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Ganjar Pranowo's Quest: Resisting Islamist Civilizational Populism in Indonesia

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

Ganjar Pranowo stands as a pivotal figure within technocratic populism, anticipated to advocate for the people's volonté générale and counter the sway of Islamist civilisational populism within Indonesia. The impending 2024 election positions him in a direct contest against Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto, both politicians who garnered support from Islamist populist factions in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial and 2019 presidential elections, respectively. Perceptions of Ganjar's political stance vary, with some viewing him as a populist figure. However, in essence, he embodies the antithesis of populism, distinct from narratives and rhetoric persistently leveraging Islamism for political gain. This article seeks to delve into Ganjar's political prospects in the upcoming 2024 election, shedding light on his role in confronting rivals and their supporters entrenched in Islamist populism. While widely seen as the most compelling figure for upholding the continuity of a vibrant democracy, his emergence also sparks inquiries into the trajectory of substantive democratic progress within the nation.

Introduction

Dan Slater, an American political scientist, contends that Indonesia's "vibrant democracy" stands a better chance of continuity under the continued leadership style of Jokowi (Slater, 2023). Among the limited pool of potential presidential candidates, Ganjar Pranowo emerges as a leading contender, viewed as the most fitting successor to Jokowi. Pranowo's potential lies in his ability to potentially surpass other candidates, notably Anies Baswedan, who enjoys support from an Islamist "civilisational populist" (Yilmaz et al., 2022) group (Bachtiar, 2023), and Prabowo, classified as a chauvinist populist (Mietzner, 2020).

However, the upcoming 2024 political contest presents an unexpected turn as Jokowi aligns himself with Prabowo, positioning his eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming, as the vice-presidential candidate within Prabowo's political coalition. This move poses a significant challenge to Ganjar's standing, pitting him against both his political mentor and a potent political force. It seems plausible that Jokowi, recognizing that no one can precisely fill his leadership role, seeks to extend his influence through his son, whom he can effectively oversee.

Indonesia, in its ongoing pursuit of economic development and democratization, appears to lean towards an authoritarian trajectory (Power, 2018) following two decades of democratization since the 1998 political reform. Within this landscape, Jokowi's inner circle comprises bureaucrats who echo the political ethos of the New Order era. This group notably includes Prabowo, serving as the Minister of Defense, and Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, holding the position of Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Affairs in Indonesia. Their influence transcends their designated roles due to their adeptness in driving strategic state development. Trained and accustomed to Suharto's militaristic approach, characterized by precision and effectiveness albeit often entailing human rights violations, they now wield considerable power.

This authoritarian inclination gains momentum amidst the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak and concurrent challenges stemming from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, triggering crises in food and energy. A recent illustration is the displacement of indigenous people from their customary lands in Rempang, Batam Island. This displacement aims to pave the way for the ambitious transformation of the region into Indonesia's Eco-City, a venture seeking significant foreign investment from the Chinese corporation Xinyi Glass Holdings.

In his role as a symbol of popular sovereignty, Jokowi endeavours to persuade his cabinet that any developmental initiatives under his leadership should not undermine democratic progress. Their objective is to ensure the sustenance of formal democracy throughout the stipulated five-year periods between general elections. This perspective contrasts with criticisms asserting that Jokowi is eroding democratic principles (Mujani & Liddle, 2021; Lindsey and Butt, 2023). Consequently, the fate of substantive democracy in the nation remains uncertain.

The intricate web of relationships among political leaders, business figures, parties, and various influential actors significantly shapes the practical dynamics of politics, thereby shaping the gradual evolution of substantive democracy. However, prevalent manoeuvres seem to exhibit a recurring pattern that weakens democratic structures. Collaborations among political entities, leaders, and business elites often lead to multifaceted

political manipulations (Bachtiar, 2020). Notably, the diminishing authority of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and its apparent tolerance toward corruption, particularly in strategic party projects, signify regressive steps detrimental to democracy.

