

PERSPECTIVE

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Which Presidential Candidate will Chinese Indonesians Vote for in 2019?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Chinese Indonesians constitute a small minority in Indonesia but their economic strength makes them significant financial contributors to the presidential candidates. Their votes may also be crucial in a tight contest.
- Although the majority of Chinese Indonesians, especially the older generation, are wary of Prabowo Subianto because of his anti-Chinese image, there are some among them who welcome a change of president because they have not benefited from the current government.
- Prabowo is also keen to have Chinese Indonesian support and hence eager to project that he is not anti-Chinese. This could be gauged from his presence at the Gala Dinner organized by some Chinese businessmen on 7 December 2018.
- Nevertheless, businessmen who *openly* support Prabowo are often those associated with SMEs, and not the major Chinese tycoons. With one or two exceptions, none of the major tycoons dare to openly support Prabowo or Joko Widodo, for fear of jeopardizing their businesses with a wrong choice.

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INTRODUCTION

The ethnic Chinese constitute less than 2 percent of the Indonesian population, but their economic power is much stronger than the number indicates.¹ Wealthy Chinese Indonesians are often given much attention by presidential candidates as they were able to provide financial support to them. Wealthy Chinese are in turn also often interested in supporting the winning candidate in the hope of gaining future economic opportunities and benefits. Although their numbers are small, Chinese Indonesians' votes are still valuable, especially if the contest is severe and Chinese votes become crucial.

Indonesia will hold its presidential election on 17 April 2019. There are two pairs of candidates: Joko "Jokowi" Widodo-Ma'aruf Amin on the one hand and Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno on the other. Who will Chinese Indonesians, particularly Chinese businessmen, vote for to be president?

During the 2014 presidential elections, the names of Chinese businessmen who made financial contributions to the presidential candidates were not publicized. In general, while Chinese Indonesian businessmen contribute to both sides; they also tend to be reluctant to take any side openly, for fear that a wrong decision would adversely affect their business in the future.

Nevertheless, there were a few whose preferences were well-known. During the 2014 elections, for instance, wealthy businessman Sofian Wanandi (Liem Bian Khoen) openly supported the Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla pair.² In fact, it was an open secret that he and his elder brother Jusuf Wanandi (Liem Bian Kie) were close with Jusuf Kalla.

Openly supporting the Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa pair as president and vice-president was Hary Tanoë Soedibjo (Chen Liming), a media tycoon who has been closely linked with the Suharto family.³ Initially, Hary Tanoë planned to compete in the 2014 presidential election as the deputy of retired general Wiranto, who is the chairman of Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat (Hanura).⁴ However both failed to get the support of other parties and their candidacy had to be abandoned. Wiranto then joined the Jokowi-Kalla group while Hary Tanoë supported the rival camp.⁵ Hary Tanoë later established the Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo). Another well-known Chinese supporter of Prabowo was Edie Kusuma (Wu Ruizhang) who runs consultant firms and educational foundations. He joined Gerindra and stood for the parliamentary election on the Gerindra ticket.⁶

DIFFERENT INTEREST GROUPS

Prabowo Subianto was a graduate of the Military Academy in Magelang. In 1983 he married Titiek, the second daughter of President Suharto but in 1998 during the crisis he divorced her. After the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1976, Prabowo was assigned to capture the Vice President of Fretilin in East Timor, and towards the end of Suharto's rule, he was the head of the Kopassus (Special Force Command). He was involved in abductions and tortures of activists and students, but has only admitted to abducting of activists but not to the killings.⁷ After the fall of Suharto, the military board reviewed the case and recommended that Prabowo be discharged from service because of his involvement.⁸ The

American government also barred him from entering the USA for his violation of human rights.⁹

Many scholars note that he was the one who also engineered the anti-Chinese violence on the eve of Suharto's fall.¹⁰ The older generation of Chinese Indonesians are therefore generally opposed to him. Although he has strongly denied that he was the ring leader, he has nevertheless failed to change this suspicion about him. At the same time, younger Chinese Indonesians may not know of Prabowo's past and hence does not share the negative view of him.

