

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Candidates, Coalitions and Prospects for the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Three candidates – Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and Anies Baswedan – have registered for the upcoming Jakarta governor election, on 15 February 2017.
- The nomination process was marked by intense last-minute negotiations led by top national party leaders such as Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prabowo Subianto. Their personal involvement signifies the immense importance of the Jakarta election, prompting many observers to compare it with a presidential election.
- Incumbent governor Ahok is currently leading the polls but we should not underestimate his two new challengers.
- The contenders are likely to pursue very different campaign strategies. Ahok will seek to highlight his achievements, Agus will bank on the continuing popularity of his father, and Anies is likely to focus on his track record and extensive experience in politics and academia.
- The winner of the election will be well placed to play a major role in the 2019 presidential election.

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## INTRODUCTION

On 15 February 2017 Indonesia will stage yet another round of direct local elections for governors, mayors and district heads. All in all, 101 elections will be held simultaneously but arguably the most highly anticipated of these will be the gubernatorial election in Jakarta where incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, will seek to win re-election against two challengers, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and Anies Baswedan.

In recent months, the enormous importance of this election became increasingly palpable as public opinion polls gauging the electability of prospective candidates proliferated and political parties scrambled to forge coalitions ahead of the registration deadline on 23 September 2016. In the final days before the registration, national party leaders like Megawati Sukarnoputri (PDI-P), Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (PD) or Prabowo Subianto (Gerindra) took personal charge of the negotiations, signifying that for them at least, this election ‘feels like a presidential election’<sup>1</sup>.

This paper will introduce the candidates who registered with the General Election Commission, trace their pathways to the nomination, and assess their respective strengths and weaknesses. It will then contextualize the election in broader political trends in Indonesia, highlighting that the Jakarta poll will not only provide potential cues for the 2019 presidential elections but also yield critical insights into different facets of electoral campaigning and, given Ahok’s background as a Christian ethnic Chinese, the salience of ethnic and religious sentiments among the Indonesian electorate.

## INTRODUCING THE INCUMBENT: BASUKI TJAHAJA PURNAMA (AHOK)

The first contender to register his candidature at the general election commission was Jakarta’s incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok. Initially elected in 2012 as Vice Governor to Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Ahok assumed the governor position when Jokowi was elected president in 2014. As governor, Ahok has divided public opinion like no other Indonesian politician. While his supporters herald him as Jakarta’s saviour and only hope for real reform, his critics find him too brash, rude and uncaring, particularly towards the city’s poor.

The eldest son of a Hakka Chinese family, Ahok was born on 26 June 1966 in the town of Manggar in East Belitung. Here, he began his political career when he was elected to the regional parliament in 2004. A narrative Ahok often recites in the media is that he only entered politics after the bitter experience of having his mining supplies business closed down by corrupt district officials. Smarting from that experience, he has built his political career mostly on an anti-corruption platform and populist strategies such as community visits and distributing his personal mobile phone number to ordinary citizens.

However, Ahok soon developed a ‘habit’ of quitting a position after only a short period of time in order to pursue higher office. He left the East Belitung parliament after only one

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<sup>1</sup> ‘SBY: Ini Pilgub DKI Rasa Pilpres’, <http://pilkada.liputan6.com/read/2607724/sby-ini-pilgub-dki-rasa-pilpres>, accessed 22 September 2016.

year in order to become district head of the same region in 2005. A year later, he resigned to (unsuccessfully) run for Governor of Bangka-Belitung Province. The pattern continued when he was elected to the House of Representatives in 2009 as a Golkar member. Merely two years later, he quit the party in order to concentrate on the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election where he eventually secured a Vice Governor nomination as Jokowi's running-mate.

The tendency to jump from one position to the next in short succession can also be seen in Ahok's choice of political parties where, in his relatively short political career, he has joined and then left no less than three political parties. Starting off with Partai Perhimpunan Indonesia Baru (PIB) during his early days in East Belitung, he then joined Golkar to run as a national MP before moving to Gerindra in 2012. Ahok left Gerindra in 2014 after a public disagreement over the party's support for the abolishment of direct local elections, and he has been a 'free agent' since.

Ahok's status as a maverick politician without party affiliation prompted concerns among his supporters that he might not secure a party nomination for re-election in 2017. In response, a grassroots network of young Ahok supporters founded Teman Ahok (Ahok's Friends), an activist group that pledged to help Ahok run as an independent candidate. Over the course of one year, Teman Ahok set up ID card collection booths all over Jakarta, and by June 2016 had collected 1 million ID cards, more than enough for Ahok to run as an independent candidate. At the same time, two political parties, Nasional Demokrat (NasDem) and Hanura, declared their support for Ahok, even if he stayed independent.

