

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

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Vote-buying in Indonesia's 2014 Elections: The Other Side of the Coin

*By Ulla Fionna**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The current electoral system in Indonesia has allowed vote-buying to flourish. As such, the intermediaries (*korlap*) in the process increasingly play a stronger role in determining whether and how people vote.
- The *korlap* work for the candidate, but demand for monetary returns for votes also comes from the voters who see elections as a way to make short-term gains.
- *Korlap* employ in-depth knowledge of their communities to effectively target and persuade potential voters to support their candidates.
- Money politics is not just a matter of demand for and supply of votes, but is embedded in complex social relations and contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Vote-buying in Indonesian elections is certainly nothing new. Since the days of Suharto, *serangan fajar* (dawn attack) – which refers to the effort of bribing voters to vote for a particular party conducted in the early hours on polling day – has continued to play an important role to this day. Since the fall of Suharto's New Order in 1998 however, there are two important trends to note. On the one hand, the predictable effects of vote-buying may have been reduced by greater awareness amongst voters, as they now enjoy the freedom to vote and know they can benefit by taking the bribe and still vote according to their own preference. At the same time, parties have quickly realised that vote-buying is expensive and probably not very effective.

In the current electoral system, candidates are at the centre of the voting process. Put simply, candidates largely run and fund their own campaigns, and they face tough competition from those not only from other parties, but also from their own parties, to win seats.¹ As such they have been forced to choose methods they deem most efficient in grabbing votes amongst the electorate to which they are largely unknown. One simple way to do this is to attract votes with material benefits, which has resulted in large-scale vote-buying. The 2014 elections have demonstrated that this phenomenon has evolved to be more extensive, sophisticated, and better-organised than before. Indeed, various observations have strongly indicated that, compared to the 2009 elections, the scale and extent of money politics in this year's elections have been remarkable. An independent observer has used the words 'massive, vulgar, and brutal' to describe the extent of transactional politics during the elections.² The wide-ranging cases that have been reported featured most notably the door-to-door approach, where typically voters would be handed an envelope containing a specific candidate's name and a certain amount of money to persuade them to vote for that particular person.³ Less-direct and more innovative methods are plenty, including interest-free loans, free blood tests, plant seeds for farmers, insurance for motorbike taxis, and lucky draws offering freezers and even a Hajj trip.⁴

¹ Around 200,000 people stood for election to 20,257 seats in the Regional and Provincial Legislative Councils (DPRD), the House of Representatives (DPR) and the Regional Representatives Council (DPD). Of these, 6,607 candidates from 12 parties competed for the 560 seats in the DPR, while the remainder ran for the 132 seats in the DPD, the 2,137 provincial seats and the 17,560 regional seats. There are 1,344 new seats, mostly in the regional parliaments and 123 in provincial parliaments. See Max Lane, "Indonesia's 2014 Legislative Elections: The Dilemmas of 'Elektabilitas' Politics", *ISEAS Perspective*, 23 April 2014, (http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/ISEAS_Perspective_2014_25-The-Dilemmas-of-'Elektabilitas'-Politics.pdf).

² "Pemantau Pemilu: Politik Uang Kali Ini Sangat Masif, Vulgar dan Brutal" ("Election Observer: Money Politics This Time Around is Massive, Vulgar, and Brutal"), *Kompas*, 21 April 2014, (<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/04/21/2000277/Pemantau.Pemilu.Politik.Uang.Kali.Ini.Sangat.Masif.Vulgar.dan.Brutal>), accessed 29 April 2014.

³ See for example Erwin Daryanto, "Begini Praktik Politik Uang Terjadi di Pileg 2014", *detiknews*, 24 April 2014, (<http://news.detik.com/pemilu2014/read/2014/04/24/060747/2563849/1562/begini-praktik-politik-uang-terjadi-di-pileg-2014>), "Praktek Politik Uang Pemilu di Lampung Door to Door" (The Practice of Money Politics in Lampung is through Door-to-Door), *Tempo.co*, 9 April 2014 (<http://pemilu.tempo.co/read/news/2014/04/09/269569301/Praktek-Politik-Uang-Pemilu-di-Lampung-Door-to-Door>), both sites accessed 2 June 2014.