A recent, contentious incident spotlighting the country's political landscape involves Jokowi's facilitation of his son, Gibran, assuming the position of Prabowo's vice-presidential candidate. This manoeuvre involved leveraging legal and political channels excessively, evident in the Constitutional Court's proceedings (Baker, 2023). Through his brother-in-law, Chief Justice Anwar Usman, Jokowi influenced legal amendments to ease the eligibility criteria for his son to run for office before turning 40.

Ganjar's challenge extends beyond contending with Jokowi's political influence. Amidst the stakes involving economic development, political stability, and the precarious state of substantive democracy, Ganjar confronts the remnants of post-Reformasi political manoeuvring, notably Islamist populism, which, while recently receding, still poses a significant challenge. Anies and Prabowo, figures supported by Islamist populist forces in the 2017 gubernatorial and 2019 presidential elections respectively (Barton et al., 2021a; Barton et al., 2021b), exemplify this trend. While Prabowo acquiesced to becoming Minister of Defense in Jokowi's cabinet, Anies, having risen to Governor of Jakarta by defeating Ahok, remains in opposition.

This article aims to explore Ganjar's approach to combating Islamist populism, particularly when certain political entities employ identity politics as a tool in their contestations. Examining Ganjar's stance in this context will elucidate whether he indeed embodies the ideal figure capable of upholding a vibrant democracy and whether he exhibits the empathy necessary to drive substantive changes within the landscape of Indonesian democratization.

Who is Ganjar Pranowo?

On October 28, 1968, Ganjar Pranowo was born in Karanganyar, Central Java, Indonesia. He studied law at Gajah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This is the same campus that Jokowi and Anies graduated from. He subsequently completed postgraduate studies at the University of Indonesia. He had been a student activist since 1992. Three years later he was a member of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) during the New Order era. In the party, he was a loyalist of Megawati Soekarnoputri, the daughter of the country's founding father, Soekarno. Ganjar joined the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in early 2003, before running for parliament in the 2004 legislative elections, but he lost. However, after his rival (the winning candidate) was appointed Ambassador, Ganjar was also appointed to sit on the DPR RI Commission IV.

It was his tenacity and courage to speak out that made his political reputation grow. From 2009 to 2014, he had been entrusted with the position of Vice-President of Commission II in charge of internal affairs. He was experienced in serving on the Commission of Inquiry investigating the Century Bank case, Indonesia's largest unresolved corruption case. In September 2012, with the support of the Central Java PDI-P Regional Leadership Council, he decided to run against the incumbent deputy governor, Rustriningsih, in the Central Java gubernatorial election. Ganjar Pranowo-Heru Sudjatmoko was officially sworn in as Governor and Deputy Governor of Central Java for

the period 2013-2018 on August 23, 2013. After being inaugurated, he promised to execute the "Agenda 18" program, a kind of regional development blueprint that is considered progressive and pro-people.

Ganjar is known as a populist figure, a subject of political performance and ideology. Populism, in this context, is the simplest form of populism that is in favor of the interests of the people. In fact, he also portrays himself as a technocrat who cares about people's everyday lives. This is the same image that his predecessor Jokowi has built up. In his official speech as governor of Central Java, he said, "...we must serve the people well, not betray them. And why this infrastructure development is so important because it is one of the main requirements to revive the people's economy" (Pranowo, 2022). Ganjar can therefore be called populist, at least performatively and ideologically.

Ganjar's Chance in 2024 Presidential Election

As governor of Central Java, he has a reputation for being a good leader, popular and close to the people. He is working to imitate Jokowi. He often makes impromptu visits (blusukan) or goes down to the grassroots to see and talk directly with ordinary people. Through this unique way, he evaluates whether his programs in government are working well or not. He also ensures that his policies benefit people's lives. This made him a well-known figure and built his image as a leader close to the people. In addition, all his activities are always publicized through various social media, especially X/Twitter (@ganjarpranowo), Instagram (ganjar_pranowo) and YouTube (@GanjarPranowoOfficial). Taking advantage of his popularity, he has become one of the leading candidates who will take part in the presidential elections of 2024.



