

Identity, Political Culture, and Democracy Naivety in Indonesia

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Abstract. Since the transition of Indonesia from the authoritarian New Order era to the more democratic Reformation Order in 1998, significant changes have occurred in leadership recruitment at the national and regional levels. There have also been substantial transition in the pattern of voter mobilization, specifically the increasing prevalence of identity politics. This study showed that each region had a different approach to incorporating identity in electoral politics. Even with the Indonesian multicultural nature and a diversity of identities, every region has unique political cultures, and acknowledges the significance of identity-related issues for achieving electoral success. Also, there was a tendency for inconsistent and double-standard positioning of identities, which biased the stance on identity and lacked neutrality. Moreover, Indonesian democracy was still perceived as naive, with identities remaining a primary electoral tool.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has been free from authoritarian rule since 1998 following the collapse of the New Order government led by Suharto, who held power for about 32 years. While this administration prioritized government centralization and efforts to promote uniformity in various fields [1, 2], reformation has transformed the system to be more democratic. Democratization has occurred across almost all sectors, specifically in the socio-political domain, leading to increased public participation at various levels, marked by extensive freedom. One significant phenomenon is the resurgence of issues related to locality, community, and recognition of diverse potentials between different regions.

In addition to increased recognition, there is a resurgence of identities once regarded as subordinate to nationalist identities during the New Order government. Over the last two decades, reclaiming identity has become inevitable, giving rise to the resurgence of identity politics [3, 4], specifically as Indonesia evolves into a modern democratic nation.

Identity reclaiming has tended to increase in recent decades. In every election momentum in Indonesia, identity politics tends to increase in intensity, form, and impact on social cohesion. This of course tends to be potentially destructive for national integration and if it becomes a trend, it will potentially create democratic backsliding. If the last election has shown identity instrumentation, the next election is projected to not be free from the shadow of identity. This can be seen before the election, the community and its various groups have been divided in such a way, this will continue to increase in the implementation year, as well as in the post-election period. Although there is a limited prohibition on identity instrumentation in the regulations, the fact is

that this condition has not been able to overcome the split society in Indonesian political society. Identity politics has clearly become a threat to democracy.

The first post-reformation election in 1999 was characterized by vibrant democracy, witnessing the growth and development of political parties categorized by various factors, ranging from religion to ideology. The 2004 election featured debates on the relationship between central and regional governments within the framework of regional autonomy. In 2009, ideologies and religious parties were grouped in the election, while the 2014 and 2019 elections were characterized by unavoidable identity divisions. During the last two elections, Indonesian democracy recorded contestants mobilizing issues of religion and other identities as a means of competition. The current study specifically addressed how identity became a new dimension of Indonesian electoral politics. Exploring the experiences of various regions in Indonesia regarding the growth of political identity movements was also crucial.

2. The New Culture: Identity Politics

Indonesia is a country with more than 700 ethnic groups and home to six religions and beliefs. Despite the Muslim majority, Indonesia is renowned for its tolerance and accommodation with diverse identities. As a pluralistic country, it inevitably has various identity variations.

Since the fall of President Soeharto in 1998, elections in Indonesia have been held several times in a democratic regime, but one of the fundamental challenges is how to make elections a momentum for consolidation to elect leaders. Elections, at least in 2014 and 2019, have become a deconstructive arena for

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national cohesion. No wonder Indonesian democracy is still struggling with procedural aspects with little substance, our democracy is not mature; immature. Identity politics has become an unavoidable color and elections have become a critical phase in building national integration. Identity politics has changed the nature of this nation, which is very open and multiculturalist, into grouping in identity boxes, most of which are not ideological, but primordial. Identity politics, which was originally based on communal interests with certain characteristics, was transformed only because of the orientation of electoral power.

In the last few elections, the term identity politics has been widely discussed, debated and practiced. Most place identity as an instrument to accumulate support, others place identity to negate different groups. Identity is framed as distinguishing facts and tends to be used as a tool to reinforce political orientation attitudes and positions rather than as a tool for class struggle.

In the last election, the context of identity politics has become an unavoidable character of contestation, most of the identities used are primordial identities, identities that are given, given and attached. This means that the instrumented identities are identities that are barely related to ideological interests. Identity politics is essentially a tool of class struggle. However, identity politics that runs in the elections and regional elections in Indonesia is more likely to be a manipulation of identity because it is used only before and during elections, but then tends to disappear after the democratic party takes place. This identity manipulation has a character and disposition that is destructive and unproductive for nationalism and leadership transformation so it is risky to maintain.

