

13th October 2013

2014 Election Proves Critical for Indonesia's Developing Democracy

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Global Governance, Issue 4, No. 2.

The big watchword for the upcoming Indonesian legislative and presidential elections in 2014 is *golput*. *Golput*, which has its history in the New Order regime, is perhaps best understood as a form of protest vote against the current political establishment. It tends to take the form of low voter turnout or intentional non-marking of the ballot to invalidate it. Since 2004, the rate of *golput* has been rising steadily in subsequent elections which has led to sardonic headlines by leading commentaries such as “*Golput Wins in the North Sumatra gubernatorial Election*”.

But if *golput* has been a steady feature of the Indonesian political landscape since 2004, why does it matter this time? It matters because of a demographic change that is occurring within Indonesia – close to 40% of the Indonesian electorate for the 2014 elections will consist of first and second-time young voters. And the percentage of voters who intend to do a *golput* is highest among this voting group. A recent survey revealed that despite this trend of *golput*, Indonesians still regard democracy as the best political system.[1] While Indonesia's efforts in the democratic experiment should be applauded especially in the backdrop of its authoritarian history, it is still worth noting that much work needs to be done, in particular to address *golput*.

In the specific case of Indonesia, the growth of *golput* among the youth may perhaps be best attributed to rampant corruption within the political establishment and a perception of paying lip service to the interests of the electorate. Between the two, the latter should be of greater concern given the set-up of Indonesia's political establishment and ongoing efforts to crackdown on corruption.

The three largest nationalist parties in Indonesia are Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDI-P), Partai Golongan Karya (Golkar) and Partai Demokrat (PD), led by Megawati Sukarnoputri, Aburzial Bakrie and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono respectively.

The configuration of PDI-P and PD can be perceived to be largely similar. Due to the eminence and status of their leaders, in particular Megawati who is the daughter of the

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founder of modern Indonesia, they are de facto heads of a patronage system within the political parties. The rise and fall of a party member therefore depends less heavily on his relations with his electorate than his relations with the aforementioned party leaders and probably family members.

While PD recently launched primaries as a mechanism to select its candidate for the presidential elections, numerous commentators have considered that as a cynical move by Yudhoyono to present an image in which registered voters for the primaries seem to have influence over the PD candidacy. This view seems highly plausible given the rapid promotion of Yudhoyono's brother-in-law, Pramono Edhie Wibowo – from not being a member of the party to a primary candidate with a key position within the party in four months.[2] In addition, Yudhoyono's position as both President of the state and leader of PD has led to a strong perception of him ignoring state duties over those of the party, creating a further sense of disconnect between the electorate and the ruling establishment.[3]

PDI-P is in a unique position in that it has a member within its ranks, Joko Widodo, who is viewed to be the frontrunner of the pack for the presidency due to his leadership style which is perceived to be a break from the status quo. The governor of Jakarta has however yet to be confirmed as the candidate for the party despite his overwhelming popularity as revealed in a recent poll by *Merdeka* and from the support he receives among the youth.[4] In order to be confirmed as the candidate of the party, he has to receive official and explicit backing from the leader of the party. With the poll showing that Megawati would lose if she ran for the presidency again, there have been suspicions that the poll was leaked to pressure her into making a decision on electing Joko Widodo as the party's candidate.

Regardless of the validity of such an opinion, it nonetheless shows the imbalance of political power in Indonesia in its existing set-up – where power is held more by a small select group of people and less by the electorate. This view is further corroborated by the claims of Christian Wibisono, member of the Economic Council and long-time observer of Indonesian politics, that political dynasties are still pivotal in the upcoming elections due to their control of the political parties. He believes that the families of Sukarno and Sarwo Edhie hold much influence in PDI-P and PD respectively. According to him, the family of Suharto has influence over Golkar and Hanura, a smaller party led by former army general Wiranto. If his observations are correct, the number of people holding real political power is reduced even further.

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Despite all of the above assessments, one should not despair. The presidential election in 2014 offers a real chance for Indonesia to break away from this mould of power arrangements and move further along the democratic experiment. The demographic change in Indonesia and the growing rate of *golput* must be factored into any political party's electoral strategy. The party which captures the youth vote will probably have the greatest success in the presidential elections.

Yet to do that, these parties will have to evolve and change their mode of operation. They must provide youths with a basis to have confidence that their votes matter and their voices are heard and interests acted upon. They must show that the electorate matters more than a select group of people. In that, Joko Widodo's style of governance as the Governor of Jakarta represents a step forward and must be applauded. For the sake of the democratic experiment in Indonesia, one should hope that his style would increasingly become the rule rather than an exception.

[1] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/public-trust-in-democracy-stays-high-despite-corruption-scandals/>

[2] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/dems-already-chose-a-candidate-analyst/>

[3] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/pramono-open-to-lead-the-democratic-party/>

[4] <http://www.merdeka.com/politik/aneka-skenario-pdi-perjuangan-capreskan-jokowi.html>

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Please cite this article as:

Im, Z. (2013). '2014 Election Proves Critical for Indonesia's Developing Democracy' Human Security Centre Global Governance, Issue 4, No. 2