

Research Articles

Indonesian Millennials Inside the Vortex of Identity Politics

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Abstract

Indonesia has long historical relations with China. The Chinese—mostly merchants—arrived much earlier than the Dutch, although no written records are available as to the exact date of their arrival. After Indonesia proclaimed independence in 1945, the Chinese found themselves in a precarious position. The anti-China narrative was played up to bolster the impression that the pribumi was somewhat threatened. This article centers on the use of anti-China narrative in election campaigns, surveys on millennial voting behavior and political preferences. It aims to provide descriptive explanation of how Indonesian millennials are contextualized within domestic political constellation, focusing on the use of identity politics in election campaigns.

Keywords: identity politics, millennials, political narrative

I. Introduction

Indonesia has long historical relations with China. The Chinese—mostly merchants—arrived much earlier than the Dutch, although no written records are available as to the exact date of their arrival (Anggraeni, 2011, pp. 259-260). Some of them then decided to settle in the new place and married indigenous women.

During the Dutch colonization, the Chinese were categorized as foreign Orientals. Their status was below that of the Europeans but above the natives, or *pribumi*. The Chinese were heavily involved in the colonial economic affairs, occupying the strategic role of intermediaries, to the resentment of the *pribumi*. After Indonesia proclaimed independence in 1945, the Chinese found themselves in a precarious position. Some chose to leave the country and return to China; some stayed (hereinafter the Chinese-Indonesians). In post-independence Indonesia, the deep-seated suspicion about the Chinese made its way to a series of discriminatory policies, not to mention persecution.

Not only did Chinese-Indonesians bear such suspicion, China too was viewed with wariness. Bilateral ties were officially formed in 1950, yet mistrust loomed large. Domestic context played significant role in affecting and helping perpetuate mistrust of China. Sukarno, albeit not a communist, was close to *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, or the Indonesian Communist Party), arousing hostility among the nationalists, particularly the army, and the Islamists toward his regime. In the night of September 30, 1965 seven army generals were kidnapped and murdered. PKI was accused of masterminding the failed coup attempt. The truth surrounding this event has remained cloudy and become a subject of continuous academic debate. One thing is of certainty nonetheless: the demise of PKI and Sukarno. What came after that bloody night was even bloodier with hundreds of thousands of communists and supporters were systematically executed. Chinese-Indonesians were not the main target, but some—though the exact number is unknown—became victims of the killing spree. The fact that PKI had contacts with China was sufficient an

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evidence that Beijing was not innocent. In 1967 the new president, Suharto, “froze” bilateral relations with China.

Under Suharto, Chinese-Indonesians lived in duality. They were stripped of their Chinese identities. The government forbade the use of Chinese language and the celebration of the Chinese New Year, or *Imlek*, among others (Suryadinata, 2003). Most Chinese-Indonesians shunned participation in politics and resigned to economic activities instead. In fact, some Chinese businessmen were Suharto’s close allies. Suharto’s last years in power were tenuous. The worsening economic condition, peaked around the Asian financial crisis in 1997, released people’s pent-up anger against his corrupt government. Chinese-Indonesians were trapped in between. Their relatively better economic stature made them vulnerable. The mobs ransacked their businesses (mainly shops), attacked, murdered and raped them. A study by Samsu Rizal Panggabean and Benjamin Smith (2011) finds that the anti-Chinese riots in some cities, such as Jakarta and Medan, were government-incited aimed at transferring people’s vexation away from the government to the Chinese-Indonesians.

Reformasi opened a new era not only to Indonesians in general, but also Chinese-Indonesians. Bit by bit, Chinese-Indonesians began appearing in political stage. In international affairs, too, relations with China have improved since Suharto restored diplomatic ties in 1990. As of 2013 the two states agreed to upgrade their bilateral status to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In his speech before the Indonesian Parliament, Xi Jinping introduced the 21st Maritime Silk Road. This proposal, along with the Silk Road Economic Belt, then is referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Joko Widodo (Jokowi) embraced it eagerly as it corresponds to his own initiative, *Poros Maritim* or the Maritime

Fulcrum. China’s investments, especially in infrastructure, started flowing in. But BRI is not without its controversies. Relatedly, even though Chinese-Indonesian growing political participation demonstrates an inclusive democracy, it does not eliminate the negative sentiment toward them.

