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Indonesia's 2019 Election: Good News, Warning Signs, and Implications for the United States

A.J. Nolte | April 25, 2019

Last week, Indonesia went to the polls for what, as of this writing, appears to have been a free, fair, and competitive election won by incumbent President Joko Widodo, more popularly known as Jokowi. Undoubtedly, Jokowi's win is good news for both Indonesia and the United States and will be welcomed by most of Indonesia's political elites, even those who supported Jokowi's

rival, Prabowo Subianto. Nevertheless, there are some warning signs of turbulence ahead for the world's largest Muslim-majority country, and one of the few Muslim-majority democracies that seems to be undergoing a genuine process of consolidation. In particular, a careful examination of the electoral coalitions assembled by Jokowi and Prabowo indicates the possibility that Indonesia may be undergoing a kind of electoral ideological sorting into three camps, whose differing views on the relationship between Islam and the state will have a huge impact on the country moving forward.

As to why Jokowi's reelection is good news for both Indonesia and the United States, I would mostly defer to Paul Marshall's excellent analysis here at *Providence*. I also concur with Marshall's concerns about Prabowo's tilt toward Islamic populism. In this context, it's worth remembering that Prabowo played a prominent role in his father-in-law Suharto's embrace of political Islam in the late 80s and early 90s, and was one of the participants in his highly publicized 1990 pilgrimage to Mecca. At a minimum, Prabowo has been extremely comfortable with the embrace of Islamic populism for tactical purposes. The fact that he lost, and is unlikely to get an uncontested third try at the presidency, is good news for those concerned about Islamic populism's impact on Indonesia. When combined with the economic uptick Indonesia has seen in light of Jokowi's reelection and the fact that most of Indonesia's major political figures, who all see themselves as future presidential contenders, are likely happy to see Jokowi reelected whatever their public comments or allegiances during the campaign, it's easy to see why Jokowi's win is being greeted with palpable relief in so many quarters.

Yet, what ought to concern Indonesia watchers most about this election are the respective electoral coalitions of Jokowi and Prabowo. According to a recent report in the *Asia Times*, Jokowi's winning coalition was based almost entirely on support from areas of East and Central Java dominated by the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a narrow win in Jakarta, and overwhelming support from religious minorities, particularly Christians and Hindus, in the out-islands. By contrast, Prabowo won 18 of Indonesia's 34 provinces, including West Java, home of hardline conservative Islamic groups in the past such as Persatuan Islam and the rebel group Darul Islam, as well as most of the non-Javanese provinces with Muslim minorities. In past elections, this level of ideological and religious demographic polarization was absent, largely due to the coalitional, transactional, and personalistic nature of Indonesian democracy. Thus, it is possible that we are seeing the beginning of a more permanent trend toward demographic and ideological electoral sorting. If so, conflicts over religion's role in Indonesia, particularly that of Islam, will only grow in Jokowi's second term.

At first glance, the ideological and demographic sorting we've seen in 2018 looks like a contest between secularists and Islamists. However, if we compare Jokowi and Prabowo's electoral coalitions to the two men's respective coalitions in 2014, what appears to be happening is a tripartite division in Indonesia. On one hand, committed secularists—located in Jakarta among religious minorities and, to a degree, in the business and political elites—have been pretty firmly behind Jokowi. While he seems to have lost some

support in Jakarta in 2019 relative to 2014, Jokowi made up for it with huge gains among religious minorities.

Second, those committed to a rigid application of political Islam in Indonesia were solidly behind Prabowo. These tend to be two groups: West Javanese, whose version of Islam is influenced by Wahhabi teachings brought back to Indonesia from Mecca, and Malay Muslims from the so-called "out-islands," who have generally been somewhat more rigid in their orthodoxy than their Javanese counterparts for centuries. Traditionally, these voters have scattered their votes among a number of different parties and individuals. Thus, the seeming consolidation of this vote behind Prabowo in this election is an ominous trend worth watching.