Prabowo Subianto gives a speech about the vision and mission of the 2019 Indonesian presidential candidate in front of a crowd of supporters on the campaign in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on April 8, 2019. Photo: Aidil Akbar.

As a candidate, Ganjar Pranowo faces competition from Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto. Anies, a professor at the University of Paramadina, holds a Ph.D. from Northern Illinois University, USA. Although not affiliated with any political party, he has been declared as the presidential candidate of the Nasdem party and enjoys support from Islamist populist groups. Prabowo, on the other hand, is the former military commander of the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) and was once the son-in-law of Indonesia's powerful figure, Suharto. Since being involved in various significant special operations, Prabowo has faced accusations of human rights violations, which has been a contentious issue for his party during election seasons. A co-founder of the Gerindra party, Prabowo has been a prominent political figure who contested against Jokowi in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Anies was part of Jokowi's cabinet in 2014 but later underwent reshuffling. In contrast, Ganjar is perceived to share similarities with Jokowi, a sentiment reinforced when Jokowi expressed a preference for a presidential candidate with white hair and a wrinkled forehead, a description that notably aligns with Ganjar's characteristics.

According to the Indikator Survey (October 2023), Ganjar Pranowo holds a significant lead in electability with 29.5%. He surpasses other candidates, including Anies Baswedan (22.8%), Prabowo (19.5%), Ridwan Kamil (5.7%), Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (1.9%), Erick Thohir (1.4%), Puan Maharani (1.3%), Khofifah Indar Parawansa (1.1%), Hari Tanoesoedibjo (1.0%), and Sandiaga Uno (0.8%). Even when compared to the prominent leader of Islamist populism, Habib Rizieq Shihab, Ganjar's electability remains the highest (Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting, 2020). This dominance in popularity may be attributed to several factors, including his identity as a Muslim and Javanese, as well as his avoidance of identity politics that instrumentalize Islam in practical political contests. Ganjar positions himself as a pro-diversity figure, aligning with Indonesia's multicultural nature.

Furthermore, Ganjar's standing within the PDIP, the victorious party in the 2019 elections, is firmly established. He enjoys support not only from Megawati, the influential figure in control of the party but also from her daughter, Puan Maharani, who was initially his competitor within the party. While Puan was groomed to succeed Megawati and was expected to run in the 2024 elections, her extensive political experience did not translate into public electability. Despite holding key positions, such as Chairperson of the PDIP faction in the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat/DPR) from 2012-2014, Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture of Indonesia from 2014-2019, and Speaker of the DPR from 2019-2021, Puan was not retained as a candidate for the 2024 elections. Puan's internally strong but nationally weak position put her at odds with Ganjar. Hence the emergence of a symbolic polemic depicting a bull (banteng) against a wild boar (celeng), successively thought to represent Puan and later Ganjar.

Ganjar is known for his resilience and sagacity in confronting challenging decisions, although some perceive him as stubborn. However, he would certainly not contemplate attacking his own mother, let alone a larger animal like a bull. When questioned by a student about whether, as President, he would be

a party cadre and officer (petugas partai) or a leader for all the people, he diplomatically responded, "When I led Central Java for ten years, did I prioritize only my party?" (Televisi UI, 2023). He aimed to convey that, as a party cadre, his role is to serve the people. On his official website, he states, "I'm ruled by the people, the Governor is just a mandate" (https://www.ganjarpranowo.com/).

Although considered the most fitting successor to Jokowi, Ganjar faced a practical challenge as Jokowi's political moves diverged from PDIP. Without formally leaving PDIP, Jokowi nominated his son, Gibran Rakabuming, the mayor of Solo, as the vice-presidential candidate alongside Prabowo Subianto. Gibran is a PDIP cadre and won local elections on the party's ticket, but his candidacy at the age of 35 is viewed as premature. Public perception suggests Jokowi's involvement in dynastic politics, potentially impeding substantive democratization. This presents a significant obstacle to victory. On the other hand, Ganjar's vice-presidential candidate is Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs (Menkopolhukam). Known for his outspoken stance against corruption, especially among high-ranking officials, Mahfud shares Ganjar's clean bureaucratic record and pro-pluralism stance, enhancing their chances in the race.