This article aims to provide descriptive explanation of how Indonesian millennials are contextualized within domestic political constellation, focusing on the use of identity politics in election campaigns. Why the millennials? Data showed that in 2017 those born between 1980 and 2000 constituted 33.75% of the total population—the largest age group of 88 million people (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak, 2018, p. 22). Of this number, 35% to 40% are eligible voters in 2019 election (Abdi, 2018). This is the generation that will define Indonesia in the next decade or so.

Analysis proceeds as follow. The next section lays out the perception of China based on issues relevant to Indonesians, i.e. China’s investment through BRI scheme and Chinese workers. The subsequent section touches on the penetration of the so-called anti-China narrative into Indonesian political sphere, i.e. how it was played on during election campaigns. The final part concludes.

II. Perception of China

Indonesian perception of China is best regarded as ambivalent. Survey revealed that 41% of Indonesians said that China would have a positive impact on their country, while 39% opined the reverse (Fossati, Hui, & Negara, 2017, p. 41). Likewise, the same survey reported that close economic relations with China would only bring a little benefit for the 62.4%, compared to the 27.7% who said that Indonesia would benefit a lot (2017, p. 41). Pew Research Center noted a decrease in

favorable view of China among Indonesians from 55% in 2017 (44% somewhat favorable; 11% very favorable) to 53% in 2018 (40% somewhat favorable; 13% very favorable), and 36% in 2019 (26% favorable; 10% very favorable) (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019a, p. 51). Moreover, the notion of current good economic ties with China was supported by 60% of respondents, vis-à-vis the 57% who took a contrary standpoint (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019a, p. 22).

Concerning investments, 54.9% welcomed China's investments only in some cases, 25.2% would never allow, and 19.9% would allow such investments to take place (Fossati, Hui, & Negara, 2017, pp. 43-44). Pew Research Center conducted research in 2019 detailing that 48% of Indonesians considered China's investments as a bad thing, even though 32% disagreed (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019a, p. 34). That China's investments require the employment of Chinese workers rouses people's fear of unfair competition—that they would steal the jobs from Indonesian workers. Intriguingly, respondents were fine with Chinese workers taking up jobs in Indonesia insofar as they are limited in numbers (50.2%) and of high qualifications (19.9%); whereas some rejected that very idea altogether (26.6%) (2017, p. 43).

As abovementioned, the troubled relations with ethnic Chinese could be dated as far back as the Dutch colonial era. Chinese-Indonesians are still seen as "foreign" and their economic wealth is a source of envy. With China's ascendance, the question of Chinese-

Indonesian loyalty once again is brought out, since they are the ones who are more likely to reap the benefits (Setiajadi, 2016). Hence, such ambivalent perception also applies to this minority. In 2017 survey 47.6% of respondents viewed that Chinese-Indonesian loyalty may still reside in China and 64.4% felt uncomfortable with their involvement in politics (Fossati, Hui, & Negara, 2017, pp. 25-27). Some 62% and 41.9% stressed Chinese-Indonesian "excessive influence" in economic and political arenas (Fossati, Hui, & Negara, 2017, p. 25). This finding substantiates the long-held perception that Chinese-Indonesians are privileged.