By July 2016, it became clear that Golkar was also going to throw its support behind the incumbent, so Ahok announced that he was going to abandon his plan of running as an independent and accept Golkar, NasDem and Hanura's nomination instead. Not yet satisfied with the size of his coalition, Ahok then expressed his hope that PDI-P, the party with the largest number of seats in the Jakarta regional parliament, would also support his bid. The PDI-P, however, hesitated and joined talks with other parties about an alternative candidate instead. In the end though, Ahok got what he wanted. The night before the beginning of the registration period, PDI-P announced its support for Ahok and also confirmed that PDI-P cadre Djarot Saiful Hidayat would be Ahok's running mate.

Although Teman Ahok made it clear that they will continue to support Ahok, many Jakartans view Ahok's 'abandonment' of his grassroots supporters as yet another example of his disloyalty. Some even speculate that Ahok never intended to run as an independent to begin with and merely used Teman Ahok to get the political momentum he needed to secure a nomination from political parties.<sup>2</sup> In any case, Ahok has once again proven his ability as a shrewd political operator willing to take unconventional (and risky) routes to achieve his political goals.

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<sup>2</sup> Dirk Tomsa, 'Teman Ahok: Friends will be Friends', *Indonesia at Melbourne*, <http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/teman-ahok-friends-will-be-friends/>, accessed 26 September 2016.

While recent polls suggest that Ahok is still the most popular candidate,<sup>3</sup> the road to the February 2017 election will not be an easy one. The incumbent can expect his opponents to attack his track-record, which includes controversial projects such as the Jakarta Cove land reclamation project, the eviction of settlements around the Ciliwung riverbank, and allegations of corruption surrounding the Jakarta government's purchase of Sumber Waras Hospital. This is not to mention the inevitable smear campaigns targeting his Chinese ethnicity and Christian religion. Particularly now when Anies Baswedan and Agus Yudhoyono have emerged as opponents in the election, Ahok and his supporters would be mistaken in assuming an easy victory.

### **THE CHALLENGERS: ANIES BASWEDAN AND AGUS HARIMURTI YUDHOYONO**

For most observers, the stronger of the two challengers is Anies Baswedan. Born in West Java in 1969, he completed his PhD in political science at Northern Illinois University, USA, in 2005. Prior to that, he studied at Gadjah Mada University where he became active in the Islamic Student Association (HMI), a prominent national organization whose many former members hold government and parliamentary positions.

His interest in education sector reform began in 2007 when he became rector of Paramadina University. In 2009, identifying the need for more teachers in remote areas, Anies founded a non-profit organization called "Indonesia Mengajar" (*Indonesia Teaches*) that aims to recruit, train and send fresh graduates to teach at elementary schools in these areas for one year. The programme has hitherto sent 600 young educators to 134 villages across the archipelago. His successful scholarship programme at Paramadina, the *Indonesia Teaches* programme, and his participation in the education sector in general caught the attention of Joko Widodo (Jokowi), so he joined Jokowi's campaign-team in 2014 and became a prominent campaigner. When Jokowi won the election, Anies was made his Minister of Culture and Education.

In the 2016 cabinet reshuffle however, the president dismissed him. Explaining the dismissal, the State Secretary mentioned that the president wanted a different course for the future of the education sector.<sup>4</sup> However, there are other, more political speculations, including the suggestion that Anies aspires to contest the 2019 president.<sup>5</sup> In fact, he had already indicated his ambition for higher office when he participated in the 2013 presidential convention organized by the Democratic Party. He denied having ambitions

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<sup>3</sup> 'Polling CNN Indonesia: Ahok-Djarot Masih Unggul', <http://www.cnnindonesia.com/politik/20160924095359-32-160800/polling-cnn-indonesia-ahok-djarot-masih-unggul/>, accessed 28 September 2016

<sup>4</sup> 'Ini Alasan Presiden Jokowi Copot Menteri Anies Baswedan', <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/ini-alasan-presiden-jokowi-copot-menteri-anies-baswedan.html>, accessed 28 September 2016.

<sup>5</sup> 'Ada Anggapan Dicapot karena akan Maju Pilpres 2019, ini Jawaban Anies Baswedan', <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/07/28/18003091/ada.anggapan.dicapot.karena.akan.maju.pilpres.2019.ini.jawaban.anies.baswedan>, accessed 28 September 2016.

for 2019, instead suggesting that the president must have had some other reason for his dismissal.<sup>6</sup>

The decision of Gerindra and PKS to endorse him for the 2017 Jakarta election came at the last minute of the registration period. It seemed that the parties had waited for PDI-P to announce their candidate first. Gerindra seemed to be dithering between endorsing their own cadre, Sandiaga Uno, a successful entrepreneur who joined the party in 2015 and who had since been relentlessly campaigning for his candidacy, or joining PDIP to endorse a candidate that was not Ahok. When PDI-P decided to endorse Ahok, Gerindra opted for Anies, who insisted that he would only run as governor candidate, not vice governor. In the end, Gerindra and PKS nominated him as governor and Sandiaga as vice governor.

With PKS as one of the nominating parties, the Anies-Sandiaga campaign may opt to mobilize ethno-religious sentiments. However, the effectiveness of such methods in Jakarta is questionable. On the whole, given the perceived reform-minded qualities of Anies, and depending on how the online campaigning is managed, he has the potential to be the strongest opponent for the incumbent.