With his traditionally pro-people populist positions, a clean track record, experience as a technocrat, strong anti-corruption stance, and pro-diversity credentials, Ganjar was expected to appeal to a broad voter base, including moderates and individuals of various religious backgrounds. He still stands a chance to emerge victorious, but the outcome remains uncertain. The Prabowo camp, currently supported by Jokowi, poses a formidable force that the PDIP cannot underestimate. However, Ganjar has capitalized on public dissatisfaction with Jokowi's perceived involvement in 'dynastic politics.' Additionally, Jokowi, once seen as a pro-democracy figure, is now viewed by some as an executioner of democracy itself. If Ganjar secures victory, the question arises: will he follow in Jokowi's footsteps in handling populist Islamic groups?

Ganjar and Identity Politics

Identity Politics is a political strategy that employs specific identities to gain a political advantage. Typically, this involves appealing to the masses, particularly the majority, to secure their votes, as large population segments are often considered favorable voting blocs in formal representative electoral politics. However, this approach is not without challenges, particularly in the context of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, characterized by thousands of ethnic groups, languages, and notable ethnic diversity. How does Ganjar navigate the complex landscape of identity politics in Indonesia, given its unique demographic and cultural context?

As the presumed successor to Jokowi, Ganjar embodies the charisma of a nationalist champion of the people. He possesses the essential qualities associated with the presidency: a Javanese figure connected to the populace, a tendency to avoid controversial statements, loyalty to the decisions of the prevailing political party, and a consistent reluctance to challenge the established power structure,

even during instances when the ruling government had to counter opposition that often employed majority identity politics, such as Islam, as a political tool. Embracing the Pancasila ideology, Ganjar frequently emphasizes the need to protect and preserve diversity, considering it a crucial aspect that should be shielded from any form of degradation or destruction by any group. Despite being pro-government and pro-people simultaneously, he supports various democratic mechanisms, including demonstrations. However, he disagrees with protests and popular movements that employ the term "people power," finding it discriminatory, intolerant, and undermining the values of unity in diversity.

In some respects, it is evident that Ganjar engages in identity politics, leveraging his Javanese, Muslim background to present himself as a nationalist Pancasilaist closely connected to the people. Simultaneously, he strategically criticizes those who exploit Islam as a tool in a confrontational, intolerant, and violently negating manner for realpolitik purposes. Ganjar takes a firm stance against groups like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Defenders Front of Islam (FPI), considering them ideological opponents of Pancasila, which promotes coexistence in a diverse society encompassing various elements such as ethnicity, religion, race, and class. His opposition intensified after the official government ban on HTI and FPI, with Ganjar, in his capacity as governor, issuing explicit instructions to civil servants not to associate with banned organizations. He vowed to dismiss any civil servant found violating his populist policies in this regard (Pranowo 2021b).

In this way, Ganjar positions himself as pro-government (establishment), pro-Pancasila, and pro-people. This is how he presents himself performatively. Notably, he also critiques Anies and Prabowo, his two main competitors, who, in the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2016 and the presidential election in 2019, capitalized on the power of Islamist populism. As the well-known Nusantara saying goes, "once you have rowed, you have passed two or three islands (sekali mendayung, dua tiga pulau terlampaui)."

Ganjar and Islamist Populism



DKI Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan with residents of Kampung Akuarium in Jakarta, Indonesia on April 14 2018. Photo: Shutterstock.

Practical political contestation has exacerbated the polarization of Indonesian society, with identity politics playing a pivotal role in this process. On one side, there are nationalists who lean towards pluralism, while on the other, there are Islamists. This polarization is a direct consequence of the 2019 presidential election, where Jokowi faced Prabowo. Prabowo garnered support from the populist Islamist movement, although this alliance soured when the movement deemed Prabowo a 'traitor' for accepting a ministerial position in Jokowi's government. Consequently, the populist Islamist group is now throwing its support behind Anies for the 2024 presidential elections. This coalition aligns with a popular political narrative aimed at challenging elites perceived as incapable of representing the collective will of the people and others deemed threatening to populist interests.

