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From an Underdog to a Frontrunner: Understanding Prabowo's Polls Surge

Alexander R. Arifianto

SYNOPSIS

*Prabowo Subianto's presidential candidacy has been boosted by several recent opinion surveys that show him as the frontrunner over Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan. The surge, according to **ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO**, is due to his rivals' strategic miscalculations, which have led to Prabowo increasingly being considered a safe, middle ground choice by the Indonesian political establishment and regular voters alike.*

COMMENTARY

Over the past month or so, Prabowo Subianto's presidential candidacy has been boosted by several recent public opinion surveys indicating that he is leading Indonesia's presidential race.

For instance, a recent survey by *Kompas* – Indonesia's leading newspaper – indicates that the defence minister has the support of [24.5% of likely voters](#), followed by the other two prospective candidates, respectively Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo (22.8%) and former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan (13.6%). A survey published on 4 June 2023 by Indikator Politik – one of the country's more reliable survey companies – also puts Prabowo in the lead with [38%](#), ahead of Ganjar (34%) and Anies (19%).

When Prabowo declared his candidacy last year, most analysts considered him the candidate least likely to win the contest due to [his age](#) and his two previous failed

presidential bids against incumbent president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo in 2014 and 2019. Why then is Prabowo currently leading in the polls?

The answer lies in the fact that Prabowo seems to benefit from the strategic miscalculations of both his opponents, who misread the responses from both the political establishment and the general public once their strategies were enacted.

Ganjar Considered “Too Close” to Megawati

Specifically, Ganjar miscalculated by portraying himself as a loyal cadre of the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP), while Anies miscalculated by launching a strategy calling for political change, not realising that the majority of the Indonesian electorate prefer continuity.

Similar to Jokowi’s initial campaign in 2014, Ganjar’s campaign roll-out was largely set up as a way for him to highlight his loyalty to PDIP and to its leader, former president Megawati Soekarnoputri. Ganjar undertook this approach notwithstanding Megawati’s decision [to postpone the formal announcement](#) of his appointment as PDIP’s presidential candidate for more than six months, denying him the status of an early frontrunner.

Ganjar also remained loyal to the PDIP party line even though the party often takes up positions that are not popular with the general public. One such position is PDIP’s decision in March 2023 [objecting to Israel’s participation](#) in the U-20 Football World Cup tournament in Indonesia that was scheduled for May–June 2023. He followed the rest of PDIP politicians in supporting the party’s stand, which eventually led to the tournament’s cancellation by FIFA. Thereafter, Ganjar’s popularity took a hit, especially among Indonesia’s Gen-Z football fans.

Ganjar’s loyalty to Megawati also created concerns among members of Jokowi’s political coalition who are not from PDIP. Over the past few months, rumours emerged that Megawati would exercise an exclusive right [to pick Ganjar’s cabinet appointments](#), which was interpreted as a sign that, unlike Jokowi, who balanced his cabinet appointments with politicians from PDIP, other political parties and independents, Ganjar’s cabinet was likely to be dominated by PDIP personnel.

After these rumours became widespread, leaders from other members of Jokowi’s coalition – including [Airlangga Hartarto](#), chair of Golkar party, and [Zulkifli Hasan](#) of the National Mandate Party (PAN) – began to hold meetings with Prabowo, seemingly distancing themselves from Ganjar and indicating their displeasure over Megawati’s prominent behind-the-scenes role in the latter’s campaign.

Several groups of “independent volunteers” who had played a crucial role in ensuring Jokowi’s electoral victories in 2014 and 2019 [have endorsed Prabowo’s candidacy](#). These include a “volunteer” group led by [Gibran Rakabuming](#) – Jokowi’s eldest son and current Solo mayor – which seems to indicate the president’s tacit endorsement of Prabowo.

Hence, Ganjar’s strategy of relying on Megawati’s personal endorsement and PDIP’s political machinery has seemingly backfired, resulting in many non-PDIP politicians

viewing Prabowo – instead of Ganjar – as the presidential candidate who would be more willing to accommodate their interests.

Anies Misreads Voters' Mood

Anies Baswedan has also made miscalculations in his strategy, which have led him to underperform against the other two candidates in recent polls. His campaign's major miscalculation is to use the theme of political change as his campaign tagline – primarily indicated in the naming of his coalition as a [“change coalition”](#) (*koalisi perubahan*). In addition, Anies's op-ed published by *Kompas Daily* on 19 February 2023, which set his campaign's [mission statement](#), indicated that he rejects “blind obedience” towards the leader, advocates a “democratic strengthening” agenda, and would promote policies for “economic equality” to improve the welfare of poor Indonesians who have not benefited from economic growth over the past decade.

These statements are implicit criticisms of President Jokowi, who has been accused by some of encouraging policies that [promote Indonesia's “democratic decline”](#) during his near-decade-long rule and a [developmentalist economic policy](#) that has left poor Indonesians falling behind. In essence, Anies is signalling that his agenda of political and economic reforms would be noticeably different from Jokowi's.

What Anies and his campaign team had not foreseen, however, is that the majority of the Indonesian electorate overwhelmingly approve Jokowi's policies, including [his infrastructure-building policy](#) and his policy of [constructing Nusantara](#), the nation's new capital.

An April 2023 poll by Saiful Mujani Research and Consultancy (SMRC) indicates that the president enjoys [82% approval](#) from prospective voters – his highest approval rating ever. This indicates that the majority of the Indonesian electorate endorse Jokowi and his policy agenda and do not seem keen to endorse presidential candidates who advocate major political change like the one that Anies is promoting.

The only two political parties that express misgivings regarding Jokowi's policies and support Anies as an alternative are the nationalist-leaning [Democratic Party](#) of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the Islamist [Prosperous Justice Party \(PKS\)](#). Altogether both comprise only [16%](#) of the seats in Indonesia's House of Representatives (DPR). Hence, only a small percentage of Indonesians seek major change from the Jokowi era, and candidates perceived to be close to Jokowi – Ganjar and Prabowo – would benefit from his high approval rating.

Hence, Prabowo seems to benefit the most from the strategic miscalculations of his opponents. He has been receiving endorsement from both [nationalist politicians](#) who are concerned regarding Ganjar's close ties to Megawati and PDIP and [Islamist politicians](#) who are not confident about Anies's electoral prospects, given his low approval rating in the polls.



Although most analysts had considered Prabowo Subianto as the candidate least likely to win when he declared his candidacy last year, Prabowo is currently leading in the polls as he seems to have benefitted from his political opponents' strategic miscalculations. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Prabowo Seen As a Safe, Middle Ground Choice

Prabowo is increasingly perceived as a safe, middle ground choice by both the political establishment and voters who seek continuity over change. However, they also prefer that Megawati and PDIP should not have too much influence over the political appointments and policies to be enacted by Jokowi's successor.

Prabowo's various missteps have not affected his approval rating in the polls. These include his proposal announced during last June's Shangri-La Dialogue [to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict](#), which [came under severe criticism](#) from many foreign policy analysts. The proposal was essentially an effort by Prabowo and his team to bolster his stature domestically as an international statesman rather than a serious proposal to end the conflict.

There are eight months left until the first round of polls, scheduled for 14 February 2024. In the intervening months, there will be numerous tosses and turns that could affect each candidate's electability. Nonetheless, at this time, Prabowo has a greater chance of winning the presidency than in the previous two elections, given that his middle ground status has earned him support from both established politicians and the electorate alike.

Alexander R. Arifianto is a Senior Fellow in the Indonesia Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).