The cited surveys seem to paint a rather gloomy picture of Indonesian perception of both China and Chinese-Indonesians. Do the millennials speak the same language? According to a study by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), millennial respondents said that economic cooperation with China, among other countries, was detrimental (32.8%), compared to those who deemed it beneficial (11.7%) (2017, p. 16).² Pertaining to foreign workers, 77.7% said they had bad influence on national economic, whereas 22.3% was of the opposite opinion (CSIS, 2017, p. 12). Although the survey did not mention any specific nationality, it indicated negative perception of the issue.³ Pew's 2019 Global Attitude Survey found that around 48% of Indonesian younger adults belonging to the 18-29 age group had a more positive stance on China (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019b).⁴ These findings underline the

² There were ten countries on the list (from the most beneficial to the least): Saudi Arabia (27.4%), ASEAN countries (23.4%), the United States (14.3%), China (11.7%), Russia (5.2%), European countries (3.3%), South Korea (3%), Australia (2.3%), India (1.2%), and others (4.4%). Some 3.7% offered no-answer.

³ I was unable to find data on Indonesian millennial perception of Chinese-Indonesians.

⁴ In comparison, 35% (aged 30-49 years) and 27% (aged 50 years above) of respondents shared the positive view of China. Recall that the oldest millennials, by the time the survey was taken, were 39 years old. In other words, the number of millennials with positive view of China was likely to be higher. Unfortunately, the full by-age data was unavailable.

ambivalent position held by Indonesian millennials which actually aligns with the general sentiment toward China.

Since this article centers on the use of anti-China narrative in election campaigns, surveys on millennial voting behavior and political preferences merit special attention. This brings us to the political events that gave rise to identity politics hovering around the anti-China narrative.

III. *Pribumi vs. asing-asing*⁵: The anti-China narrative in election campaigns

Scholars seem to agree on designating Ahok case as the turning point in Indonesia's political contestation (See, e.g., Hadiz, 2018; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2019; Lim, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Briefly, Ahok (the nickname of Basuki Thahaja Purnama) was Governor of Jakarta after replacing Jokowi who was elected president in 2014. Sometime in September 2016 a truncated video of Ahok speaking in front of his people in North Jakarta was spread like wildfire in social media. In it, Ahok was recorded making reference to a verse from the Koran—*Al-Ma'idah 51*—that speaks about choosing non-Muslim leaders. Ahok was set to compete in 2017 gubernatorial election. The verse had been called on by Ahok's political opponents as if to remind Jakartans of his identity as a Chinese Christian. Pressures amounted with Muslims marched on the streets demanding charges against Ahok. He was eventually convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison in May 2017. Prior to this, Ahok managed to participate in the election where he lost in the second round

to Anies Baswedan. The campaign was notorious for its excessive use of identity politics which later reverberated through 2019 presidential election.

Millennials are generally known to be more educated, more connected, more technologically savvy, and economically wealthier.⁶ They are exposed to internet on daily basis. A survey by Indonesian Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA) in 2017 unveiled that 83.23% millennials spent their times on internet for social media activities, 68.01% for accessing information/news, and 46.81% for entertainment (2018, p. 72). Their reliance on internet merits special attention.

With the highest access to internet, millennials "in general are easily swayed by dominant issue in social media," (Huda, 2017, p. 11). It is no coincidence that social media play a significant role in election campaigns (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2019). A poll by *Masyarakat Telematika Indonesia* (MASTEL, 2019), or Indonesian Telematics Community, highlighted social media as the most used platform for propagating hoax (87.5%), followed by messaging apps (67%), and websites (28.2%). Socio-political (e.g. local election and government policy) and SARA (abbreviation for ethnicity, religion, and race) issues were the two most frequent sources of hoax (93.2% and 76.2% respectively) (MASTEL, 2019).

The anti-China narrative took form of hoax and hate speech. In 2016 news of ten millions of Chinese workers coming to Indonesia was widely circulated, prompting the government to clarify that Chinese workers comprised only 20% of total foreign workers in

⁵ The word *asing* literally means foreign. *Aseng* is a derogatory word for China and/or Chinese-Indonesians.