The third group, East and Central Javanese voters, will likely prove most decisive going forward. Voters in East and Central Java swung from splitting their votes between Jokowi and Prabowo in 2014 to overwhelmingly supporting Jokowi in 2019, and this shift more than offset Jokowi's losses among disaffected Jakarta secularists and Muslims from West Java and the out-islands. Represented by Nahdlatul Ulama, these voters tend to be fairly devout Muslims but follow a more traditional version of the faith common in East and Central Java. They are, on one hand, wary that secularists will push too far in excluding Islam from public life, and are skeptical of many aspects of the liberal project that they find overly Western. Yet, on the other hand, they are very leery of any attempt by those who favor an Islamic state to impose some form of national Shari'a law. In fact, Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in 1926 precisely to resist the importation of what its founders considered to be more Middle Eastern-looking forms of Islam into Indonesia. There's also a marked difference between East Javanese Islam and it's West Javanese and out-island counterparts in terms of their views of religious minorities. For example, NU is also decidedly less hostile to Christianity than other Indonesian Muslim organizations, as scholar Jeremy Menchik documented in his 2017 book Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism. At the same time, he found that the West Java-based Persatuan Islam, which was a precursor organization to today's West Javanese conservatives, was by far the least tolerant.

I suspect these NU-oriented voters in East and Central Java probably backed Jokowi over Prabowo in 2019 for two reasons. First, Jokowi's selection of an Islamic cleric with NU ties as his vice president was likely decisive. Jokowi was not so assiduous in courting NU in the 2014 election or early in his term, which may have been part of the reason his political ally Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (BTP, formerly "Ahok"), a Christian and former Jakarta governor, did not receive as much top-cover from NU as he might have otherwise. Second, it's possible some leaders within NU were becoming concerned about the possibility of a government that might actually implement an Islamic populist vision for Indonesia. For the nearly 100-year-old organization founded to preserve Indonesia's unique, local Islam, that would be far from a desirable outcome.

The implication then is that these Javanese voters linked to NU will be the key swing demographic group in Indonesia's elections moving forward. On balance, this is a mixed blessing in terms of religious freedom and harmony moving forward. Fortunately, NU and its supporters are not likely to welcome any move that would, for example, make Indonesia an Islamic state, implement Shari'a universally, or depart too far from the

nation's ideological framework, known as Pancasila. Yet they may be cautious about a serious role-back of Shari'a legislation in more conservative Islamic areas, and will be very sensitive to any public actions that are seen as too overtly un-Islamic.

There is little the US can do directly to affect these internal dynamics in Indonesia. Still, there are a few small, public diplomacy steps American officials could take. First, the US should strongly express its support for Jokowi as a responsible partner both in the region and the Muslim world. Saying a few nice, but diplomatically phrased, things about the value of Indonesia's distinctive form of Islam also couldn't hurt. Second, as odd as it may seem, encouraging reform in Saudi Arabia could actually help the situation in Indonesia. Despite the vast distance that separates them, the Indonesian archipelago has historically been one of the regions that sends the highest number of pilgrims to Mecca, and the teachings brought back from the Hajj are taken very seriously. Anything that decreases the influence of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia, then, may well have positive and long-lasting effects in Indonesia. From a US perspective, this means that encouraging figures within Saudi Arabia who are seeking those reforms, insofar as we can, is in our interest. Third, it might behoove the State Department and other US agencies, when interacting with Muslim religious leaders at a high level, to be sure to include representatives of NU. Not only is the NU Indonesia's largest Muslim organization and a key domestic actor, but it also represents one of the few genuinely influential, well-organized, and politically powerful voices of moderate Islam in a Muslim-majority country. While our ability to directly influence public opinion and, even more so, religious practice in the Muslim world remains limited, it is certainly in our interests to see groups like Nahdlatul Ulama both grow stronger and, at the same time, embrace a robust view of religious freedom. Finally and most critically, the United States must develop a body of foreign policy practitioners familiar not only with Islam in the abstract but also with its concrete, local variations in places like Indonesia. However positive Jokowi's electoral victory may be, the tide of Islamic populism has probably not reached its high-water mark, either in Indonesia or globally. Given that reality, the ability to distinguish between local variants of Islam and find those that might not be intrinsically hostile will be of incalculable benefit. This is true not only for the US as a whole, but particularly for those Christians concerned with the fate and freedom of our co-religionists living in Muslim-majority countries.

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