Islamists fail to sway regional Indonesian elections

Tom Allard | June 28, 2018

JAKARTA (Reuters) - A resounding win by an Indonesian mayor targeted by some hardline Muslims over the construction of a church highlighted a broader failure by Islamists to influence regional and local elections in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country.

Bekasi mayor candidate Rahmat Effendi (R) accompanied by his wife Gunarti (L) pose for a photograph after voting in Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia June 27, 2018 in this photo taken by Antara Foto. Picture taken June 27, 2018. Antara Foto/Suwandy/via REUTERS

Rahmat Effendi, the mayor of Bekasi, a city of 2.7 million on the fringes of the capital Jakarta, is on course to be re-elected after winning about 68 per cent of the vote in Wednesday's elections based on unofficial quick counts.

Effendi, a Muslim, faced sustained criticism from hardliners for approving the building of the Santa Clara church in the staunchly Muslim city after 17 years of rebuffs by local authorities.

Tensions boiled over last year when riot police used tear gas to subdue protesters attacking the site where the church was being built. The mayor was also lambasted by prominent clerics and pilloried in social media posts falsely claiming he planned to allow hundreds more churches.

His victory, and exit polling of voters, showed that the religious and ethnic divisions that characterized last year's race for Jakarta governor were largely absent in elections for 171 city mayors, regents and provincial governors, said pollster Djayadi Hanan.

"There was an effort to use identity politics, especially Islamism, as an issue in this election. It didn't work," said Djayadi, executive director of Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC).

Earlier this year, senior government officials warned of a "black campaign" to stoke sectarianism in Indonesia's most populous province, West Java, amid a spate of mysterious attacks on clerics, mosques and schools.

A woman tends to her field behind the Santa Clara church, still under construction, in Bekasi, near Jakarta, Indonesia, June 28, 2018. REUTERS/Willy Kurniawan

The incidents were inflamed by a co-ordinated social media campaign depicting Islam as under attack and blaming the moderate President Joko Widodo and his political allies.

Ridwan Kamil, a moderate Muslim and U.S.-trained architect perceived as sympathetic to Widodo, said in a interview ahead of the polls that rivals had accused him of not being "Islamic enough". He still prevailed in the contest for West Java governor according to quick counts, albeit by a slender margin.

POLICY TRUMPS RELIGION

A common denominator of the unrest in Bekasi and West Java was the involvement of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the Islamist group that spearheaded the ouster of former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama last year.

Known as 212, the movement led by the FPI mobilized hundreds of thousands on to the streets of Indonesia's capital amid accusations the ethnic Chinese, Christian Purnama had insulted Islam. Purnama, previously hugely popular, was defeated and later jailed.

FPI members participated in the riots in Bekasi, according to media reports. Reuters revealed in March that FPI cadres concocted a viral video falsely accusing a vagrant of attacking an Islamic boarding school in West Java.

"The FPI and 212 were not influential during the election campaign," said Deka Anwar, a researcher at the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict.

Provisional analysis of exit polling by SMRC found more voters cast their ballots on policies, rather than religion or ethnicity. This favored incumbents and candidates with policy achievements in previous posts, Djayadi said.

Religious affiliation appeared to have played a role in North Sumatra, though. SMRC exit polling suggested Purnama's former deputy, Djarot Saiful Hidayat, got only 15 per cent of the Muslim vote. Djarot is a Muslim but his running mate was a Christian.

Analysts cautioned about interpreting the regional elections as a predictor of the campaign for president in April.

Eurasia Group director Peter Mumford said he expected "identity politics to be used more aggressively" against Widodo as his opponents "paint him as insufficiently Muslim and too pro-minority".

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