⁶ Such depiction of Indonesian millennials can be misleading. A study by Ariane Utomo, Iwu Utomo,

and Peter McDonald (2018) discloses the other side of the millennial coin where the underprivileged young adults in Jakarta struggle with poverty and other disadvantages.

Indonesia (Anggraeni & Chairunissa, 2018). This clarification aside, the “politicization” of Chinese workers did not abate the closer the nation got to 2019 election. My readings of the narrative shared and debated on social media revolved around China’s investments (that it is bad for the country), Chinese foreign workers (that they steal the jobs from the locals), communism (that China’s connection with PKI somehow is still alive), and Jokowi’s pro-China regime.

Hate speech against the government was massive. In July 2017 pro-*khilafah Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI) was officially disbanded for going against the state ideology, *Pancasila*. Because of this decision, the government was judged anti-Islam or Islamophobic. In early January 2019 a tweet went viral informing the arrival of seven containers from China in Tanjung Priok port in North Jakarta. The containers, the tweet claimed, were filled with voted ballots for Jokowi which turned out to be hoax. That China was said to abet Jokowi in winning the election further reinforced the existing *antek* (or lackey of) *asing-aseng* narrative. Additionally, given his administration close ties with China, such accusation spoke for itself. The opposition candidate, Prabowo Subianto, on the contrary, was portrayed as pro-Islam. His anti-*asing-aseng* campaign gained currency as he was championing the *pribumi*. The politicization of China’s investments and invasion of Chinese workers strengthened the victimization of *pribumi* narrative. Albeit not openly anti-Chinese (Hew, 2016), negative view of China may have ramification on Chinese-Indonesians (Setiajadi, 2016).

In view of such political development, how do Indonesian millennials make sense of it? Survey by Poltracking Indonesia in 2018 highlighted millennial voting behavior where 27% of respondents chose legislators and local leaders/president based on their religion,

rather than their performance (17%) (KPPPA, 2018, p. 129). In the same vein, CSIS found that 53.7% millennials could not accept leaders from different religions, while 38.8% said otherwise (2017, p. 28). Alvara Research Center’s study differentiates the Muslim millennials into three typologies: nationalist-oriented (35.8%), nationalist religious-oriented (40.9%), and religious-oriented (23.3%) (Ali, 2018). This finding implies that religion remains a key factor for millennials to determine their political preferences. Although more millennials are nationalist-oriented, those with religious tendency (i.e. aspiring to Islamic state) are not far behind (Ali, 2018). Identifying oneself with religion, i.e. “being Islam”, has become more important (Jati, 2016, p. 389). Rising religious awareness among Indonesians has been conspicuous in post-*Reformasi* era. Despite this, they tend to have rather superficial understanding of Islam, resulting in political personification, that is, to choose candidates on account of their personal attributes (Jati, 2016, p. 386).

Such political preference denotes inclination to identity politics. The problem is not about the difference in preference, but rather the enmity toward other preference. Political intolerance cuts across various identities, but SARA (anti-Islam, pro-*pribumi* discourse) seems to be in the limelight (See, IPAC, 2019, for a good analysis on this matter). Different political preferences thus give Indonesians the license to exercise the “freedom to hate” (Lim, 2017).

III. Conclusion: The Way Forward

Millennials are not immune to identity politics. They are known to be apathetic toward politics and less engaged in political discussions, especially in social media (Chen & Syailendra, 2014; KPPPA, 2018). Their preference for personality over performance is

a case in point. As the biggest internet users, they are subject to hoax and hate speech. However, given their educational background and adeptness in technology, millennials are expected to become more scrupulous in sorting out news. As regards religion, they lean more toward moderate Islamic teaching based on their affiliation with organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah* (Ali & Purwandi, 2017, p. 15). Notwithstanding such good news, a caution should be spelled out. Middle-class millennials, especially those residing in urban areas, tend to be career-oriented that they favor the “easy way” to fulfill their spiritual needs. *Hijrah* has become the buzzword for this phenomenon.⁷ But *hijrah* is not without its dark side. HTI preacher, Felix Siauw, is very popular among millennials. His radical views, e.g. calling for the establishment of *khilafah* and criticizing nationalism, may infiltrate his millions of *jama’ah* or followers. Felix is not alone. There are other preachers affiliated with radical organizations like *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, or Islamic Defender Front). This kind of teaching might endanger Indonesian unity as it plants intolerance toward out-groups. HTI and FPI were deeply embroiled in the campaigns against Ahok in 2017 and for Prabowo in 2019, hence capitalizing on identity politics (Lane, 2019).

As the defining force of Indonesia’s future, millennial vulnerability to identity politics is disquieting. But this is not the whole story. Recall that moderate Muslim millennials are in majority, advocating friendly and tolerant Islam. CSIS (2017, p. 29) study found that 90.5% millennial respondents disagreed with the idea of abandoning or replacing

Pancasila as the nation’s ideology. Earlier study correspondingly underscored the proclivity to identify oneself by nationality (73.9%), rather than religious (17.8%) and ethnic (6.4%) identification (Chen & Syailendra, 2014, p. 14). These millennials are the silent majority—those who opt for avoiding conflicts by lying low. Various polls showed that Jokowi won the heart of the millennials (Destryawan, 2019; Qodar, 2019; Sitepu, 2019). Therefore, Jokowi’s victory in 2019 presidential election by 11% margin should be celebrated too as the victory of silent-majority millennials against identity politics.⁸

The long road lies ahead for Indonesian millennials. Identity politics must not become the only game in town. The anti-China narrative was played up to bolster the impression that the *pribumi* was somewhat threatened. The two presidential aspirants, and their supporters, then were pitted against each other based on their respective stance on related China issues. Each group claimed to be pro-*pribumi* and pro-Islam, while slamming the other as traitor, infidel, communist, and all. Not only does such extreme polarity endanger national unity by sowing discords among citizens with different political preferences, identity politics may as well shape foreign (mis)perception of Indonesia. The anti-China narrative will not invite Beijing to intervene in Indonesia’s domestic politics, like the seven-containers-from-China hoax. But such false narrative, if perpetuated, would eventually be perceived as truth. Indonesians have enough negative sentiment toward China. To trigger angry reaction by invoking China issue is

⁷ *Hijrah*, from an Arabic word *hajara*, means to move to a better place or condition, both in physical and spiritual terms. Interestingly, the word *hijrah* in Indonesia is represented primarily by fashion and lifestyle. It does not, however, necessarily disregard the essence of *hijrah* by relegating it merely to symbolic changes like physical appearance.

⁸ Both candidates actually resorted to identity politics. Jokowi’s choice of Ma’ruf Amin as his partner was made in the face of stern anti-Islam indictment by the opposition. Jokowi supporters, in exchange, questioned Prabowo’s credibility as Muslim by, among others, zeroing in on his Christian brother.

relatively easy. Furthermore, we should always be cautious about the potential repercussions of the anti-China narrative that might put Chinese-Indonesians in peril.

It is fair to say that Indonesia-China relations are colored by misunderstanding. There is no better way to reverse them than enhancing contacts between the two states. Thus far, relations with China have been mainly conducted at state level. BRI has generally been well received by the government. Though still too nascent to predict Jokowi's foreign policy in his second term, it is unlikely that he will withdraw from his commitment to BRI. Yet, the people seem to be left behind. As evidenced in the previous elections, it is the people, millennials included, who are inclined to fall victim to anti-China narrative. It is up to the young generations whether to let the existing misunderstanding reign future Indonesia-China relations. People-to-people exchange is a good initiative to facilitate communication between the two parties so as to clear up any misunderstanding. However, to the extent that China issue has been politicized, the initiative should also come from within. As future leaders, millennials can no longer be apathetic. In the post-truth era, being a silent-majority is not enough.

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