

POLITICS

Pilkada 2024: Cawe-Cawe All the Way?

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Outgoing and incoming presidents during the latter's inauguration in October 2024. Prabowo's victory owed much to support from Jokowi. Credit: CNN Indonesia/AFP/Bay Ismoyo

Part of an ongoing article series on Indonesia's regional elections 2024.

Bad Omens

Just days away, Indonesian voters will once again exercise their democratic rights by directly voting for regional heads candidates for various levels of administrations (provinces, regencies and cities). The Simultaneous Regional Head Elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Serentak – Pilkada*) will be held on 27 November 2024 to elect 37 governors and 508 mayors/regents.

Pilkada, which was introduced in the post-1998 decentralization era, gives ways for regional figures to rise above the ranks in their respective “fiefdoms”.

These regional heads – governors, regents and mayors – hold highly strategic positions that can make or break central government's policies and programs in the regions. This is because these regional heads may have personal and political interests that may differ from the central government's targets and directives.

Against this backdrop, there have been several attempts during President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo's administration (2014-2024) to overturn the mechanism from direct elections to parliamentary-appointed regional heads.

The notion about rampant political interference in Pilkada, in addition to possible weakening of civil oversight over its process, has been put forward since as early as July 2023, if not before.

One such interference was the fact that half of regional head offices were occupied by interim personnel appointed through questionable process after the term of previously elected leaders expired. Most of these individuals used to hold government offices or hail from the military or the police.

Furthermore, party elites have tried to revert the direct election process back to political appointment by parliament, a practice that was last seen in Soeharto's era. To them, direct elections are seen as creating massive political noise, expensive (thus encouraging corruption) and contradicting Pancasila, especially the fourth point, which stipulates "Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising *out of deliberations among representatives*." For the upcoming Pilkada, at least, the voting process will still be conducted directly.

Other major events have also taken place that influence this year's Pilkada, such as the Constitutional Court's (MK) ruling that allowed stronger competitions among candidates and political parties. The House of Representatives (DPR) tried to reverse this ruling and thus instigated a constitutional crisis a few months ago, though thanks to citizens' intervention, the DPR called off this process.

With all of these under consideration, we need to examine what the current situation looks like and project some potential trajectories.

"Higher" Intervention

Presidential meddling was obvious in the past presidential election process and current Pilkada discourses tend to highlight its potential return.

The Javanese term *cawe-cawe* (meddling) has gained popularity ever since Jokowi announced his intention to meddle in the contest. As if to double down on this, Jokowi also mobilized state apparatus and programs to influence the outcome, such as "stalking" Ganjar Pranowo's campaign trail, increasing salaries for civil servants and massively distributing cash aid just weeks ahead of the voting.

In return, Prabowo has reciprocated Jokowi's support. He has retained 17 of Jokowi's ministers as well as numerous officials in senior-level positions.

He has also accommodated some of Jokowi's preferred candidates to run in strategic provinces. These include North Sumatra, where Jokowi's son-in-law Bobby Nasution is running for a gubernatorial position. In Central Java, Jokowi's close aide Ahmad Luthfi is also gunning for a similar position. This is despite Prabowo's party, *Gerakan Indonesia Raya* (Gerindra), having initially earmarked one of its key figures, Sudaryono, to run as the party's gubernatorial candidate.

These reciprocities suggest that the upcoming Pilkada is likely to mirror the presidential election, in which the central government – i.e. Prabowo instead of Jokowi now – would mobilize state apparatus and show support to help the prospects of certain candidates.

Those that support such intervention justify it on the basis of the need to ensure a strong alignment between the central and regional governments, an adage that has become a central incantation in every regional campaign cycle to date. The subject has also been a key theme for public debate sessions among candidates.

There is a possibility that the current administration may emulate Jokowi's "formula", such as through the weaponization of law enforcers against candidates outside of Prabowo's camp.