Indeed, there is no 'stable and fixed' theoretical concept of populism (Muhtadi, 2019). It is inherently contextual and dynamic, adapting to the prevailing circumstances. Generally, following Cas Mudde's minimal definition (2004: 543-4; 2017), populism is a set of ideas or ideologies that dichotomize society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups—the pure people versus the corrupt elite. It is rooted in the moral belief that the elite either fails to serve the general interests of the people or actively corrupts them. When manifested as an ideological movement, populism tends to disregard the rule of law, champion popular sovereignty, emphasize people power, and is often viewed as detrimental to democracy. It can manifest as a street-level force, enabling mobocracy, where the

crowd determines political direction and even the interpretation of truth.

In its expression, Islamist populism in Indonesia employs a civilizational rhetoric that diametrically contrasts 'us' and 'them' using cultural and religious language (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023). Within the Indonesian context, populists employ terms such as Islam against the West and China, the ummah against oppressive rulers, or the marginalized (mustadhafin) against the oppressors (mustakbirin). A recent addition is the dichotomy of defenders of Islam against blasphemers, which emerged from Jakarta electoral politics in 2016. However, despite emphasizing the rhetoric of civilizationism, the Islamist populism that has gained prominence lacks any inherent connection with the genuine interests of the people. Notably, NU and Muhammadiyah, claiming a combined mass of 100 million people, have expressed opposition to Islamist populism, considering it a disruptive minority that tends to hijack democracy, foster social polarization, discriminate against minorities, and threaten national integration (Triono, 2023).

While Islamist populism strategically deploys religious ideology and civilizationism as political instruments to advance its populist objectives within mainstream political contestation, practical political actors leverage the populist group to secure support from their voter base. This dual instrumentalization operates on two levels. Initially, it exploits religion to stir mass emotions, foment animosity toward elites, and create a narrative of "civilizational populism," framing resistance to populist adversaries as a religious and holy struggle (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2021). Subsequently, Islamist populism becomes a political tool that recognizes the social and cultural significance of religious symbols within the majority of the population.

Ganjar takes a clear stance in opposition to Islamist populism. Unlike his political rivals Anies and Prabowo, who have benefited significantly from the maneuvering of Islamist populism to increase voter percentages in previous elections, Ganjar emphasizes identity politics. He positions diversity, pluralism, and nationalism as political symbols that can strengthen the 'Indonesianess' of society. Consequently, he challenges rivals like Anies and Prabowo, as well as Islamist populist actors such as HTI and FPI. Ganjar's explicit warning to government officials in Central Java, under his jurisdiction, prohibiting their involvement in the activities of banned organizations (HTI and FPI), serves as evidence of his stance against Islamist populism.

The effectiveness of Ganjar's confrontation, whether on an ideological or instrumental level, remains somewhat ambiguous. If his confrontation operates on an ideological level, it is rooted in his status as a cadre of the PDIP, the ideological successor of Soekarno's nationalism. In this capacity, he positions himself as a defender of Pancasila, promoting ideas of pluralism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and human rights. Alternatively, if his confrontation in the instrumental level, it is because his appearance should be an Indonesian instead of Javanese Muslim. This strategic shift is essential due to the diverse composition of his voters, representing the varied demographics of Indonesia. Furthermore, Ganjar must craft his political narrative as the successor to the 'Javanese King' Jokowi, a figure whose actions, according to political

scientists, have played a significant role in steering Indonesia toward authoritarianism through the political banning of HTI and FPI (Power, 2019).

