

PERSPECTIVE

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Chinese Participation in the 2019 Indonesian Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Chinese political participation suppressed during the New Order, re-emerged after the fall of Suharto. The Chinese joined mainstream political parties, with between 8-16 Chinese candidates elected into parliament at every election.
- In the 2019 parliamentary election, two new “ethnic Chinese parties”, namely Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI) and Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo), participated, creating the impression that many more Chinese Indonesians have entered into politics.
- The PSI and Perindo are ethnic Chinese-led parties, but in reality are not Chinese-based. The PSI support base is made up of young Indonesians of various races advocating pluralism, minority rights and anti-corruption.
- The PSI and Perindo, however, both failed to pass the electoral threshold during the 2019 elections and were unable to send any representative to the legislative assembly. As a result, all Chinese members of parliament today continue to be from the established parties, especially from the PDI-P.

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INTRODUCTION

Some observers in Jakarta claimed that the 2019 legislative assembly election saw a record high number of Chinese-Indonesian candidates.¹ An Indonesian Chinese veteran journalist suggested that this was due to the participation of the ethnic Chinese-dominated party, the Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI), which nominated ethnic Chinese candidates. How true is this claim? Is the PSI an ethnic Chinese party? Was there a high degree of political participation among the Chinese Indonesians in the 2019 election? Did it differ from previous patterns? Who did the Chinese choose during the Presidential elections? What are the results of the parliamentary elections?

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION SINCE THE FALL OF SUHARTO

During the New Order period (1966-1998), Chinese political participation was discouraged. However, as soon as Suharto was forced to step down on 21 May 1998, two ethnic Chinese-led parties were established. These two parties, namely, Partai Reformasi Tionghoa Indonesia (PARTI) and Partai Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (PBTI), were set up by younger generation Chinese who had never been involved in politics previously.² PARTI was only a party on paper and never participated in any general election; only PBTI participated in the 1999 election, winning a single seat in the process. This was in West Kalimantan, where there is a large number of Chinese Indonesians. The PBTI later underwent an internal split and disappeared from the electoral scene. Since the 2004 general election, there has been no more ethnic Chinese-based party in Indonesia. The number of Chinese Indonesians has been small (approximately 2%)³ and culturally they are not a homogeneous group.⁴

Since the fall of Suharto, official Indonesian Chinese political participation has been through the main stream political parties, i.e. the indigenous dominated political parties, such as the PDI-P, Partai Golkar, Partai Demokrat, and PAN. It was through these parties that Chinese Indonesians were elected into Indonesian parliament.

In fact, many Chinese Indonesians were more interested in political participation through Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). There included Chinese social organizations such as Mataklin,⁵ Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia (PSMTI) and Perhimpunan Keturunan Tionghoa Indonesia (later changed to Perhimpunan Indonesia-Tionghoa, known as INTI), as well as Chinese clan associations such as Indonesian Hakka Association and “professional” organizations such as Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Through informal politics, ethnic Chinese have been able to attain some significant achievements, particularly during the pre-Joko Widodo period. At least three Presidential Instructions that benefited the Chinese Indonesian community were issued, and this was the result of informal politics rather than official political participation. However, since this is not directly related to the 2019 Elections, informal politics will not be discussed in this paper.⁶

THE PARTY OF YOUNG GENERATION

Chinese Indonesians had been participating in previous elections but in different ways compared to their participation in 2019. During this election, there was a new “ethnic Chinese” party: the Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI, Indonesian solidarity party) led by a third generation Catholic Indonesian Chinese (36 years of age), Grace Natalie, whose Chinese name is Wu Xiaohui 伍小惠. As a TV personality, she is well known among young Indonesians. However, few know her Chinese name and do not identify her as such in public. The name was only found in the Chinese language newspapers. Grace speaks fluent Bahasa and English, but not Mandarin; and, although considered among the Chinese community in Jakarta as ethnic Chinese, has never adopted a Chinese persona publicly.

The PSI was established on 16 December 2014, soon after Joko Widodo defeated Prabowo in the presidential election, and also after Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (alias Ahok) succeeded Jokowi to become the governor of Jakarta. Jokowi’s and Ahok’s victory in the Jakarta election raised the interest of many young people, both ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese, in politics. The PSI champions pluralism, and solidarity among multi-ethnic and multi-religious Indonesians. It also fights for women’s rights, and a clean government, and against corruption and polygamy. It declares to be the party of young Indonesians under 45 years of age, regardless of their religion and ethnicity. The way the party recruited candidates for parliamentary elections, transparently and with rigor, has impressed many observers. Pro-pluralist Indonesian intellectuals, regardless of race and religion, gave strong support to the PSI.⁷

However, this young people’s party was sometimes misunderstood by some Chinese and political observers as a Chinese-dominated party. In fact, in the PSI central board, apart from Grace Natalie who has ethnic Chinese background, not many are of Chinese origins. The secretary-general of the PSI, for instance, is Raja Juli Antoni who is a Javanese Muslim, and his deputy, Danik Eka Rahmanytyas is also a Javanese Muslim. In fact, the overwhelming majority of its MPs candidates were non-Chinese.

THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Direct presidential election in Indonesia only started in 2004. Before that, the president was elected by the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR), therefore the population at large was not involved. During the 2014 election, there was a contest between Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo. A significant number of Chinese Indonesians supported Jokowi because he was perceived to be friendly with the Chinese while Prabowo was perceived to be working with radical Muslims and unfriendly towards the Chinese. In the 2019 election, identity politics had worsened, and the minority Chinese continued to openly support Jokowi,⁸ as did many indigenous Indonesians who are in favour of pluralism and reform.

It is not surprising that during the 2019 presidential elections, PSI declared its support for Jokowi. It also had 575 candidates contesting in the parliamentary election. Many of these were non-Muslims but very few of them were ethnic Chinese. Of 575 candidates, less than 5% of the candidates were of Chinese origin.⁹ The Chinese candidates were concentrated in Jakarta; of the 21 candidates there, about 10 were Chinese, Grace Natalie being one of them. In other constituencies, there were very few Chinese candidates. There were only 16

Chinese candidates out of 575 candidates; the absolute majority were indigenous Indonesians, both Muslim¹⁰ and non-Muslim. And the proportion of non-Muslim among the candidates was very high.

Despite its non-Chinese majority, PSI's chairperson is a Chinese Indonesian and the party fights for "minority rights". Many Chinese individuals and a few Chinese groups supported the PSI, and even organized a fund-raising dinner for her party. Grace was also eager to visit Chinese-Indonesian organizations, urging them to vote for the PSI as she needed at least 7 million votes (about 4% of the total national votes) for her party to enter parliament.¹¹ However only in Jakarta and Surabaya did the PSI received support from the Chinese community as shown in the votes that the PSI candidates received in these two cities during the local parliamentary (DPRD) elections.¹²

Apart from the PSI which has an ethnic Chinese politician as its chairperson and ethnic Chinese activists among its members, there is another new political party that was established by an Indonesian Chinese, Hari Tanoesudibjo¹³ (alias Chen Mingli 陈明立). Hari is a Chinese tycoon active in media business. At one time, he was a close associate of Suharto's children. During the 2014 elections he supported Prabowo Subianto, but in the 2019 presidential election he abandoned Prabowo and became a keen supporter of Jokowi.¹⁴ On 7 February 2015, he established Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo). His wife Liliana and three daughters were MP candidates for the party.¹⁵ All in all, his party had 568 candidates contesting in the parliamentary election and of these, about 15 appeared to be ethnic Chinese.¹⁶ It should be noted that despite ethnic Chinese chairmanship, Perindo was not considered by Chinese Indonesians to be an "ethnic Chinese party". Hari Tanoe is not seen to be close to the Indonesian Chinese community.

CHINESE-INDONESIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS

Some Chinese Indonesian politicians preferred to run under the Gerindra ticket (such as Eddy Kusuma for North Sumatra and Dr Irene for Papua), while a much larger number joined parties that supported Jokowi such as the PDI-P, Golkar, PKB, PSI and Perindo. According to a local Chinese newspaper, at least 23 Chinese participated in the national parliamentary elections: 12 from PDI-P, 3 from PKB, 2 each from Golkar, NasDem, Gerindra and Perindo, and 1 from Hanura.¹⁷ However, PSI had at least 16 Chinese candidates but these were not included in the abovementioned list.

In the Regional Representative Council (DPD) which has 136 members, there was also at least 5 Chinese candidates in the 2019 elections, and 4 were elected.¹⁸ A significant number of Chinese candidates were present at the provincial DPRD level, but this paper will focus on the national DPR level.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, 11 Chinese candidates were elected: 9 came from PDI-P, 1 from Golkar and 1 from PKB. None of the Chinese candidates representing Partai Demokrat, Gerindra, NasDem and Hanura was elected. Grace Natalie of the PSI was reported to have gained the third highest votes among the parliamentary candidate for Jakarta, but since the PSI only received 1.89% of the votes nationally and hence is below the threshold required to enter parliament, she could not represent the party in parliament.¹⁹ Perindo, in turn, received 2.67% of the total votes and hence did not pass the parliamentary

threshold either, therefore its candidates, even if elected, would not have been able to enter parliament either.²⁰

