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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Golput and Its Implications

By Made Ayu Mariska

SYNOPSIS

Indonesians will soon vote in the presidential election to decide whether the incumbent Joko Widodo, or the challenger Prabowo Subianto, will lead the country until 2024. Initial surveys show that, as in 2014, there may be a high number of abstaining voters, known as golput. Why are Indonesians increasingly uninterested to vote?

COMMENTARY

A RECENT survey by [Indikator Politik](#) predicted that at least 20 percent of voters are going to abstain in the upcoming presidential election. It is clear that both of the presidential aspirants – Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) and Prabowo Subianto – have failed to effectively convince the electorate that they are qualified to lead the country.

As always, the issue of non-voters, or *golongan putih (golput)*, has raised questions about the extent of indirect protests by the disaffected. Is this a temporary reaction to this year’s candidates or is this indicative of the failings in Indonesian democracy?

Vote Spoilers in Indonesian Elections

The term golput first originated from protesting youth and students as they disagreed with the implementation of the 1971 general election which they considered as pseudo-democratic. The name itself was purposely similar to Suharto’s political party, Golkar (Golongan Karya).

Golput was used specifically for those who went to the ballot box but spoiled their vote by punching a hole in the blank space, instead of on the picture of the preferred candidates. This was their way of showing dissatisfaction with the process. In

contemporary usage, golput simply refers to all those who abstain from voting, either by spoiling their ballot or not voting at all.

More than 192 million Indonesians are registered to cast their vote next week on 17 April 2019. Although the number of registered voters is high, there is an increasing trend to abstain from voting. It is predicted that the number of golput is going to be almost as high as in the 2014 presidential election.

The chairman of Indikator Politik, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, stated that there is a possibility the number will increase because of the growing inclination to be undecided voters. From the survey, it was found that there are 9.2 percent of undecided voters so far. Potentially these swing voters could decide to abstain if they are not convinced by the presidential contenders.

Golput Trends

In the first presidential election in the post-Suharto era in 1999, the number of golput was just 7.3 percent; this increased significantly to 29 percent by the 2014 presidential election. Riau Islands (40.6 percent) and Aceh (38.6 percent) were the two regions with the highest proportions of golput, followed by three regions in Sumatra.

The high number of golput in these regions could have been driven by the lack of infrastructure development since Java was the main target for investment. Another factor could simply be because of the lack of socialisation regarding the voting process.

One of the responses to the high number of Golput was the *fatwa* (a nonbinding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law) from Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical body, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), stating that abstaining from voting is *haram* (forbidden). Recently, MUI reiterated the haram fatwa in the effort to suppress the number of non-voters in the upcoming election, since it is not compulsory to vote by national law.

Motivations Behind Golput

The phenomenon of non-voters in elections is neither unique, nor new to Indonesia. However, the trend still warrants examination, as a healthy, legitimate democracy is one with high participation rates. The high level of golput predicted for the 2019 election is driven by the dissatisfaction and disappointment of the people towards the two candidates, specifically with regard to human rights issues.

During his campaign in 2014, Jokowi pledged to bring to justice to those guilty of violently oppressing Indonesians during the Suharto era including those responsible for infamous instances such as the May riots, disappearances or kidnappings of protestors, and the 1965 mass killings of alleged communist sympathisers. Jokowi also guaranteed protection and the right to freedom of religion, pledging to take legal steps against perpetrators of violence in the name of religion.

In addition, Jokowi promised to prioritise reducing sexual violence against women and children. Yet during his presidency, Jokowi has not been able to resolve any of those

past human rights violations. On the contrary, according to the Women's National Commission ([Komnas Perempuan](#)), the number of reports involving violence against women in 2017 increased 76 percent from the year before.

Controversies Behind Candidates

Furthermore, Jokowi has appointed conservative Islamic scholar, Ma'ruf Amin, as his vice-presidential running mate. Ma'ruf is considered to have had a role in the spread of intolerance in Indonesia, especially during the controversy over the blasphemy case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok").

On the other hand, Prabowo's candidacy is also the target of human rights activists. There is an [indication](#) that the former Kopassus general was linked to the enforced disappearance of activists from 1997 to 1998. This issue is causing a dilemma for voters because the two candidates are not viewed as a solution to the country's human rights issues.

There are several factors why voters decide to go golput. One is distrust, dissatisfaction, and disappointment of both candidates. The second factor is that voters feel whoever wins the election will make no difference to their lives.

This may be explained by the opinion of many scholars. Long-time Indonesia watcher, Harold Crouch, for example, sees that throughout the different presidencies post-Suharto, the Indonesian government has tended to focus on the reform of key political institutions, barely touching ground-level issues, such as people's welfare and human rights.

How to Get More People Voting

To resolve the problem of the growing trend towards golput, reiterating the haram *fatwa* towards abstaining, or potentially making it legally compulsory to vote will not address the root causes. It is essential for the government to reflect on the core motivations of non-voters. Instead of seeing them as simply abstaining from voting, the government should start to see this as a political act of rejection towards the candidates or the system as a whole.

In this very short period left before the election, both candidates must address more specifically how they will achieve their aims or promises made in their campaigns. In the long term, the high number of golput is an indicator that further reform is necessary. The voters need to believe in the system and the candidate for any successfully elected president to have the mandate necessary to exercise the changes they promised.

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