Thus far, Ganjar has played the role of Jokowi's mouthpiece, navigating important policy decisions in the political arena, even though this poses a dilemma as Jokowi is in disagreement with Megawati and the PDIP. Ganjar is the attacking pawn in the game of political chess that is ready to fight for the elimination of the agents of Islamist populism. However, in this game where he has not succumbed to the adversary, he also has the opportunity to ascend to the position of Crown Prince. Ultimately, he emerges as the frontrunner to succeed the king, especially as Jokowi hesitates to extend his term beyond the constitutional maximum of two terms. Meanwhile, Jokowi's nomination of his son, Gibran, as Prabowo's running mate is both a strength and a political experiment, but it also presents a vulnerability by fueling discourse around dynastic politics and authoritarianism, which has faced public criticism (Muhtadi & Muslim, 2023). This weakness in Jokowi's strategy clearly works to Ganjar's advantage.

If Ganjar genuinely takes on the challenge of eradicating Islamist populism – which, in the Indonesian context, presents an opportunity for elites to pursue democratization – on both ideological and practical-instrumental levels, he positions himself in the middle ground between the flawed elite and the oppressed people. He can be a successor to Jokowi and a committed member of the victorious party, making it easier to garner voter support, while also serving as a political force that counters Islamist populism. Simultaneously, he can align with the suffering populace by steadfastly upholding diversity and facilitating communication with the ruling elite, ensuring that the people's aspirations are better understood. This approach may pave the way for new policies that prioritize the interests of the people.

On the flip side, Islamist populist entities can also function on two simultaneous levels: ideological and practical politics. Ideologically, Islamists aim to influence the electoral agenda and advocate for the implementation of Sharia, while instrumentally, their elites have historically been employed by previous rulers (such as Soeharto) to obstruct civil society's efforts to compel the government to address the economic crisis of the late 1990s. Regardless of the level, Ganjar persists in countering them, driven by his robust ideological and nationalist convictions, as well as the pursuit of victory in the 2024 presidential election.



Ganjar Pranowo, the governor of Central Java, is visiting Purwokerto, Indonesia on August 20, 2022. Photo: Ainul Ghurri.

CONCLUSION

Ganjar's prospects in the political arena are not without challenges, despite his viable chance of winning. Prabowo, supported by Jokowi, holds significant influence, even among Megawati and her dedicated supporters. In a hypothetical two-round election scenario where Anies loses in the initial round, it is anticipated that Anies' voters would likely shift their support to Prabowo rather than Ganjar. This shift signifies that endorsing Anies aligns with supporting Islamist populism and other conservative Muslim factions. With only two choices—Prabowo and Ganjar—voters tend to lean towards Prabowo due to his previous candidacy in 2019, despite subsequent characterizations as a traitor and his current support by Jokowi. Ganjar's candidacy does not align with the original intentions of Islamist populism, leaving the alternative for them to abstain from voting altogether.

Ganjar staunchly advocates for diversity, positioning himself as an anti-Islamist populist figure. In contrast to Islamist populism's labeling of figures using derogatory terms, Ganjar consistently emphasizes the symbol of Pancasila and the motto of 'unity in diversity' to unite the nation and voters. He emerges as a significant advocate for democratization, emphasizing inclusivity in politics, religion, and fostering social tolerance.

While Ganjar may rhetorically support substantive democratization, his ability to maintain a vibrant democracy hinges on navigating the complexities of economic development, largely influenced by New Order cadres, ensuring political stability, and upholding national

security. However, these complexities do not necessarily guarantee the concurrent advancement of substantive democracy.

The fragile democratic landscape in Indonesia is susceptible to conservative and authoritarian shifts, both signaling democratic regression. Though less superficial than in previous years, the highly polarized role of identity politics poses challenges to substantive democratization. Yet, persistent issues like oligarchic competition, weakened anti-corruption institutions, and eroding judicial roles remain significant hurdles.

The current political scenario underscores the difficulties in making informed political choices during elections, primarily due to the diverse interests among the three candidates—Anies, Prabowo, and Ganjar. This underscores Indonesia's elite-centric political landscape, limiting substantial participation from the populace. The opaque and unpredictable nature of practical politics in the country constrains the organic development of democracy rooted in the demos. The evolving situation emphasizes the vital importance of substantial democratic progress. Ganjar's capacity as a democracy-builder aligning with the people's aspirations will ultimately stand the test of time.

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