Efforts to stem the rate of identity politics have been outlined in the Election Law, the latest being Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections article 280 paragraph 1 letter (b) states that every team, implementer, and participant is prohibited from carrying out activities that endanger the integrity of the Republic of Indonesia, paragraph (c) states the prohibition of insulting a person, religion, ethnicity, race, and intergroup, and (d) inciting or pitting. The same thing is stated in Law Number 14 of 2014 in conjunction with Law Number 1 of 2015 in conjunction with Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning Regional Head Elections which prohibits doing the same thing. It's just that there are many regulatory gaps that are still biased and make the utilization of identity disintegrative and unproductive for Indonesian nationalism. Some of these regulations are not detailed and progressive enough to answer the dynamics that develop in the field so that violations of identity instrumentation are still difficult to deal with both from the candidate's side and from the supporters' side, including weaknesses in answering the intended violations committed through digital platforms such as those that have been developing in various mass media and social media.

The most debated identities have religious, ethnic, and regional aspects, respectively. These three typically form the primary framework in electoral political contests, both at the national and regional levels, as

showed by several studies [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Since 2004, the country has adopted a direct election format for the president and vice president, as well as for national and regional legislators. Although political parties remain the primary drivers for electoral politics, the voting format follows an open proportional system.

Voters inevitably have to decide voting based on selected names due to the open proportional system. This leads to increased openness in competition, as contestants compete with candidates from outside the political party and internal competitors in the same electoral district. Consequently, political battles intensify, and the mobilization of issues becomes crucial in shaping a favorable image among voters.

The current study, conducted in 2023, showed that religious and ethnic identities were unavoidable and crucial catalysts, as supported by some previous investigations. Zam, one of the informants from the western part of Indonesia and a candidate for a regional representative council member stated the intention to use identity prominently. As a Muslim, Malay, and local resident, Zam believed that prioritizing these identities was crucial for establishing common ground with the targeted voters. Similarly, Gui, another informant from the same region but belonging to a different political party, stated that nothing was inherently wrong with identity politics, and all candidates would use identity politics, as it was an undeniable reality. Moreover, even mischievous individuals could resort to identity politics to increase their constituents.

Zon, another informant from the eastern part of Indonesia, specifically Maluku, mentioned that identity politics was widely adopted in Maluku, as it served as a stabilizing tool and an unavoidable cultural reality. Consequently, identity politics has become a political reality used for achieving political victories.

A religious practitioner serving as a pastor in one of the churches in Maluku identified religion as a susceptible tool in electoral contests. This could be attributed to the consolidation of religion during various worship moments. Thiel & Coate [11] stated that religious identity offered stability and cohesion, making it easily mobilized as a tool for political consolidation. Jam, a politician serving as an informant in Maluku, stated that religion and ethnicity were significant configuration tools for measuring political strength, specifically in Maluku, where Islam and Christianity were equally large religious groups. In this context, religion becomes an effective bargaining tool to enhance the popularity of candidates.

The use of identity politics in electoral contests was also acknowledged by Kris, a member of the campaign team playing a significant political role in the Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara Province, a city populated by Catholics. According to Kris, religious identity has considerably intensified during recent electoral contests. The prevalent composition in these contests revolves around religion, with the primary composition being Catholic-Christian, and a small portion being Christian-Catholic or Christian/Catholic-Islam. Ethnic identity only originated as a secondary consideration after religious identity.

According to Boll, an Islamic figure in an area predominantly Catholic, politics cannot function without the mobilization of identity primarily orchestrated and designed by political consultants for the candidates. Boll emphasized differing experiences in various areas of the East Nusa Tenggara region, specifically a combination of ethnic and religious identity axes, which are used interchangeably based on the characteristics of the regional identity.

In central Indonesia, particularly in Kalimantan, it was interesting to explore how identity plays a crucial role in the political landscape. Debates between the Malay and Dayak communities dominate the identity struggles in Pontianak, with ethnicity being a significant factor. Edo, one of the informants, mentioned that identity politics in Kalimantan, specifically in Pontianak, often originates from political and bureaucratic categorizations that enhance competition for resources. The Malays tend to dominate as the elected leader hails from their ethnic group. This condition is related to the assumption that identity politics is inherently exclusive, perpetuating the negation of one group over another.

Sap, an informant in Pontianak, suggested that local politics in this area had a more primordial essence. Issues concerning locals and non-locals are crucial and related to the leadership privileges within the region. Kalimantan specifically bears a history of ethnic conflicts resulting in social upheaval, extending even to the disintegration of national spirit.

Based on data from various regions in Indonesia, electoral political culture is often interpreted as an identity-based political culture. This culture originated as a new facet of Indonesian political transformation. A new political culture occurred in the post-Suharto era, primarily shaped by voting practices that inevitably bear the imprint of identity, specifically in terms of religion and ethnicity. Whether this is detrimental to the future political development of Indonesia or a natural symptom that should be acknowledged as part of the political transformation remains a crucial question.