⁴ Novrida Manurung and Neil Chatterjee, "Free Loans Trump Noodles in Indonesia Voter Race", *Bloomberg.com*,

Vote buying also takes place at different stages of the campaign. Candidates provide gifts as a way to introduce themselves to voters. These could then be followed up by hand-outs at mass rallies, and donations to build or improve community facilities. To ensure that these tactics work, the candidates may then proceed with vote-buying much closer to the polling day.⁵ Aside from these methods, this year's election also revealed that vote-buying was done not only by the candidates, but also by organisers and scrutinisers – who were supposed to maintain the integrity of the voting process. A case in point is Gerindra Party's candidate in Pasuruan (East Java), Agustina Amprawati who admitted to bribing 13 sub-district electoral committees (PPK, Panitia Pemilihan Kecamatan). The committee members were paid a total of 117 million rupiah (approx. USD 10,172) in exchange for 5,000 votes for the candidate in all the sub-districts that the committee was in charge of. Feeling cheated when she still failed to secure a seat, she reported the case to the election watchdog (Panitia Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, Panwaslu).⁶

While vote-buying has been relatively well-documented, there is a different side to the phenomenon that is less known, namely, that of the intermediaries. This article shares some insights from the individuals who buy votes, and/or persuade voters on behalf of the candidates. It shows that there are various nuances in the practice of vote-buying in Indonesia. While the practice is becoming more institutionalised, what has not been stressed enough is that there is demand for vote-buying not only from candidates, but also from voters – primarily from low-income constituents who see the elections as a way to make short-term gains. It will also be demonstrated here, that although the work of the intermediaries largely bends the principles of free elections, ironically they could also increase interest in the elections.

HOW VOTE-BUYING ON THE GROUND WORKS

The 2014 legislative elections have institutionalised the need and demand for field co-ordinators (*korlap*, acronym for *koordinator lapangan*). These individuals played a significant role in how people voted on 9 April 2014. Interviews with two of these *korlap* revealed their side of the practice. They are seasoned practitioners who operate in their local communities.⁷ In every legislative election since 1999, they have worked

9 April 2014, (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-08/free-loans-trump-noodles-in-indonesia-voter-race-southeast-asia.html>), accessed 2 June 2014.

⁵ Edward Aspinall, "Money politics: The distribution of money, goods, and other benefits is an integral part of electioneering in Indonesia", *Inside Indonesia*, Edition 116 (Apr- Jun 2014), (<http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles/money-politics-2>), accessed 2 June 2014.

⁶ "Sogok Rp 117 Juta tapi Gagal, Caleg Cantik ini Merasa Ditipu" (Bribing Rp 117 Million but Failed, this Pretty Candidate is Feeling Cheated), *Kompas*, 24 April 2014. (<http://indonesiasatu.kompas.com/read/2014/04/24/1026159/Sogok.Rp.117.Juta.tapi.Gagal.Caleg.Cantik.Ini.Merasa.Ditipu>), accessed 2 June 2014.

⁷ The two men are middlemen or *makelaar* - people come to them when they want to buy or sell houses, land, vehicles and other goods, asking them for their service to find buyers and sellers and they will be paid a percent-

for various candidates to either persuade voters or simply buy votes. Established shortly before the 2009 elections, the current electoral system abolished the party ranking list, thus allowing every candidate an equal chance to be elected.⁸ This created and strengthened the demand for the *korlap* profession as candidates' success now depends on the direct votes they garner.⁹ Each of the two *korlap* interviewed worked for two separate candidates during the 2009 and 2014 elections.

Although it would be easy to assume that money is their only motivation, and that they would have no allegiance to a specific party, there are specific nuances to this aspect. The two *korlap* are friends, but often worked for different parties. This is the case because, while *korlap A* has chosen to work exclusively for Partai Demokrat (Democratic Party, PD), *korlap B* decided to work for any candidate but PD's – based on a particularly bad previous experience. Thus, party allegiance or non-allegiance can be a strong determinant of their decision to work for particular candidate(s).

