Hanging on by a ‘sin’ and a prayer

CHONG WU LING - 21 FEB, 2017

In the 2010 Medan mayoral election Chinese contestant Sofyan Tan was the victim of a concerted campaign against him based on religious identity. Here’s what that election can tell us about what to expect in the second round of voting for Jakarta’s governor, and why Ahok should brace for more racial and religious politics.

Featuring charges of blasphemy, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election has been a bitterly contested and controversial ballot laden with a heavy dose of religious and racial politics. Not only is the vote now headed to another round, but things could only get more intense.

According to quick count results released by Kompas, the major Indonesian-language newspaper, the incumbent pair Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, aka Ahok (钟万学) and Djarot Saiful Hidayat lead the race with 42.87 per cent of the total votes, followed closely by former education minister Anies Baswedan and his running mate Sandiaga Uno with 39.76 per cent. The son of former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and his running mate Sylviana Murni, managed to grab only 17.37 per cent of votes. A second round of the race will be needed since none of the pairs obtained more than 50 per cent of the votes.

The quick count election results indicate two very important things. First, the lesser votes that Agus and Sylviana received compared to their rivals clearly shows that the influence of SBY has declined significantly since he stepped down. It also shows that Susilo’s party, the Democratic Party (PD- Partai Demokrat) is not as influential as it was during Susilo’s presidency. Now the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P- Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan), which the current president Jokowi is affiliated with and which supports the Ahok-Djarot pair, and the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Partai Gerinda– Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya) led by ex-General Prabowo Subianto that supports the Anies-Sandiaga pair, are much more significant.
Second, the results also indicate that it will be very tough for the Ahok-Djarot pair to get elected in the second round of the race since it is highly possible that those who voted for the Agus-Sylviana pair will now support the Anies-Baswedan pair instead. It could be argued that those voters who supported Agus-Sylviana were most likely to be anti-Ahok.

In addition, it would also be difficult for the Ahok-Djarot pair to gain the support of Jakarta’s evicted slum dwellers. They used to live along the riverbanks of the city but were forcibly evicted by the incumbent provincial government as part of efforts to overcome frequent flooding. Although most of the residents were later relocated to semi-state low-cost apartments at the outskirts of the city, they had to start paying a monthly rental fee of 300,000 Rupiah (US$23.15) after living there for three months. As the Jakarta Globe reported, at one of the low-cost apartment residential areas, most voters cast a ballot for either Anies-Sandiaga or Agus-Sylviana. It clearly indicates deep resentment among the residents towards Ahok.

So what can we expect next? An election held seven years ago and some 1,400 kilometres away might shed some light.

The second round of Jakarta’s governor race will probably see the escalation of communal tension and the continued increased emphasis on religious identity, similar to what happened during the second round of Medan’s mayoral election in 2010. At that time, Sofyan Tan aka Tan Kim Yang (陈金扬), the only ethnic Chinese mayoral candidate, gained the second highest votes by defeating eight other candidates in the first round of the race. He and the incumbent who obtained the highest votes then entered the second round.

Tan was a Buddhist, and his non-Muslim background became the target of attack for the incumbent’s camp, who undermined Tan’s legitimacy as a mayoral candidate by manipulating religious identity. They launched a concerted campaign urging Muslim voters to not support Tan, claiming that it was against the teachings of Islam to vote for a non-Muslim. Many conservative Muslim voters were influenced by such propaganda and decided not to vote for Tan. Moreover, prior to the polling day of the second round, many local Chinese voters were intimidated by rumours and mobile phone text messages that warned if Tan was elected, anti-Chinese riots would break out in the city. Many Chinese were frightened and decided not to vote for Tan on polling day, or not vote at all.
In addition, it was also alleged that there were several violations and irregularities committed by the incumbent's camp, who were mainly bureaucrats in Medan's local government. They instructed all kecamatan (district) and kelurahan (village) heads to ensure victory for the incumbent in their areas. Consequently, many voters in the kecamatan where Tan and his running mate received most votes in the first round were de-listed and could not vote in the second round. Tan and his running mate lost to the incumbent in the second round of the election.

The manipulation of religious identity by Ahok's opponents will be much more rampant in the second round of Jakarta's vote for governor since Ahok has been charged with blasphemy over his comments about the Quran.

Moreover, according to reports on Facebook and YouTube, it was alleged that many voters in some areas with a majority Chinese community in Jakarta could not vote because there was a shortage of voting forms. If these allegations are true, it shows that the violations and irregularities during the polling process were so rampant that Ahok's campaign team was not able to monitor and prevent them — even though Ahok is the incumbent candidate.

What happened to Ahok prior to and during this gubernatorial election also affirms the argument that I have made previously on New Mandala — that it is relatively easier for ethnic Chinese Indonesians to get elected as national legislators than as regional or local government heads who have relatively greater power compared to their national counterparts.

This election can be seen as a test of Indonesia's ethnic and religious tolerance as well as democracy. If Ahok loses the race, it will prompt political Islamists to continue manipulating religious identity for their political interests at the expense of religious tolerance. Furthermore, Indonesian political parties might be less likely to nominate candidates from ethnic and religious minority groups to contest regional or local government elections.

If the Ahok-Djarot pair wants to get elected, they must work very hard to maintain the support of those who voted for them in the first round and also to get the support of the evicted slum dwellers who supported their rivals in the first round. Their campaign team must also put in more efforts in monitoring the polling process to prevent any violations and irregularities.
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