Of the 11 elected Chinese Indonesian MPs, 7 are businessmen, 2 are university staff members, 1 is a priest and 1 is a physician who runs a consultant firm (see appendix 1). With regard to their religious affiliation, 7 are Christians, 3 Buddhists and 1 Muslim. As to their age, 3 are below 50 years old.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese participation in both parliamentary election and presidential election is significant for Chinese-Indonesian political identity. This participation made Chinese Indonesian become part of the Indonesian polity. There are also other objectives: such as personal and business interests for Chinese politicians. As the number of Chinese Indonesians is small and the community is heterogeneous, it is difficult to be voted into parliament if they merely rely on Chinese-Indonesian voters. Therefore they joined mainstream Indonesian political parties in order to get elected, and by joining these parties, the Chinese Indonesians also strengthen their Indonesian identity.

All of the MPs with Chinese background after 2004 were elected through main stream indigenous dominated parties. This is also the case with the 2019 election. The ethnic Chinese-led parties (PSI and Perindo) failed to send any candidates to the parliament.

However the 2019 elections witnessed slightly higher number of Chinese Indonesian candidates for Member of Parliament as a result of the participation of the PSI and Perindo. Although previous elections had quite a large Chinese participation, the 2019 elections saw the presence of a party led by a young Chinese Indonesian woman and another party led by a Chinese tycoon. The PSI succeeded in mobilizing some young urban Indonesians (including young Chinese Indonesians) regardless of ethnicity and religion to participate in the national general elections in order to improve the political system. As the party was campaigning for the youth not to boycott the election or to cast blank votes, one can argue that it might also have contributed to the higher turnout during the 2019 election. However, the PSI failed to gain the electoral support it expected as the Indonesian voters, including many Chinese, preferred to give their votes to established parties.

Appendix 1:

Ethnic Chinese Members of Parliament for the Period of 2019-2024

Name	Party	Year of Birth	Occupation	Religion
Dr Sofyan Tan 陈金扬	PDIP	1959	Physician/Consultant	Buddhist
Bambang Patijaya	Golkar	1970s	Businessman	Buddhist
Sudin 蔡瑞龙	PDIP	1964	Businessman	Buddhist
Ir Rudianto Tjen 曾昭真	PDIP	1958	Businessman	Christian
Daniel Johan 张育浩	PKB	1972	Priest	Catholic
Ichsan Sulistio	PDIP	1954	Businessman	Muslim
Darmadi Duriyanto, Ph.D. 林德俊	PDIP	1967	University staff	Christian
Charles Honoris 何震康	PDIP	1984	Businessman	Christian
Prof. Dr. Hendrawan Supratikno 黄正德	PDIP	1960	University staff	Christian
Indah Kurniawati	PDIP	1962	Banker	Christian
Herman Hery	PDIP	1962	Businessman	Christian

Source: Compiled from online unofficial results and Chinese newspaper reports; some information was provided by Mr. Lu I Kun, a Chinese newspaper journalist in Jakarta. I would like to record my appreciation to him.

¹ Su Junxiang (苏俊翔) “Yinni huayi houxian ren lilai zuoduo yici... (印尼华裔候选人历来最多一次.....the largest number of ethnic Chinese parliamentary candidates in Indonesian history), 联合早报 (Lianhe Zaobao), 16 April 2019.

² PARTI was led by Lieus Sungkharisma (Li Xuexiong), a member of the Young Buddhist Association, while PBTI was led by Nurdin Purnomo (Wu Nengpin). See Leo Suryadinata, “Chinese Politics in Post-Suharto’s Indonesia: Beyond the ethnic approach”, *Asian Survey* vol. 41, no.3 (May/June 2001), pp.502-524.

³ The 2010 Indonesian population census shows that the Chinese only constitute 1.2% of the Indonesian population. However, many members of the Chinese community believe that they constituted between 3% and 5% of the population as many in the census did not admit that they were of ethnic Chinese. I am of the view that the percentage of Chinese in Indonesia does not exceed 2%. See my article: “How many ethnic Chinese are there in Indonesia?”, *Asian Culture*, June 2004, pp.63-74.

⁴ For the heterogeneity of the Chinese Indonesians, see “Ethnic Groups and the Indonesian Nation-State, with Special Reference to Ethnic Chinese”, in Robert W. Hefner, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 43-53.

⁵ Matakín, the Supreme Religious Council of Confucius Religion, was first established in 1966 during the early Suharto period but was de-recognized after 1978 as the Suharto regime no longer recognized Confucianism as a religion.