3. Democracy Naivety

Identity is often regarded as a primordial reality, specifically when associated with inherent traits not acquired through negotiation [12, 13]. While identity is primarily viewed as a tool [14] or a construct [15], the reality is that primordial identity, rooted in biology, is not easily divisible. According to Kuo et al. [16], individuals may have multiple identities but tend to prioritize only one. The process of accumulating similarities in these primordial identities, whether instrumental or constructed, does not negate the reality that primordial identity frequently shapes mobilization.

Initially, identity mobilization in electoral political contests may seem common and ordinary. Holders of specific identities are given the privilege to mobilize identity resources as an advantage, subsequently followed by others with similar opportunities. However, using identity as a political resource often disregards the consequences of battles not based on ideas and

capabilities. This approach, particularly for voters, overlooks the leadership capacity of an individual. In identity politics, the debate revolves around identity, neglecting non-identity factors. However, electoral politics is not solely about selecting representatives based on identity. When identity politics entails choosing representation based on identity, the contest becomes more about strengths and weaknesses unrelated to democratic criteria for leadership recruitment. In reality, according to Twikromo [17] and Bloomfield et al. [18], identity is frequently used as a manipulation tool.

Identity-based politics in electoral contests also disregards the principle that political competition should be inclusive. When political competition lacks inclusivity, it deviates from the democratic process. In an inclusive democracy, the contestation process ensures equal chances for everyone, measured by more objective criteria of acceptance and rejection. Operating exclusively in democracy shifts the topic of contention from the essence of democracy that provides equal opportunities for every individual toward a more non-substantive direction.

Considering identity politics as a natural and inevitable consequence of diversity is a form of naivety. Mobilizing identity for political struggle causes significant risks to democracy. However, identity politics is not confined to the electoral level but extends into community and social integration. Individuals polarized by identity continuously uphold differences even after elections [19, 20, 21]. The division over identity facts could potentially ignite conflicts, effectively becoming a source of division [22]. Therefore, when many political actors perceive the division as a natural process, democracy faces submersion, and risks becoming a shipwreck by failing to facilitate community integration.

Another naive aspect of identity politics is the contradiction with Indonesian identity as a diverse and democratic country. The constant debate over identity as a battle resource and the collective affirmation raises concerns about Indonesian democratic character. Identity-based democracy can be seen as a primitive form of democracy. It is naive for political actors and voters to brand Indonesia as the fourth-largest democratic country globally when democratic practices may not fully reflect that branding. A closer examination challenges the belief in the adequacy of Indonesian democracy. True democracy thrives on embracing and nurturing diversity.

Figure 1 shows the position *vis-à-vis* identity politics and ideal democracy.

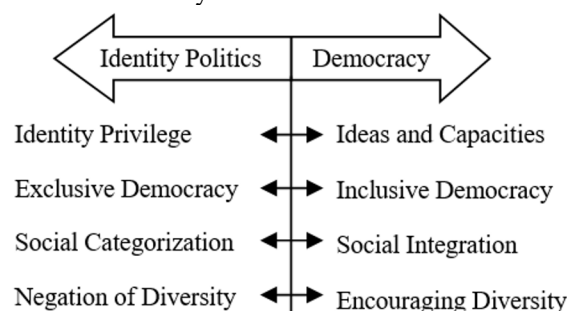


Fig. 1. Position of Identity Politics and Democracy

Despite being a diverse country, Indonesia still needs to refine its democratic practices. Each region, with unique characteristics, has developed diverse contextual electoral political patterns. This shows the potential stagnation of democracy when political actors and voters perceive identity politics as an inherent and persisting reality.

Evaluating the accuracy of the democratic apparatus is essential, even in democratic systems. The phenomenon of a less democratic democracy is still prevalent, specifically in developing countries. Collaborative efforts are necessary to foster democratic egalitarianism, making it more inclusive and freer from the shadows of identity politics. Should this trend persist, the hard-fought democracy achieved by overthrowing the previous undemocratic regime can become futile. The prevalence of identity politics undermines the struggle to construct a more democratic political landscape, contradicting the ongoing transformation process. Therefore, Indonesia should focus on structuring a democratic journey to reinforce its substance. The pervasive influence of identity politics shows a decline in democracy, similar to what Puhle described as a flawed democracy [23]. Resistance against identity politics, as advocated by Mubarak [24], should be a collective effort to cultivate immunity against its effect.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Indonesian electoral contest, known as Pemilu, experienced a rise in identity politics. Across East, Central, and West regions of Indonesia, identity mobilization had become a prevailing feature of the new political culture of democracy. Religion and ethnicity were used interchangeably, varying according to regional contexts, and often perceived as normal, unavoidable norms, and relatively tolerated.

This study showed that Indonesian democracy tended to operate naively. Identity politics tended to create group divisions that persisted even after the elections. This contradicted the essence of diversity, which had traditionally been a strength of Indonesia. Specifically, Indonesian democracy required refinement and essential democratic measurement tools to prevent transitioning into a flawed democracy in the future.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology for supporting this study through the Applied Research scheme in 2023.

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