Prabowo and his supporters later established the Gerindra party. In the 2009 Presidential Election, he formed a partnership with Megawati Sukarnoputri, the chairperson of the PDI-P, to be her deputy in the presidential elections, but the pair was defeated. In 2014, he tried again, this time putting forward himself as presidential candidate against the former Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo. Again, he was defeated.

Prabowo's strategy is to collaborate with radical Muslim groups and Islamic political parties although he himself is known as a secular leader. Prabowo's camp often created racial and Islamic issues to weaken political opponents. Initially this encountered failure, but in the 2016-17 Jakarta Governor re-election, he managed to put up his own Muslim candidates to compete against Chinese Christian Basuki Tjahaja Purnama alias Ahok; and they won. Prabowo continues to apply the same strategy today.

Chinese Indonesians are not a homogeneous group, and have different cultural, political and economic backgrounds. In short, their interests vary. One of the Chinese businessmen who supported Prabowo is Lieus Sungkharisma (Li Xuexiong), who used to be active in the Indonesian young Buddhist movement. After Suharto stepped down, he and a few young Chinese formed the Partai Reformasi Tionghoa Indonesia (Parti) but this party was unable to develop and failed to participate in any national parliamentary election. He later set up a group called Komunitas Tionghoa Anti-Korupsi (Chinese Community Anti-Corruption) and attacked governor Ahok for his "misbehaviour".

Jusuf Hamka (A Bun), a Chinese businessman who was converted to Islam during the Suharto era, collaborated with Lieus in his campaign against both Ahok and Jokowi. Jusuf Hamka established the Muslim Tionghoa Indonesia (Indonesian Chinese Muslims) as his base. When Prabowo supported the Front Pembela Islam (Front of Defenders for Islam, FPI)-led demonstrations against Ahok in 2016, both Lieus and Jusuf Hamka openly sided with the FPI. In the name of the Chinese Indonesian community, they jointly nominated the leader of the FPI, Habib Rezieq, as "Man of the Year for 2016". They praised Rezieq for his leadership of the 212 peaceful demonstration that did not lead to racial and religious conflict.¹¹

Apparently, the Chinese Indonesian community is split on their support for the presidential candidates, but those who openly supported Prabowo appeared to be few. Those who disagreed with the pro-Prabowo group reacted against Lieus and Yusuf Hamka and told them that they did not represent the Chinese Indonesian community. Anton Medan (Tan Kok Liong), chairman of PITI, the largest Chinese Muslim organization with a long history, commented that "only two of them [Lieus and Hamka] were present at the [honoring Rezieq] occasion and they did not represent the Chinese community but themselves"¹².

Anton further argued that Hamka did not represent Chinese Indonesian Muslims either.¹³ Anton Medan is an ardent supporter of Ahok.

PROBOWO'S POLITICAL SHOW

Some Chinese Indonesian businessmen have not been satisfied with Jokowi and have complained that Jokowi's fight against corruption in the government administration is not "conducive" to business environment, as bureaucrats tended to move very slowly in issuing permits whenever no kickbacks are in the offing. Many businessmen are not happy either with Jokowi's heavy taxes.¹⁴ Others who have been unable to enjoy benefits under the Jokowi administration are hoping that a different government would make life easier for them.

On 7 December 2018, a group of Chinese businessmen organized a gala dinner at the super ballroom at Sun City Jakarta, located in the Chinese business district. They invited Prabowo as Guest of Honour and to give a talk on "Chinese and business in the eyes of Prabowo Subianto". They also planned to solicit donations for the Prabowo presidential campaign fund after the gala dinner.

