

Behind the jamboree

Direct local elections give Jakartans a say in their city's future

Jeremy Gross

Since June 2005, direct local elections, or pilkada, have been taking place throughout Indonesia. At last, on 8 August 2007, it was Jakarta's turn to vote. In addition to the 287 cities and districts that had already voted, Jakarta was the sixteenth province to go to the polls.

The candidates

Two candidate pairs contested the election. The first pair consisted of retired senior police officer, Adang Daradjatun, and his running-mate, Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) city legislator Dani Anwar. Adang's candidacy was backed by both PKS and the Democratic Renewal Party (PDP). And although he is seen as a reformer within the police, Adang was nevertheless a strange choice for a political party that prides itself on its moral integrity and conservative Islamic principles, something for which the police are not well-known.

Their opponents were the incumbent deputy governor and city administration career bureaucrat, Fauzi Bowo, and a relatively obscure retired major general, Prijanto. Fauzi was backed by a coalition of 19 political parties, including all the big parties. For Jakarta's native Betawi people, who comprise approximately one third of Jakarta's population, Fauzi's appeal lay in his status as a 'local son'. To others, the pairing of Fauzi and Prijanto represented the pluralism and diversity of Jakarta, a theme they played on with their slogan 'Jakarta for All'. A vote for Fauzi was also a vote for continuity and experience.

Campaign promises

The campaign itself was a rather unedifying affair. Although Jakarta's main thoroughfares and streets were festooned with banners, posters and stickers, there was little substance behind the hype. The lack of concrete policies was evident in the one candidate debate attended by both candidates. Screened on Metro TV on the Saturday prior to the election, and organised in conjunction with the Regional Election Commission (KPUD), the two candidate pairs only had a couple of minutes each to answer the question posed by a panelist. Panelists were given no opportunity to respond if a candidate's reply wasn't relevant. And with the excessive breaks for advertisements, actual questions and answers were confined to less than half an hour.

More successful, the People's Voter Education Network (JPPR) conducted televised interviews on two successive evenings in which panelists questioned candidates on their policies. Again, the answers were not the sharpest, but the questions were more focused and the panelists did attempt to probe the candidates for better answers. JPPR also conducted a candidate questionnaire, the results of which were printed in 800,000 voter education brochures distributed throughout Jakarta. Other NGOs also worked hard to make the candidates focus on specific issues: Pelangi on the environment, CIDES on economic development, and the Urban Poor Consortium on the poor. While these organisations made little headway in extracting concrete promises from candidates, they did help to raise awareness that elections are a time when issues like these should be discussed. While to some this may sound paltry recompense, it's important to remember how different the situation was five years ago. Then, there was no campaign and no public debates. It was the Jakarta legislators who elected the governor and the public had no say whatsoever in the process.

On election day, voting proceeded relatively smoothly, with Jakarta once again staging a free and fair election. With a respectable 65.4 per cent voter turnout, Jakartans voted for continuity and experience, electing Fauzi by a margin of 57.8 per cent to 42.2 per cent. Some people had expressed concern beforehand that the election could cause confrontation between the camps of the two candidates, or between and within different ethnic and political groups. Fortunately, none of these fears were realised. There were, however, more administrative problems with this election than previous elections, including problems with the voter registration lists and the level of understanding of polling station officials about how to conduct the election. These are problems that the Election Commission (KPU) will need to resolve to ensure the 2009 national elections run smoothly.

A challenging mandate

As Jakarta's new governor, Fauzi faces myriad challenges: there are no instant fixes to the legacy of years of rapid urban expansion when infrastructure development could not keep pace with population growth. None of Jakarta's problems are unique: even wealthy cities are increasingly suffering from floods, congestion, pollution and problems of waste management. But this does not absolve Jakarta's government of responsibility for the state of the city, which has suffered from years of indifference and poor management.

Jakarta is a city with more problems than can be resolved in any single five-year term of office. But political will, and a sincere commitment to address challenges, can bring about change. This has been seen in other cities around Asia. New leadership in Bangkok heralded a cleaner and far greener city, and a determination to clean up the air in New Delhi led to a dramatic improvement in air quality. By contrast, Jakarta gets mediocre and mismanaged projects like the yet to be completed monorail - it is now over three years since the foundation stone was laid - and a busway system which, while conceptually good and functionally proficient outside the rush hour, degenerates into little more than cattle-class during peak hours.

Improving sanitation, healthcare and creating a better environment for job creation are essential, and will be difficult to achieve. But other, smaller changes can make Jakarta a kinder place for its citizens. Ending forced evictions, establishing accepted ways to compensate for land or deal with disputed claims, reducing pollution, creating more neighborhood parks, repairing pavements and having pedestrian crossings – these are all achievable and will contribute to making Jakarta a more people-friendly city.

Optimism for the future

Direct local elections are just one way to make political leaders more accountable to their constituents. Of course, to be effective, other changes are necessary, including more effective monitoring of legislators, a reform of the administration, and the opening up of all budgeting and contract allocations for public scrutiny.

Representative local government was given another boost by a recent groundbreaking Constitutional Court decision on 23 July. The court ruled that in future, independent candidates will be allowed to participate in pilkada. This will break the monopoly held by political parties in nominating and selecting candidates and give voters the chance to vote for a figure not tied to a political party. The court's decision will put pressure on political parties to reform not just how they select candidates, but how they develop policy and differentiate themselves from one another.

As pilkada in other regions have shown, a new type of political leader is emerging. In cities such as Solo and Pekalongan, politicians speak about having a legitimacy and mandate based on their election by the people. Their actions in office also seem to confirm that they are there to serve the people who elected them rather than the interests of the parties that nominated them.

But for now, Jakartans will have to wait and see what their newly elected governor, who takes office on 7 October, manages to achieve over his five-year term of office. ii-90

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