The modus operandi is relatively simple: Law enforcers will approach regional influential figures, civil servants and even village heads to demand their support for Prabowo's or Jokowi's preferred candidates. If they are unwilling to do so, they must remain neutral, i.e. not voicing out support for other contenders. Failure to do so may plunge them into legal quagmire through all kinds of lawsuits.

Prabowo has also followed Jokowi's steps by showing his public support for his favored candidates. This is seen most recently in his public support for the Ahmad Luthfi-Taj Yasin Maimoen pair in the Central Java contest.

As mentioned before, Luthfi is a figure close to Jokowi. His candidacy was endorsed by Jokowi himself, having served as chief of Surakarta Police during Jokowi's first term and as chief of Central Java Police during his second.

Furthermore, Prabowo also gave blessing to his Chief of Staff A.M. Putranto to join Luthfi-Yasin's campaign team, further cemented his support for the pair.

Nonetheless, Prabowo may be more hesitant to mobilize state resources and distribute social aid programs. As a new president, he is also pressured to deliver his ambitious projects, such as the free meal programs, school renovation, hospital development and tuberculosis eradication. Next year's state revenue is projected to stand at Rp3,000 trillion (US\$190 billion), but Prabowo's administration needs to figure out ways to pay for more than Rp1,000 trillion (US\$63.5 billion) in state debt and interest in 2025.

An Ultimate Test

The upcoming Pilkada is key for Prabowo for several reasons.

First, it serves as the first test for the Jokowi-Prabowo tango and remains in question how long the former's influence over the latter would last. Second, Pilkada will test the ability of Prabowo's *Koalisi Indonesia Maju* (the Onward Indonesia Coalition – KIM) to work together in securing votes and victories. Whether parties would prioritise their own needs over the coalition's common goal will remain to be seen. Third, Pilkada's outcome will determine whether Prabowo would have a grasp over strategic regions during his rule.

These are important points should he decide to run for a second term in 2029. If he could have a firm footing in highly strategic provinces such as Banten, Jakarta, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi as well as West, Central and East Javas, Prabowo's chance at getting re-elected would be higher. This is because Prabowo would then be able to mobilize political machinery in these regions to rally support, much akin to what Jokowi did to deliver Prabowo to victory in the presidential election.

Failure to dominate these strategic provinces would result in two negative outcomes.

Firstly, in the short term, it could lower Prabowo's legitimacy in the eyes of his allies. As a president, he would be expected to bring his favored candidates to victories—otherwise he would just be viewed as a powerless president.

Secondly, it would lower Prabowo's chance at winning the 2029 presidential election.

Meanwhile, questions have been raised over the effectiveness of KIM-led campaigns for several candidates.

In Jakarta, the KIM-backed pair Ridwan Kamil-Suswono is starting to go out of steam. Several polls showed that the pair's electability has lost traction against the main contender, Pramono Anung-Rano Karno, who are supported by *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* (PDI-P).

In Central Java, Prabowo's public support for Luthfi came at a time when the gap between Luthfi-Yasin and Andika Perkasa-Hendrar Prihadi (the PDI-P's candidates) was narrowing.

In Banten, the KIM-backed pair, Andra Soni-Dimyati Natakusumah, struggle to compete against incumbent governor Airin Rachmi Diany, who is backed by the PDI-P and *Golongan Karya*.

All of these concerning signals may push Prabowo's team to stage more intervention in the last days of the Pilkada process.

Conclusion

Prabowo entered his office with a high approval rating but is under pressure to turn Pilkada's outcome in his favour. He might replicate Jokowi's meddling methods through the mobilization of state apparatus, the

weaponization of law and public support of favored candidates. Institutional mobilization might become the norm after this, thanks to a strong precedent set by Jokowi.

If he also practices Jokowi's *cawe-cawe* style, in the near term, it might lower the approval rating not only towards his office, but also all of the government's institutions. It might also destroy the very concept of political competition, shatter the checks and balances system and ultimately diminish the meaning of democracy. In the end, it all comes down to whether Prabowo would be willing to balance his political pragmatism with adherence to democratic principles. It seems that Indonesia still has long and winding roads ahead to achieve a robust democracy.

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