

Worrisome Indonesian polls

LOW TURNOUT: Voter apathy and lack of faith in political system may be true



IN a recent commentary by Max Lane (ISEAS Perspective, April 23), it was revealed that the number of eligible voters who chose to not vote at the recent parliamentary elections may be as high as 34 per cent.

Though this figure is being tallied and disputed by some, it does send a very worrying signal to Indonesian analysts, who bemoan the state of party politics in the vast and important country, and it suggests that earlier surveys about voter apathy and lack of faith in the political system may well be true.

If so, this is not a good sign for the times ahead and politicians from all parties have to ask how and why this has happened, and why so many Indonesians today do not even believe in politics anymore.

Though such a question begs a longer and more detailed and nuanced analysis, I can offer a cursory observation at this point, based on my own observation of this year's campaign and previous campaigns.

Looking at Indonesia today, we can see that none of the three leading parties (PDI-P, Golkar and Gerindra) has really "won" in any meaningful sense of the word. None of the parties has managed to pass the 20 per cent voters' mark and none of them is in a commanding position to compel or induce a coalition with other parties.

The spread of votes has been rather even, which suggests that most parties were able to grab a slice (big or small) of the voters' pie, but none was given the lion's share. The relatively equal spread of votes may indicate how Indonesian society today is being torn in different directions by parties that are seen more as vehicles for social mobility, rather than agents of socio-economic-political transformation.

But, there may be another reason for the lacklustre performance of the parties in general, and it is this: As most Indonesians know, Indonesian governments have been made up of loose and pragmatic coalitions since the early 2000s.

The ritual of coalition-forming has been more or less the same since then: parties vie for support, count their winnings, and proceed to bargain and horse-trade, only after they know where they stand vis-a-vis other parties.

This is exactly what is happening now, with PDI-P, Golkar and Gerindra trying to use whatever little leverage they have to win the support of other parties that got slightly less than they did at the polls. By June, the electorate will be presented with two or, perhaps, three coalitions that will claim the right to represent the nation as the next government.

However, this also means that the actual process of voting may not deliver the desired result for the individual voter.

Take, for instance, the case of Voter A, who votes for Party A. He or she votes for Party A because he or she believes in its ideology and programme (no matter how loosely or ill-defined it may be). Party A wins, say, 15 per cent of the votes. This would not be enough for Party A to nominate its own presidential candidate, and so it begins to negotiate with Parties B, C, D and others.



An Election Commission official monitoring his computer screen during the tallying of votes in Jakarta earlier this month. AFP pic

Now, at this stage, Voter A may raise some serious objections: He or she may reject Party B's stand on economic nationalism or Party C's stand on foreign policy, etc. But, the future of Party A's association with other parties is no longer in the voter's hands: he or she has cast the vote and has to accept whatever alliance Party A enters into, depending on the whims and calculations of the leaders of the party.

This, in effect, means that the vote cast by Voter A means very little, and may have little or no impact on the future trajectory, behaviour and political choices made by the party that he or she had voted for. And, if that is the case, then why vote at all?

The situation I have described sums up the nature of the political beast in Indonesian politics, where there are no clear distinctions between fewer parties, such as in the United States, where the two main choices are the Democrats and Republicans, or in the United Kingdom, where it is between the Conservatives and Labour Party.

Even in countries like Malaysia, where there are coalitions at work, the coalitions are set before the elections and not after, and the choice is simply between Barisan Nasional or Pakatan.

Indonesia's fluid system (which will be reformed by the next election, five years from now) still allows for this peculiar arrangement, where coalitions are formed after and not before the votes are cast, thereby, introducing an element of uncertainty as to what form the elected government might take and who the members of the ruling coalition might be.

Though no systematic study has been done that proves a causal link between the coalition system and voting patterns, on the basis of the interviews I have done during and after the elections, this was one of the factors that was quoted to me again and again to explain the level of apathy among many.

All eyes are now upon the coming presidential elections, where it is hoped that the range of choices will be smaller and clearer, too.

It is also speculated by some that more people will come out to vote for the presidential elections than the legislative elections, and I hope that to be true. By the time of the next elections in Indonesia, many analysts hope that the quirks of the Indonesian system will be ironed out, so that voters will have a clearer idea of what the parties stand for, what the coalitions may be and how they differ.

I, for one, hope this comes true, for the electoral process in Indonesia is an indicator of the strength of democratic praxis in our region, and it would be a disaster if the biggest democracy in Southeast Asia becomes little more than a ritualised bargaining shop, where votes no longer matter.

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