In addition, *korlap B* noted that he always investigates the candidates that he works for. Specifically, other than choosing candidates that are not from Partai Demokrat, he would find out the background and credentials of the candidate(s). He would look for evidence that the candidate(s) have worked in and/or for the community, and not just rich individuals with money to spend. He mentioned that if the candidate had worked in local community organisations such as Karang Taruna (a typical small-scaled local youth organisation), or was involved in some social work – he would be more willing to assist him/her. However, he would not rule out a 'new-comer'. He would talk to the candidate to gauge what his/her interests truly are, what his/her programmes would be, and whether in general the candidate is trustworthy. The *korlap* also follows trends of electability and see which candidates have populist programmes, as electability and populist programmes would make their chosen candidates even easier to sell. If he, by the end of his investigations still does not feel confidence in the candidate, he claimed that he would not proceed in his service.

Because of the friendship between the two *korlap*, they would coordinate with each other to ensure that they would not intrude onto each other's turf. For instance, if one has worked on a particular RT/RW,¹⁰ the other would stay away from it. If both feel strongly about working in a particular one, they may also negotiate to decide how they would divide the constituents that they could target. Beyond negotiating

age of the agreed purchase price.

⁸ The party ranking is a closed list system, where parties determine the rank of the candidates. The voters cast their votes for the party, but the individual who will occupy the seat is chosen by the parties. Since 2009 with the open system, voters cast their votes directly for the individual candidates, regardless of their rank in the list, so voters choose the candidate and the party.

⁹ On 23 December 2008, the Indonesian Constitutional Court annulled Article 214 of Law No. 10 of 2008 on Parliamentary Elections to put an end to the party ranking list and let only the number of votes determine a candidate's success at securing a seat.

¹⁰ RT/RW are the smallest administration units in Indonesian community. RT stands for Rukun Tetangga (Neighbourhood Association), RW stands for *Rukun Warga* (Community Association). Rukun Tetangga is a small administration unit consisting around 15 neighbouring households, and Rukun Warga is a larger administration unit consisting of several (usually around five) RTs.

however, the way they operate also reveals the level of management that they need to possess to succeed in their work.

Their job requires in-depth knowledge of the people in their community. For them, this is relatively easy as they have lived there all their lives. Such knowledge is important for identifying potential voters whom they can persuade or buy. Because they know the individuals quite well, it is easy for them to choose their targets – which are usually swing- and first-time voters. It is considered risky and unproductive to approach supporters of other parties. Quite logically, they also would not approach voters whom they think would already vote for candidates they were working for.

Interestingly, they stressed that it is not always about money. *Korlap* B revealed that he had different methods to persuade would-be voters. He would first try talking to them. He would ask whether he/she would vote, and gauge who the likely candidate of choice is. Afterwards he would try to 'sell' his candidate. For him, this is easy to do as he genuinely supports the particular candidate(s). His approach is to convince the voters to think about what is best for his community – or ask whether the party/candidate that they had voted for in the previous election had really worked to improve the community. In urging voters to think this way, he aims to convince them to vote for his candidate instead. Stressing further that it is less about money, the *korlap* mentioned that they care about their pride. After working across a number of elections for a variety of candidates, these *korlap* cannot afford to lose face. This priority entails keeping their reputation intact by ensuring both success rate in helping candidates, and maintaining a good relationship with the community. Pride is also the reason cited when they claimed that they do not specify any tariff for their service.

When money does play a part, the *korlap* claim that it is often the voters who approach them asking “How come you are not giving away money?” (In Javanese: “*Sampeyan kok gak bagi-bagi duik?*”). Such a question indicates that the community knows and accepts what they do. The question also indicates a growing perception among voters that elections provide an opportunity to make easy money. This can be understood in the context of the poverty in these communities, and that voters are desperate for some kind of tangible benefits from the elections. This further fuels the demand for the *korlap*'s work. Also, demand can come from the candidates themselves, who sometimes have specific ideas of how many votes they need/want from specific polling stations, and ask the *korlap* to help them to secure the votes.

Once approached by voters, the *korlap* would know that for these voters it is indeed about money. What they would do then was to collect identity cards from them, typically by asking them how many people they have in their households, and then give them the name of the candidate that they need to vote for to get the money. In these cases, the approach is quite straightforward. The voters get 50 percent of the money¹¹ prior to voting and 50 percent after – once the votes are tallied at the

¹¹ The 'average' rate for individual voters in Malang area was around Rp. 50,000 or around USD 4. The government regulates that employers in Malang should pay their employees a minimum of Rp, 1,587,000 (less than USD 137) per month.

local voting booth and the *korlap* are convinced the voters have voted as they were supposed to.

