

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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## **A Snapshot of the Campaigning in Indonesia's 2014 Legislative Elections**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- New methods are shifting the way parties and candidates vie for support in the 2014 Indonesian elections. They are abandoning traditional campaign rallies (*pawai*) in favour of *blusukan* – a more direct approach to their constituents.
- These new campaign methods are bringing candidates closer to the voters. What the candidates hope to achieve is to signal how caring they are and that they are personable.
- Money politics/vote-buying are prevalent in this year's election campaign. However, the impact of money in influencing voters' actual choices at the ballot box remains unclear.
- The parties' lack of political platforms still limits the effectiveness of the new forms of campaign and voters only have superficial knowledge of the candidates. Voters may still remain confused and uninformed since they are forced to choose among a large number of candidates who offer similar promises.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, Indonesia has been in full campaign mode for its 2014 elections. This year's are the fourth legislative and the third direct presidential elections conducted after the country underwent its transition to democracy in 1998. The official campaign period for the national, provincial, and district-level legislative elections will continue until April 5. After a cooling off period lasting a few days (*minggu tenang*), polling will take place on April 9.

New methods are shaping the 2014 campaigns, especially at the grassroots level. First, parties are showing preference for the use of *blusukan* conducted by candidates to meet with individual voters. Literally meaning going through places in which passage is difficult (crowds, scrubs, narrow alleys, etc.), *blusukan* is now seen as an essential mode of campaign. This method is supposed to help voters to get to know their candidate at a more personal level. Voters can look for particular personal attributes, while candidates can show that they genuinely care about individual voters' concerns. Second, although money politics remains an integral part of the campaign approach, the way parties rely on it has changed. The cost of mobilising voters for mass rallies (*pawai*) have become more expensive, and parties are now more careful about spending the money on them. Consequently, there are now less rallies and they are only reserved for visits by high-profile leaders. Furthermore, as most parties would be doing the same thing, any advantage that any party may gain from luring supporters with money is cancelled out. As such, money no longer has the kind of power it used to have for buying votes. The role that money will play on the polling day remains unclear.

## THE INCREASING POPULARITY OF *BLUSUKAN*

In past elections, parties preferred a mass mobilisation of members and supporters. They typically held mass rallies to draw supporters, usually by staging live music and other kinds of entertainment. This year things have clearly changed. Although parties still conduct these rallies, they are fewer in numbers, and are smaller. Rather, the most interesting aspect in this year's campaign is how the methods generally adopted by most political parties and legislative candidates (*calon legislative - calegs*) to reach potential voters within their legislative districts (*daerah pemilihan - dapil*) have changed. With mass rallies, it was the voters who showed up to participate. But now it is the candidates who have to make the effort to visit voters. In this sense, voters now have to be wooed and candidates are expected to demonstrate their willingness to serve them. Candidates are increasingly adopting a direct approach that is reminiscent of the approach used by political parties in western democracies, which requires candidates to go directly to their constituents to sell themselves and their poli-

cies. This is also known as “retail politics”.<sup>1</sup> In the Indonesian case, these new means seem to have been heavily inspired by the “*blusukan*” approach that Joko Widodo popularised during his campaign for the governorship of Jakarta Metropolitan Special Province in 2012. The current Jakarta governor, who has just been designated by the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDI-P) as its presidential candidate, is presently leading most poll surveys.<sup>2</sup> He has almost single-handedly developed the new ways of reaching out to voters which have become popular.

Indeed, parties are increasingly adopting *blusukan*-style events such as small-scale village town meetings and door-to-door visits by candidates to individual homes as their primary means to meet voters and seek their support. For instance, a candidate from the National Awakening Party (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* - PKB) who is running for a regional legislative (DPRD) seat in the Sleman district (Central Java) states that he interacts with potential voters by attending events such as Islamic community prayers (*pengajian*), attending small group discussions with certain constituencies (e.g., farmers, factory workers, university students, etc.), carrying out door-to-door visits to people’s homes, and posting advertisements/flyers in street corners and other strategic places.<sup>3</sup>

Many candidates believe their *blusukan*-style methods are the most effective means to reach potential voters at the grassroots level since voters are more likely to support those they know the best. Even though the official campaign period only started on March 16, most candidates began their campaigns more than a year ago and have continuously campaigned in their respective districts ever since. Thus, many have developed relationships with people from their *dapil*, which they hope will translate into votes in the April 9 election. Voters indicate in turn that the candidate’s character and perceived closeness to the voters are their primary selection criteria for the election. Voters tend to consider a candidate to be close to them if he or she lives within the community, attends campaign events in person instead of being represented by members of his/her campaign staffs (*tim sukses*), and is seen to be responsive to the community’s concerns and needs.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, personality and character are an important variable in the campaigns. How the candidates directly interact with their constituents is a much stronger determinant of votes – while advertisement on television and banners posted on streets

