolak-omnibus-law-pks-tuai-simpatidipilkada-siak>

⁴⁶ By comparison, the nationwide 2019 elections, which combined the presidential and legislative elections in an effort to reduce expenditure and involved over 190 million voters, was allocated Rp. 25.59 trillion. <https://www.kemenkeu.go.id/en/publications/news/these-are-the-2019-election-budget-allocation-details/>

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