In other cases, where they see potential voters gathered as a particular group, such as the local Qur'anic study group (*pengajian*) or local football club, they would make a direct approach and ask them what they need. Typically the answers would be new Qur'an, equipment for praying, or new uniform. The down payment system is applicable in these instances too, where the voters would then be registered, and half of what they need would be provided before polling day, and the other half after – once the votes from them are realised as agreed. It should be noted here that although *korlap* B claims that he never uses intimidation, *korlap* A does. What he would do in this instance is to remind the voters that there would be some consequences – often unspecified – if they did not vote for the candidate as they promised.

Due to the nature of the work requiring them to deal with candidates as well as voters and the election watchdog; understandably there are risks that the *korlap* bear. Essentially, they are the contacts that connect voters to the candidates. This means that if anything goes wrong it is them that voters would go after. They shared stories of having to use their own money to pay the voters off, in cases where the losing candidates had run away. Other risks come from the election watchdogs, who can report and prosecute them. They claim that these however, are easier to manage, as candidates typically have set aside bribe money for these officers. Their stories suggest how powerful they can be, particularly against the election watchdog – suggesting that reform on the role and accountability of the election watchdog is urgent.

BEYOND MONEY IN MONEY POLITICS

The *korlap*'s work clearly skews the principles of democracy. While ideally voters should make a free choice, which entails that there should largely be no other incentive than choosing representatives they trust to accommodate their needs; in reality, the *korlap* intervenes, somewhat like grassroots activists, except that they have at their disposal money and menace as optional tools of persuasion. The role of *korlap*, as explicated here, gives a more nuanced picture of money politics in Indonesia. In particular, it demonstrates that vote-buying is not simply a matter of demand and supply – it employs mechanics that involve complex social relations and deep local knowledge. Firstly, for efficiency, they target swing and first-time voters – voters who are largely non-partisan. Because of this tendency, they may very well have contributed to the reduction of the number of non-voters, and actually improved electoral turnout. Evidently, the rate of non-voters has gone down, from 29 percent in 2009 to just under 25 percent in 2014.¹² Nonetheless, concerns should be raised about

¹² Dhani Irawan, "Dibanding Tahun 2009, Angka Golput Pemilu 2014 Lebih Rendah", *detiknews*, 10 May 2014, (<http://news.detik.com/pemilu2014/read/2014/05/10/074125/2578828/1562/dibanding-tahun-2009-angka-golput-pemilu-2014-lebih-rendah>), accessed 2 June 2014.

the motivation of voters and how rampant money politics has been. As the *korlap* themselves have indicated, in this year's election, practically every political party was engaged in it.

Secondly, for the *korlap* there is a moral discourse intertwined with the economic aspect of their vocation. *Korlap B* suggested that he sought accountability from the candidates. He demanded of every candidate that he had helped to genuinely work for their communities. He claimed that he would check on them every once in a while, to see what kind of contribution they had made. He mentioned a few interesting cases on working for a variety of candidates. One was in which he ended up in confrontation with a candidate who owed money to be paid to the voters who had cast their votes for him. In this case, he ended up having to use his own money to pay voters. Failure to pay the voters, he said, would have cost him his profession and pride. If problems arise, a *korlap* would rather confront the candidates, than face the electorate – particularly as the areas they work in are also where they live, so they need to maintain congenial relationships with the locals. He also voiced strong displeasure towards those whom he had helped but had done very little for the community afterwards.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Undoubtedly, there are flaws in Indonesian elections. The narrative here clearly points to one: that the elections enable the profession of vote-buyers to flourish. The fact that every candidate ran his/her campaign independently has further strengthened this profession. After all, candidates seem to be convinced that it is impossible to be elected without distributing money. However, this article has shown vote-buying to be a process embedded in complex social relations and contexts. To ensure the durability of their vocation and their social standing in their respective communities, *korlap* are incentivised to select electable candidates to support, and thereafter to check on their accountability.

While we cannot claim that the cases elaborated on here are representative, they do show that in the processes of vote-buying, there are considerations beyond goods and rupiah.

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