Prabowo delivered a 40-minute speech without a text. He expressed his thanks to the organizers, and stated that Indonesians of Chinese descent have the same rights and obligations as Indonesians of other ethnic groups.¹⁵ "If I were elected President and received the people's mandate," Prabowo stated, "I will try my best to defend all citizens, including minority groups."¹⁶ "If any ethnic group or religion is being ill-treated and receives no justice, it is the responsibility of the leader to defend that group."¹⁷

Prabowo talked about his life as a soldier and stated that he met "all sorts of people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They are all human beings with similar characteristics: having dreams, desire and fear".¹⁸ He went on to say that in every ethnic group there were bad elements; this was the case with the Javanese and also the Chinese. But he stressed that we should not condemn the whole ethnic group just because there were some bad elements in the group.

Prabowo also noted that he admired China (Tiongkok) and Chinese culture, saying that his life had been influenced by Chinese philosophy. One of the Chinese sayings that he remembered was: "One thousand friends are too few and one enemy is too many."¹⁹

Among the attendants at the gala dinner was his former wife, Titiek Suharto, and leading members of his party. There was one unexpected programme that night. After giving his speech, Prabowo who was still on the stage suddenly announced that he would like to invite Titiek Suharto to sing a song on the stage. He told the audience that Titiek's hobby is singing, including singing Mandarin songs.

Titiek who was in Indonesian traditional dress walked to the stage and received the microphone from the MC. She moved towards Prabowo, looked at him and started singing a popular Mandarin love song "The moon represents my heart" (月亮代表我的心). She was able to sing the whole song in Mandarin, and Prabowo stayed on stage with her, throughout the song.²⁰ There was a rumour that if Prabowo became President, Titiek would

go back to him. The Suharto family still has strong economic power; they recently established a new party Partai Berkarya which supports Prabowo in the presidential election.

This event was meant to show that there are Chinese Indonesian businessmen who support Prabowo; at the same time, Prabowo was also sending a message to Chinese Indonesians that he is not anti-ethnic Chinese and that he can accommodate Chinese culture.

When interviewed, the chairman of the gala dinner committee, Chandra Suwono said that he hoped that Prabowo would become the new President. He also explained that donations were voluntary and not all attendants were asked to donate to the Prabowo campaign fund.²¹ It appeared that the Chinese businessmen who attended the function were from small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and none was from the tycoon group on the Forbes list. Donations were collected at the end of the gala dinner and a list of donors, 15 persons in total, was published the next day. It managed to collect 435 million rupiahs (around S\$43,500),²² of which the largest donor was a person called Kasidi alias Ahok, who has an identical nick name with the former Jakarta governor.²³ This person donated 250 million rupiahs (S\$25,000). The amount of money collected during the gala dinner was small, but it does show that Prabowo does have Chinese supporters.

As mentioned earlier, wealthy Chinese tycoons in general would not openly express their support for Jokowi or for Prabowo, because this would not serve their interest. But SME Chinese businessmen do not have this fear as they are not well-known and hence bear no big risk.

There is however one wealthy Chinese Indonesian tycoon who has publicly expressed support for Jokowi. This is Hary Tanoe, the chairman of Perindo. During the 2014 presidential election he had supported Prabowo.²⁴ It is not clear what brought on his change of preference. He stated that he was supporting Jokowi this time because Jokowi had done a good job in infrastructure development.²⁵ The social media noted that Hary Tanoe had come into conflict with Tutut Suharto over the TPI television case.²⁶ Besides this, he was also under investigation for “intimidation” of a Supreme Court official.²⁷ This again proves the correctness of a popular saying: In politics there is neither permanent friend nor permanent enemy but permanent self-interest!

¹ The 2010 Population Census shows that the Chinese only constitute 1.2 percent of the Indonesian population. I would argue that the number is slightly larger as many Chinese decline to admit themselves as Chinese. Nevertheless, it is not likely that it would exceed 2 percent. See Leo Suryadinata, “How many ethnic Chinese are there in Indonesia?” in Leo Suryadinata, *Understanding the Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia*. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007) pp. 285-300.

² <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/06/30/jokowi-would-drive-change-jusuf-wanandi.html> (Accessed 31/12/2018)

³ On his biographical sketches, see Leo Suryadinata, *Prominent Indonesian Chinese: Biographical Sketches*, ISEAS publishing, 2015, pp. 303-304.