Agus Yudhoyono, by contrast, is regarded as a dark horse. SBY's eldest son had a good career in the army, holding the rank of major before he resigned in order to be governor candidate. In his career, he was deployed to many places including Southern Lebanon as United Nations' Peacekeeper in 2006. He also has a solid educational background, having three master's degrees from Nanyang Technology University, Harvard University (John F. Kennedy School of Government) and Webster University.

Many lamented the decision of the Cikeas coalition (PD, United Development Party-PPP, National Awakening Party-PKB, National Mandate Party-PAN) to nominate him, as this meant that he had to resign from the military.<sup>7</sup> However, some political observers believe that the gubernatorial candidacy is a good step for Agus, as advancing in his military career would be difficult as long as the government is in the hands of PDI-P, a long-standing opponent of PD.

His last-minute candidacy came as a surprise, as he has no political experience and the parties opposed to Ahok had been publicly deliberating on other names such as Yusril Ihza Mahendra (former State Secretary under SBY), Rizal Ramli (former Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs under Jokowi) and Sandiaga Uno. In the end, the opposition parties split into two coalitions and while Gerindra and PKS nominated Anies, the remaining four parties endorsed Agus at their meeting at Cikeas. For PD in particular, the nomination of Agus was not uncalculated. The party needs a future leader and Jakarta's election could set the stage for Agus even if he does not win. Depending on the

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<sup>6</sup> 'Anies Baswedan: Bukan karena Kinerja Saya, Presiden pasti Punya Kepentingan lain', <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/07/29/08061211/anies.baswedan.bukan.karena.kinerja.saya.presiden.pasti.punya.kepentingan.lain?page=all>, accessed 28 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> A recent poll by CNN Indonesia indicated that 87% of 1,245 respondents believed that Agus should have stayed in the military. See 'Polling CNN Indonesia: Agus Yudhoyono Lebih Cocok di Militer' <http://www.cnnindonesia.com/politik/20160925125552-32-160975/polling-cnn-indonesia-agus-yudhoyono-lebih-cocok-di-militer/>, accessed 30 September 2016.

management of his campaign, being an unknown figure politically could turn out to be beneficial and Agus could be a dark horse in the 2017 election.

## **OUTLOOK AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

Assuming that the election commission deems all six contenders fit for office, the official campaign will commence on 26 October. Unofficially though, it has already begun. In fact, Ahok's campaign effectively began with the formation of Teman Ahok, the activist group that was established in early 2015 to urge the incumbent run as an independent candidate. Since Ahok's about-face in July 2016, it is clear that his campaign will focus less on the mobilization of grassroots activists and more on the interests of political parties and powerful business actors. However, with a reluctant PDI-P coming on board only at the last minute, friction within the campaign teams seems inevitable, so that Teman Ahok are likely to be called upon later in the campaign to help mobilize young and undecided voters.

The campaigns of Ahok's challengers will be quite different. Both Agus Yudhoyono and Anies Baswedan will rely heavily on the backing from powerful oligarchs to bolster their chances. Anies in particular will seek to mobilize large resources from his running mate Sandiaga Uno, a superrich businessman, and Gerindra patron Prabowo Subianto. At the same time, he will try to highlight his political experience at the highest level as he held a ministerial post in Jokowi's cabinet until the most recent reshuffle.

Agus, by contrast, will bring the politics of dynastic succession to the campaign. With no track record to show, Agus' only trump card is the reputation of his father, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. But whether the mobilization of nostalgic sentiment for a former president will sell in Jakarta is questionable. While political dynasties are common and widespread in Indonesia, the nation's capital with its large number of well-educated voters seems unlikely to endorse a totally inexperienced candidate purely based on the merits and charisma of his father.

More interesting will be the question to what extent Jakarta voters will be prone to the mobilization of ethnic and religious sentiments. Survey data show that there is a significant proportion of Jakarta residents who are reluctant to vote for Ahok for religious reasons.<sup>8</sup> But to what extent the 2017 campaign will seek to exploit that sentiment will depend on who will call the shots in the campaign teams of the two challengers. While the candidates themselves, Agus and Anies, seem unlikely to succumb to the temptation of sectarian politics, the parties that nominated them, as well as their supporters, may have other ideas.

Ultimately, religion will not decide this election. More important will be how effectively the two opposition candidates can expose Ahok's other vulnerabilities and convince voters through innovative campaign strategies.

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<sup>8</sup> Populi Center, *Elit dan pemilih terbelah? Peta pilgub Jakarta yang makin mengerucut*, Media release, 30 August 2016.

Whatever the outcome, the election will almost certainly have ramifications for national politics. Having imposed their will on the nomination process, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prabowo Subianto will all watch the Jakarta poll with eager anticipation because the outcome will directly influence their strategic planning for the 2019 presidential election. Indeed, whoever wins in Jakarta next year might well be expected to find himself in the running for a presidential or, more likely, vice-presidential ticket in 2019.

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