⁶ For a discussion on these regulations, see Leo Suryadinata, “State and ‘Chinese Religions’ in Indonesia: Confucianism, Tridharma and Buddhism during the Suharto rule and After”, in Tan Chee Beng ed. *Chinese Overseas: Religions, Identity and Traditional Networks*. Singapore World Scientific Publishing, 2014, pp. 19-42; Leo Suryadinata, “An end to discrimination for China and the Chinese in Indonesia”, *ISEAS Perspective* #26 (25 April 2014).

⁷ For instance, Gunawan Mohammad, Faisal Basri, Mari Pangestu all actively supported PSI.

⁸ The image of Prabowo as the mastermind behind the anti-Chinese riots prior to the fall of Suharto was widespread among the older members of the Chinese community. In addition to this, Prabowo of the “green general” image also frightened many Chinese voters. I was in Jakarta before the 2014 presidential elections and discussed the presidential candidates with many Chinese leaders and voters, my conclusion is that overwhelming majority of the Chinese had strong distrust towards Prabowo. In the 2019 election, I also conducted field work in Jakarta and West Java, the Chinese voters’ sentiment against Prabowo was equally strong. Many Chinese campaigned for Jokowi.

⁹ Information given by Grace Natalie, 2 May 2019, Singapore. However, she did not elaborate on the number of Chinese candidates from the PSI. I have tried to check the list of PSI candidates for parliament. As all but one has changed their names, it is difficult, if not impossible to identify their ethnic background. I have studied their photos, their Indonesian names, religion and education, and ruled out those who are Muslims. Indeed, the number of ethnic Chinese appears to be small.

¹⁰ Of course, there are Chinese Muslims among the candidates but I have not been able to identify them.

¹¹ <https://qiandaoribao.com/img/upload/images/epaper/12042019/5.pdf> (Accessed 28/5/2019)

¹² The PSI gained 6.28% (4 seats) of the votes in the Surabaya local parliamentary election, defeating PPP and PAN, see <https://surabaya.kompas.com/read/2019/04/25/12211251/kejutan-perolehan-suara-psi-di-surabaya-kalahkan-ppp-pan-partai-nasdem> (Accessed 17/7/2019); <https://www.tribunnews.com/regional/2019/05/09/psi-raih-4-kursi-dprd-kota-surabaya-jadi-fraksi-sendiri-siap-bersih2-juga-kawal-no-money-politics> (Accessed 17/7/2019). In Jakarta, the PSI gained 8 seats in the local election, see <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190521124532-32-396846/psi-jadi-oposisi-anies-penyeimbang-pks-di-dki> . (Accessed 17/7/2019). In these two cities there is a large Chinese population. It is likely that many Chinese voted for PSI.

¹³ https://partaiperindo.com/?page_id=36770 (Accessed 30/5/2019).

¹⁴ On the possible reason for Hari Tanoe moving away from Prabowo, see Leo Suryadinata, “Which Presidential candidate will Chinese Indonesians vote for in 2019?” *ISEAS Perspective* #7 (1 February 2019).

¹⁵ <https://kumparan.com/berita-caleg/liliana-tanaja-istri-ketua-umum-partai-perindo-yang-maju-di-pemilu-2019-1544773341826925839> (Accessed 30/5/2019);

<http://wartakota.tribunnews.com/2019/04/02/putrinya-bersaing-dengan-ibas-dan-johan-budi-di-dapil-jatim-vii-hari-tanoe-jessica-anak-hebat> (Accessed 30/5/2019);

<https://www.cantika.com/read/1173598/persiapan-liliana-tanoesoedibjo-dan-tiga-anaknya-jadi-caleg> (Accessed 30/5/2019).

¹⁶ <https://infocaleg.com/detailParpol/9> (Accessed 30/5/2019). I have the same problem in identifying the ethnic background of the Perindo MP candidates. The 15 members were based on my educated guess, Hari’s wife and his three daughters being excepted.

¹⁷ An article by Cui Yi Sheng (崔一生), 2019 nian daxuan guohui he DPD de huayi yiyuan houxuanren (2019 年大选国会和 DPD 的华裔议员候选人, The candidate for DPR and DPRD in the 2019 elections) *Guoji Ribao* (国际日报), 15 November 2019. This article has not included the PSI candidates. It is worth noting that Hari Tanoe’s wife and his three daughters were not on the list.

¹⁸ These are Haripinto Tanuwijaya (陈涵平), Ibrahim Liyanto (李树宝), Christiandy Sanjaya (黄汉山) and Yoris Raweyei (His surname is 董). Information provided by Mr. Lu Ikun.

¹⁹ <https://politik.rmol.co/read/2019/04/18/386574/gagal-ke-senayan-psi-akui-kekalahan> (Accessed 28/5/2019).

²⁰ <https://tirto.id/akibat-parliamentary-threshold-gagal-ke-dpr-meski-suara-banyak-dZXx> (Accessed 31/5/2019).

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