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Indonesia's 2018 Regional Elections

The East Java Gubernatorial Race: Dead Heat but Non-Controversial

By Alexander R Arifianto and Jonathan Chen

Synopsis

While the East Java gubernatorial election remains one of the most significant regional-level leadership races in Indonesia this year, campaigns had been orderly and free of controversy. Only a few hot-button issues that have plagued other races are present within the region.

Commentary

THE EAST Java gubernatorial election can be considered one of the most pivotal races in the 2018 simultaneous local election cycle. The province is the second largest in the country, with a population of 42 million and contributing 14.8 percent to total GDP.

East Java is thus significant both economically and politically, and an important factor amongst candidates positioning themselves for the 2019 Indonesian general election less than a year away. So who are the leading contenders in this race?

The Aspirants

Two candidates are competing to replace Soekarwo, the incumbent governor who has served two consecutive five-year terms. The first one is Saifullah Yusuf, the province's deputy governor. His running mate is Puti Guntur Soekarno, a granddaughter of Indonesia's founding president Soekarno.

They are backed by a coalition of parties, including the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) of former president Megawati Soekarnoputri, the National Awakening Party (PKB) affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) of Prabowo Subianto and the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

The second one is Khofifah Indar Parawansa, the former minister of Social Affairs under President Joko Widodo. Her running mate is Emil Dardak, the 34-year old former regent of Trenggalek, a rural region in the southern part of the province. The pair is supported by a coalition consisting of the once-ruling Golkar Party, the Democrat Party (PD) of former president Yudhoyono, and the National Mandate Party (PAN) among others.

Popular support for the Saifullah/Puti pair is largely based on personal and familial ties. Saifullah is the grandson of Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of NU, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation. Hence, he seeks support largely from NU clerics and Muslims who affiliated themselves with NU, whose membership is approximately two-thirds of the East Java population. Madam Puti and the PDI-P are banking on her family lineage stemming from the Soekarno name to win electoral support in the province.

Meanwhile, the Khofifah/Emil pair generally tends towards emphasising a combination of professional image and Islamic credentials. Madam Khofifah uses her positions as a long-time Head of Muslimat – NU's women's wing – to seek support from female Muslim voters. Emil, on his part, touts his business background and experience as Trenggalek regent from 2014 to 2018, during which period he won national recognition as one of the best local executives in Indonesia.

National & Regional Trends

One important insight we gathered from our research in East Java is that national-level political patterns and constellations may not have a direct effect on regional-level elections, given the nature of local politics and rivalries between political parties within similar coalitions.

In East Java, while the Saifullah Yusuf/Puti Guntur Soekarno is officially supported by Gerindra, representatives of the party we spoke to made it clear the party only supports Saifullah as its nominee as East Java governor. It does not support Madam Puti's appointment to be his running mate, given that she comes from PDI-P.

As such the party does not spend much time and resources in their gubernatorial campaigns, preferring to focus on next year's presidential election instead. Hence, even though both Gerindra and PDI-P are formally in the same gubernatorial coalition, communication between the two rivals are few and far between.

A similar phenomenon can also be seen in the Khofifah Indah Parawansa/Emil Dardak campaign. The Democrat Party seems not to devote much resources to the campaign, in contrast to the Golkar Party, the pair's chief sponsor. It seems that the former only supports them because it wants to retain its status as the second largest faction in the East Java legislature. Much of the Democrats' resources are devoted to the 2019 regional legislative election, not to the gubernatorial election itself.

Identity and Business-Politics Relations

Unlike other local races, identity politics do not play a big role in the East Java gubernatorial election. Since both Saifullah and Khofifah are senior cadres of NU, no ethno-religious issues are expressed during the campaign as NU generally promotes a moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam.

The influence of conservative Muslim organisations like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is relatively minimal in this election. Muslim-based parties like PKS, PAN, and the Crescent and Star Party (PBB) tend to focus their attention on the national legislative and presidential elections rather than the gubernatorial race.

Regarding the relationship between business and politics, our research has shown that business groups are pragmatic and prefer a candidate who supports investment-friendly policies in East Java province, something that Soekarwo – the outgoing governor – had provided during his decade-long tenure as the province's chief executive. However, neither candidates have provided significant outreach to business groups or demonstrate their commitment towards investment-friendly policies.

It can thus be seen that most business groups are adopting a 'wait-and-see' approach and are watching closely for signs from several business conglomerates like property developers Ciputra and Pakuwon Jati Groups, and regional manufacturers like Maspion Group, for cues on which candidate they would support in this election.

Non-controversial Race

The East Java gubernatorial race is considered to be one of the most significant electoral races among this year's regional executive elections due to its population size and political impact. However, the campaign itself is free from controversy, and in fact, very orderly as most parties and interest groups are devoting their resources toward the 2019 general election.

There are minor contentions such as accusations from the Khofifah/Emir campaign that local civil servants are implicitly backing the Saifullah/Puti campaign, even though they were supposed to be neutral in the race. However, these are a far cry from the controversies that had surrounded the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017.

A recent survey by the large-circulating Kompas daily showed the Khofifah/Emir pair slightly ahead of Saifullah/Puti, with a margin of 48 to 45 percent. The closeness of the margin indicates that the two candidates are in a dead heat, as none of the candidates can distinguish themselves as a clear alternative to their opponent.

Alexander R Arifianto PhD is a Research Fellow and Jonathan Chen is an Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This is part of a series on Indonesia's simultaneous regional elections.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg