

The Chinese Indonesians' dilemma in electing president

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In the country's first direct presidential election in 2004, the majority of Chinese-Indonesians knew who to choose for the president — the incumbent Megawati Soekarnoputri, because they wanted to thank for her great attention to this ethnic group. This year, however situation is totally different. Many of them are still undecided, like many other Indonesians.

A group of people share the same ethnicity, but there are still thousands of differences in political perspectives because of class, interests, knowledge, personal circumstance, religion, and others. The Chinese-Indonesians, on the other hand, like every other ethnic group in Indonesia share general attitude and behavior in politics.

This article tries to give a sketch on how Chinese-Indonesians perceive the presidential candidates, and why.

Chinese-Indonesians experienced cultural and identity renaissance under the presidency of Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati administrations (2001-2004). Often scorned and viewed negatively throughout Soeharto's 32-year ruling and with its peak during the May 1998 riots, all of a sudden they felt appreciated and admitted, and were starting to explore and express their ethnicity.

The Pacific Rim, at the same time, was experiencing a boom of East Asian fashion, food, entertainment, and culture. Those commodities also flourished in Indonesia and were also enjoyed by non-Chinese Indonesians.

At the same time, the specter of Islamist terrorism haunted Indonesia, while inter-religious conflict was taking place in Maluku and Central Sulawesi. Several Muslim vigilantes groups attacked Christian schools and places of worship. The post-9/11 atmosphere convinced many Chinese Christians that there was indeed a war taking place between Islam and Christianity. The 2004 presidential election, therefore, became a dire situation. Megawati was seen as the only secular candidate that could promise security for the Chinese and other minorities. When Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) was gaining popularity and becoming a new favorite, stories emerged that he was supported by Islamic parties hardliner groups. The fear was strengthened when the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) supported SBY.

Jusuf Kalla, SBY's chosen vice president candidate, was pictured as a racist and an Islamist. Therefore Megawati became the obvious choice, although a handful of Chinese also voted for SBY because of his image as an intellectual, modern, and Westernized firm leader.

Not long after Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won the presidency, Jusuf Kalla allegedly launched a negative statement concerning the Chinese Indonesians. Largely unknown in Indonesia, his comment for a while created an uproar among Asian-American activists.

Under SBY's administration, Indonesia was saturated with bad news of disasters, incompetency, and scandals. Poverty was rising, the parliament adopted Islamist-driven bills, and Chinese-Indonesians adopted a low-profile attitude again.

Although Yudhoyono might be not a proponent of it, since his administration, assertive nationalism has become popular in Indonesia, as it is in several other countries like Russia, China, and Iran. Media, politicians, and public figures express contempt toward foreigners and foreign countries.

Chinese-Indonesians are not specifically targeted, and some even joining in when the perceived enemies are shared, such as America or Malaysia. But although Chinese-

Indonesians hardly admit it, the nationalists openly condemn institutes closely related with Chinese-Indonesian lifestyles, such as malls, foreign franchises, and upmarket apartments and private schools.

Economic nationalism has become the biggest issue in this election. One of Kalla's catchphrase is "being a mandiri (independent) nation", which can be interpreted as self-sufficient, independent, and mature. His point, however, that Indonesia should limit foreign trade and should dare to say "no" to foreigners.

Megawati's running mate, Prabowo, had been a populist from the start, condemning apartments, malls, and foreign trade on his party's advertisements. Megawati and Kalla accused the SBY ticket as "neoliberalist", in contrast to their "people's economy". On a lower pitch, Kalla and Wiranto portrayed their wives as devout Muslim women, and rumors appeared on the Internet that Boediono's wife is actually a Catholic.

These issues, however, don't turn many Chinese Indonesians to Yudhoyono. In public, many Chinese-Indonesians feel it's safe (and even cool) to repeat what they have heard from the media, and the media often try to look critical and brave in criticizing the president.

On the other hand, Megawati is still popular as a secular leader, and Prabowo is the hardest-working candidate when it comes to approaching Chinese community leaders. The trick somehow worked since first, he isn't identified as an Islamist and he could convince people that he is Chinese-friendly, although numerous worldwide news reports and academic papers link him to the May 1998 riots.

Jusuf Kalla is also active in approaching the Chinese community leaders, and even has won the endorsement of prominent figure Sofyan Wanandi, who insists that Kalla isn't a racist.

It is true that Yudhoyono would still be popular for many Chinese who don't know and don't care much for politics, but only wishing for security, safety, and order. But some of his lesser maneuvers did not really help his image. He also attempted some gestures which could be seen as appeasement to the Islamists, such as promising to rejuvenate the Islamic scout or quickly approving the Iranian election result.

This newspaper stated that there are only 1.5 million eligible Chinese voters out of 170 millions. That's not even one percent. More than half of them live in Greater Jakarta, leaving less than one million thinly spread all across Indonesia.

In numbers, they are very insignificant and their votes are actually quite expendable. But in economics, international relations, and social affairs, they are indispensable.

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