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<sup>1</sup> For principles of the concept, see Judith S. Trent and Robert V. Friedenberg, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices*, New York: Praeger, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Dave McRae, “Indonesian Politics in 2013: The Emergence of New Leadership?” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, vol. 49 (3) (2013), p. 292. For Jokowi’s winning chances, see for example Margareth S. Aritonang, ‘Jokowi Leads the Pack: Polls,’ *The Jakarta Post*, 2 December 2013. (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/12/02/jokowi-leads-pack-polls.html>), accessed 31 March, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mohammad Alfuniam, caleg for the Sleman regional legislature (DPRD II) from the National Awakening Party (PKB), 19 March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Each candidate usually has a team that supports his/her campaign – these are called *tim sukses*. Usually the bigger the constituents the bigger the *tim sukses* is.

matter less.<sup>5</sup> This is rather ironic as Indonesian streets have been littered with a myriad of posters and banners of all sizes. Voters get much less information about candidates from these printed materials, which typically only contain simple catchy taglines along with a picture of the candidate's face, the symbol of his or her party, and the number in the ballot.<sup>6</sup> It is evident that *blusukan* is emerging as a more promising and effective method for candidates.

## MONEY POLITICS IN THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

Money politics will still play an important role in the legislative election, but its role is also changing. Vote-buying by presidential and legislative candidates have become a common feature of post-*Reformasi* Indonesian elections since 1999.<sup>7</sup> However, what makes vote-buying in this year's elections different from previous elections is the extent to which it has become widespread and accepted. In areas we observed in our field study in Central and East Java, vote-buying activities were common. The practice has become so common that party officials and candidates openly admitted during interviews that it is unavoidable if they are to attract support for campaigns, and hopefully win votes as well.

For instance, when parties organise mass rallies, large sums are used to persuade supporters to flock to these events. These payments are usually called "*uang bensin*" (lit. gas money/transport allowance).<sup>8</sup> Other costs come from the printing of T-shirts, banners, and various essentials. However, as evidenced in Malang (East Java), such techniques sometimes have not even succeeded in mobilising enough supporters to fill up a small basketball stadium.<sup>9</sup> A PKB rally in Malang even offered door prizes, but this still failed to draw a bigger crowd.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the recent shift away from mass rallies (*pawai*) also comes from the fact that these are not only expensive, but also probably

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, see the Charta Politica Survey conducted on March 1-8, 2014, summarised in Bagus BT. Saragih, 'TV ads "not effective" in influencing voters,' *The Jakarta Post*, 26 March 2014. (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/03/26/tv-ads-not-effective-influencing-voters.html>), accessed 27 March 2014.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, some of these banners and posters in Malang have taglines such as '*peduli wong cilik*' (care for the little people), '*berjuang untuk kesejahteraan rakyat*' (will fight for people's prosperity), and '*hidup mati bersama rakyat*' (life and death with the people).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Vedi R. Hadiz, "Decentralization and Democracy in Indonesia: A Critique of Neo-Institutionalist Perspectives", *Development and Change*, Vol. 35 (4), September 2004, p. 697-718; Nanyung Choi, "Local Elections and Party Politics in Post-Reformasi Indonesia: A View from Yogyakarta", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26 (2), 2004, p. 280-301.

<sup>8</sup> Some candidates in Malang (East Java) complained that even this has become more expensive. It costs them Rp. 25,000-30,000 (SGD 3-4) for only one supporter, while in the previous campaign Rp. 10,000-15,000 (SGD 2-3) was enough.

<sup>9</sup> The Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN, National Mandate Party) in Malang organised such a rally on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2014 and chairman Hatta Rajasa attended as the main attraction. However, only about 500 people showed up.

<sup>10</sup> The prizes offered were a fridge and a gas stove. The rally was held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, and only around 500 people attended it.

not very effective.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the Jokowi-style *blusukan* is cheaper and gains more sympathy than at the usually crowded, loud, and traffic-stopping rallies. As such, although the General Elections Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum* - KPU) has allocated a set of campaign dates and spots for each party, these have rarely been used – except when high-profile party leaders visit.<sup>12</sup>

Elections in Indonesia have become an expensive undertaking for parties and candidates alike. Direct elections, the current election system that allows thousands of candidates to run,<sup>13</sup> and lack of organisational prowess among parties have forced candidates to organise and fund their own campaigns. Lax of campaign finance regulations in Indonesia also allows for millions of dollars in donations to be funnelled to all major political parties from anonymous individuals and corporations, with virtually no legal restrictions.<sup>14</sup> A closer look at the various donations and contributions to parties reveals that many of them have established massive war-chests. As of early March 2014, all political parties have reported a combined campaign budget of Rp 1,9 trillion (USD 171 million).<sup>15</sup> Much of these funds are invested by the parties in both legal campaign activities (e.g., media advertisements, banners, and billboards) as well as in illegal ones (e.g., vote-buying).

In Sleman and also in Malang, officials from various parties have indicated that all their parties are engaging in vote-buying activities. Money politics in the districts has become so rampant that even candidates with extensive personal appeal who regularly use *blusukan* activities still feel obliged to engage in vote-buying activities to ensure that their supporters are not swayed by the money received from other candidates.<sup>16</sup> On average, it is estimated that candidates spend between Rp 50 000 to Rp 60 000 (US\$ 4.2 to US\$ 5) per voter.<sup>17</sup> Within the Sleman district, the largest expenditures spent by a PKB caleg is Rp 900 million (US\$ 75,000), while on average, PKB calegs incur between Rp 300 and 500 million (US\$ 25,000 to US\$ 41,670) in campaign expenditures.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Political parties often hire traditional Indonesian pop (*dangdut*) singers, TV actors and actresses, and attractive female dancers as free entertainment to the scores of people who attend the *pawai* rallies. Many participants are actually there for this sole purpose and barely listen to the stump speeches given by politicians.

<sup>12</sup> These campaign spots are usually public stadiums. A drive through these locations in Surabaya, Malang, and Yogyakarta during our field trip reveals that they were not used for campaign events despite the fact that the spots had already been allocated to parties.

<sup>13</sup> Voters typically have to cast their votes for the municipal, provincial, and national candidates. Each party has multiple candidates for each of these levels.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Party Financing in Post-Soeharto Indonesia: Between State Subsidies and Political Corruption", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 29, no. 2, 2007: 238-263.

<sup>15</sup> The party with the biggest campaign fund is Gerindra with more than Rp 306 billion (USD 27 million). See "Ini Daftar Laporan Awal Dana Kampanye Parpol", *Kompas*, 2 March 2014 (<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/03/02/2124214/Ini.Daftar.Laporan.Awal.Dana.Kampanye.Parpol>).

<sup>16</sup> In the words of the party official, "In real life, money is king. We cannot hope to gain any votes if we do not use money [to bribe them]." ("Pada kenyataannya, duit itu rajanya. Kita nggak bisa dapat suara kalau nggak pakai duit") (Confidential interview with a PKB party official from Yogyakarta, March 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Confidential interview with a PKB party official from Yogyakarta, March 2014.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the desired effect of such money politics seems to be diluted by the fact that voters are receiving similar amount of bribes from different parties. Parties and candidates realise that only a handful of voters whom they have bribed will actually vote for them in the end. Thus, they try to make estimations of how many votes they can expect. For example, the PKB Party in Yogyakarta estimates that on average, only 40 percent of the voters that have received money from PKB *calegs* will actually vote for them in the April legislative election. This number increases to 60 percent in villages where support for the party is considered very strong, and decreases to less than 20 percent in villages where support for the party is weak.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The increased utilisation of new direct campaign methods such as *blusukan* is forcing parties and legislative candidates to make their case directly to grassroots voters. As a result, these voters are increasingly demanding that candidates have strong personal appeal and demonstrate genuine care for the constituents. The advent of “retail politics” in Indonesia is creating a new breed of candidates who need to create and maintain direct contact with the community – while old-style politicians are increasingly perceived to be out of touch, and as desk-bound officials.

Unfortunately, money politics remain a troubling feature in this year’s legislative election, as most parties and candidates continue to give out money to entice voters to support them during the campaign and also at the voting booth. It is even more troubling to see that this practice is no longer a taboo subject and that many politicians are willing to talk about it openly. Parties continue to use this method, not least because they have failed in developing solid organisational structures with clear platforms and programmes.

However, since many parties are opting for money politics, and none of them are left with an edge over the others, the effect of bribing voters remains unclear. By sticking to their own choice, voters may eventually force parties to abandon money politics or, at least, diminish its prominence in the Indonesian electoral process. It will thus be important to evaluate, after the legislative elections, whether parties and candidates still consider such investments to be really worthwhile.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

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