⁴ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2013/07/02/1055216/Wiranto.Saya.dan.Hary.Tanoe.Capres.dan.Cawapres.2014> (Accessed 31/12/2018).

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaLZkQo2zkQ> (Accessed 1/1/2019)

⁶ Leo Suryadinata, *Prominent Indonesian Chinese*, p. 107-108.

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- ⁷ https://pure.au.dk/ws/files/85696083/Tan_2015.pdf (Accessed 31/12/2018). Recently unclassified US secret documents revealed that Prabowo was responsible for the abduction and disappearance of those activists. He was obeying instructions from Suharto.
- ⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-44949790> (Accessed 2/1/2019)
- ⁹ https://pure.au.dk/ws/files/85696083/Tan_2015.pdf (Accessed 31/12/2018); Also in Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia 1996-1999*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2006, p.154.
- ¹⁰ Susan Sim, "Prabowo Denied US Visa under Torture Agreement", Straits Times, 31 December 2000.
- ¹¹ Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia 1996-1999*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2006, pp. 149-156.
- ¹² <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3375755/komunitas-tionghoa-nobatkan-habib-rizieq-sebagai-man-of-the-year> (Accessed 16/12/2018)
- ¹³ <http://www.netralnews.com/news/megapolitan/read/44025/lieus.dan.jusuf.mengatasnamakan.tionghoa..ini.kata.anton.medan> (Accessed 16/12/2018)
- ¹⁴ <http://www.netralnews.com/news/megapolitan/read/44025/lieus.dan.jusuf.mengatasnamakan.tionghoa..ini.kata.anton.medan> (Accessed 16/12/2018)
- ¹⁵ A few businessmen that the author met made these complaints.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.suara.com/news/2018/12/08/134000/warga-tionghoa-di-mata-prabowo-subianto> (Accessed 2/1/2019)
- ¹⁷ <https://www.suara.com/news/2018/12/08/134000/warga-tionghoa-di-mata-prabowo-subianto> (Accessed 2/1/2019)
- ¹⁸ <https://www.merdeka.com/politik/bertemu-warga-tionghoa-prabowo-janjikan-keadilan-buat-semua-golongan-masyarakat-kln.html> (Accessed 1/1/2019)
- ¹⁹ <https://www.merdeka.com/politik/bertemu-warga-tionghoa-prabowo-janjikan-keadilan-buat-semua-golongan-masyarakat-kln.html> (Accessed 16/12/2018)
- ²⁰ <https://www.suara.com/news/2018/12/08/134000/warga-tionghoa-di-mata-prabowo-subianto> (Accessed 2/1/2019). Throughout his speech, he used "Tiongkok" (China) and "Tionghoa" (Chinese), not the derogatory term "Cina", to refer to China and the ethnic Chinese.
- ²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVIWWTiCAw> (Accessed 1/1/2019)
- ²² <https://www.viva.co.id/berita/politik/1101543-ahok-donatur-terbesar-gala-dinner-pengusaha-tionghoa-dukung-prabowo> (Accessed 20/12/2018)
- ²³ <https://www.viva.co.id/berita/politik/1101543-ahok-donatur-terbesar-gala-dinner-pengusaha-tionghoa-dukung-prabowo> (Accessed 20/12/2018)
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ <https://news.detik.com/berita/3585314/hary-tanoe-dukung-jokowi-di-2019-gerindra-bebas-aja> (31/12/2018).
- ²⁶ <https://news.detik.com/berita/3929683/ini-alasan-perindo-dukung-jokowi-di-pilpres-2019> (Accessed 11/1/2019)
- ²⁷ <https://news.detik.com/berita/3278971/kembali-menang-kubu-tutut-minta-mnc-tv-melaksanakan-putusan-ma> (Accessed 11/1/2019)
- ²⁸ <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/896744/pengakuan-elite-perindo-soal-hary-tanoe-merapat-ke-jokowi/full&view=ok> (Accessed 11/1/2019)

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