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Non-Voters and Local Elections in Indonesia: A Growing Trend?

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Trends from local and national elections in Indonesia for the past indicate a growing number of non-voters. This preliminary analysis contends that, first, voters are bored with the political game; second, various candidates are seen as redundant; and third, image politics will remain a significant factor in the upcoming general elections.

ON JULY 23, East Java held its gubernatorial election. Voter turnout was 61.8 percent - leaving around 38.12 percent *golongan putih* or *golput* (non-voters). This high percentage of non-voters seems to be a recurring trend in local polls across Indonesia since 2005.

The People's Voter Education Network (JPPR) recently noted thirteen gubernatorial elections – out of 26 between 2005 and 2008 – that saw high percentage of non-voters, including Central Java (45.25 percent), East Nusa Tenggara (40 percent), and North Sumatera (41 percent). Little wonder that the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) puts the average number of voter turnout in local elections at only around 60 percent.

Similar trends can also be discerned at the national level. The 1997 general elections – the last election of President Suharto's New Order era, saw non-voters numbering at 6.4 percent, while in 1999 this increased to 10.4 percent. In 2004, non-voters were at a record high of 23.34 percent, or 34 million non-voters.

Syamsudin Harris, a professor at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), argues that there are two kinds of non-voters -- technical (unable or could not vote due to technical reasons) and political (deliberately decided not to vote). The majority of voters in Indonesia seem to belong to the latter.

Thus, the question that arises is this: Why does Indonesia, which is supposedly becoming more 'democratic', see its people increasingly reluctant to exercise democracy's most fundamental right – the right to vote?

More importantly, how can we interpret this phenomenon as it relates to the 2009 general elections? With the national legislative campaign season officially kicking off last month, the answer to these

questions is becoming more pertinent.

Non-voters: local and national trends

From the local elections, it appears that there are three inter-related factors that could help us understand the increasing number of *golput* or non-voters.

First, the Indonesian people are currently ‘bored’ with the political game – especially those played by the old establishment – whose leading actors are trying to make a comeback although they have not improved the lives of the people when in power. This fits the general character of the Indonesian society, labeled by Sukardi Rinakit, director of the Jakarta-based think tank Soegeng Sarjadi Syndicate, as a ‘melodramatic society’ -- that is a society that is easily moved, easily forgets, gets easily bored, and has a tendency to take a diametric stance.

In this light, the increasing percentage of non-voters in local elections should not be seen as a society that is losing faith in the idea of democracy, but instead, as a bored society exercising their right by not voting in elections they deemed ‘superfluous’.

In fact, a majority of the public and observers alike have argued that with regional autonomy, corruption has been decentralized at the local level as well. The spate of local parliamentarians and regency heads who have been charged or convicted with graft cases is a testament to this perception.

This fact also highlights similar trends at the national level, namely the lack of alternative leadership. This can be clearly seen in the slate of potential candidates for the 2009 presidential election which is still dominated by the ‘old guard’ of the 1998 reform movement, including President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid, Sultan Hamengkubuwono, and Wiranto.

Secondly, various candidates nominated by the parties are seen to be redundant. For example, the Central Java elections indicated that when there are no contrasting differences between the candidates – all are from the old establishment, with no ‘young and exciting’ new candidates – then the number of non-voters would be relatively high (42 percent). Meanwhile, in West Nusa Tenggara and West Java, where young and exciting candidates ran against aging candidates and seasoned bureaucrats, the number of non-voters decreases to 22 and 32 percent respectively.

A fair comparison could be drawn at the national level, where political observers have claimed that the main reason why people would still vote for President Yudhoyono if elections were held today is due to lack of a better alternative.

Perhaps to offset the sense of jadedness amongst the electorate, certain members of the political elite have nominated presidential candidates from the younger generation. It appears that by raising the profile of younger candidates, they hope to attract people to come to the polls while bringing a new optimism in politics.

Thirdly, there appears to be a diminishing significance of political parties and their machinery. The loss of major parties in local elections seems to confirm an April 2008 poll by *Kompas*, a Jakarta-based newspaper, that 82 percent of the public would not vote a gubernatorial candidate based on his/her party affiliations.

Furthermore, political parties are deemed by the public as amongst the most corrupt institutions in the country, as shown by a 2006 Transparency International Indonesia (TII) survey. Thus, it is not surprising that a May 2008 poll by the same newspaper noted that 84.7 percent of the public finds political parties ‘disappointing’.

Non-voters: A prelude to the general election?

Based on these factors, and at the risk of over-simplification, our initial analysis seems to have three

conclusions. First, the growing phenomenon of low voter turnout is an indication that the Indonesian people are tired with political parties and old politicians that have not done much to improve the people's lives.

Second, the *golput* phenomenon underscores the obscure nature and role of political parties. On the one hand, political parties and their machinery are needed to contest the national elections – considering the fact that 33 provinces and over 400 regencies and municipalities are up for grabs. But on the other hand, local elections have shown how their relevance and popularity are diminishing along with their ability to produce qualified alternative leadership and cadres.

Third, it appears that for the time being, Indonesian politics still emphasizes image politics, while ignoring detailed policy debates. This significance of the candidates' personal charisma was confirmed by 49.3 percent of respondents in the same April 2008 *Kompas* poll. This means that we could see charisma-heavy strategies in the upcoming elections. In this setting, complicated policy debates, although seemingly attractive to middle-class voters, is not seen as a winning strategy at the national level.

One final note concerns the correlation between local and national elections. An interesting phenomenon to look forward to in the coming months is how victories at local elections could translate at the national level. For example, it remains to be seen whether Golkar's control of around 42 percent of the regency and municipal elections could secure a national victory in the April 2009 legislative elections.

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