

# Indonesia, 2019 elections: Gaining the grassroots vote

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**In 2019, President Joko Widodo will no longer enjoy the support of the grassroots urban poor movement. He has also failed to bring the labour movement into his camp over the course of his first term. Both groups feel the president has ignored social and economic rights, instead focusing on economic growth and infrastructure development, and neither is likely to support his bid for re-election in 2019.**

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Urban poor networks are dissatisfied with progress on a housing security deal they made with Jokowi during the 2014 election. Labour groups are unhappy with their exclusion from the calculation of the minimum wage, which has caused wage growth to slow, as well as new restrictions on labour strikes.

The urban poor and Indonesia's labour movement are two enormous electoral constituencies. On numbers alone, the disaffection of the urban poor and organised labour looms as a significant problem for the Jokowi camp. According to data from the Ministry of Manpower, there are 2.7 million union members in Indonesia, which amounts to more than one per cent of Indonesia's registered voters. The urban poor are even more numerous - estimated at 10.3 million people in 2018.

Disunity in both those groups, however, threatens to constrain their influence in 2019. None of the urban poor networks can claim to represent their immense but highly fragmented constituency. Workers are represented by a myriad of unions with diverse political standpoints. This disunity decreases the bargaining power of those activists who are seeking long-term programmatic outcomes and concrete solutions from the two presidential contenders. Nevertheless, the door remains open for either presidential camp to woo the support of workers and the urban poor.

## Urban poor

Nearly 40 per cent of the 26 million poor people in Indonesia live in cities. These urban poor have long faced protracted problems with land and housing security. Members of this group spend most of their income on rent, and evictions are a constant threat. Urban beautification, disaster reduction and smart cities projects can all see poor residents turfed out of their homes. A wave of such evictions in Jakarta between 2015 and 2016 was one factor that contributed to incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's (Ahok's) defeat in the 2017 elections for governor of Jakarta.

To advance their rights more effectively, urban poor networks have increasingly entered into political contracts with political candidates in local elections around Indonesia. In Jakarta, for example, networks associated with the Urban Poor Consortium made a deal with Jokowi when he ran for governor in 2012. Jokowi's successor, Ahok, violated this deal which prompted many urban poor to shift their support to Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno in the controversial 2017 election. Anies's willingness to sign a detailed 18-page political contract that outlined concrete steps to improve the situation of the urban poor further cemented their alliance.

At the national level, urban poor networks also signed a contract with Jokowi when he ran for the presidency in 2014. Back then, Jokowi and his running mate Jusuf Kalla made promises relating to five issues as part of this political deal.

They promised:

1. free access to basic education
2. free access to health care
3. zero evictions
4. contingency funds for victims of the Lapindo mud disaster in East Java
5. secure work (including for informal sector workers).

The education and health care programs were 'easy' for Jokowi to fulfil, as these were broader priority programs for his government and in areas of policy he was familiar with from his time as governor and mayor. But there has been no significant progress on the other three issues during his presidency. Activists were particularly dismayed by Jokowi's silence when evictions swept through Jakarta in 2016 and 2017.

As the 2019 presidential election draws nearer, the urban poor have not yet achieved a new deal with either presidential ticket. In part, this reflects a determination from advocacy groups to focus on the sub-national level which they deem more important because local programs are the ones that matter most to the urban poor. It also stems from Prabowo's ugly human rights record, which makes it difficult for networks representing the urban poor to support him. And it may also reflect a lack of interest from either presidential camp to engage more intensely with such a divided constituency. Urban poor advocacy networks confirmed to the author, at the time of writing, that neither Jokowi's nor Prabowo's team had approached them.

## **The labour movement**

If disappointment about Jokowi among the urban poor is mostly driven by the president's unwillingness to honor the 2014 political contract, the primary issues that have turned organised labour against Jokowi are the minimum wage, limitations of their right to strike and outsourcing of work. The metal workers union, in particular, staunchly dislikes the president.

The fight for higher minimum wages had been central to trade union advocacy in cities and provinces across Indonesia until 2015 when the Jokowi government abolished the role of unions in negotiations through a new government regulation. This regulation set out a national formula for minimum wage calculations, based on the national inflation rate and economic growth. The new formula no longer takes account of a decent standard of living, which unions had previously used to

push for higher wages.

Local wage councils were also abolished, as a consequence of using the inflation rate and economic growth as the main determinants of wage calculations. According to the Workers Confederation (KSPI), this regulation slowed average minimum wage growth from 15 per cent a year to around eight per cent. The regulation also prevents unions from achieving local advances through political deals with local politicians. The metal workers union had scored just such a victory in Karawang District in 2015, where a political deal with the now district head, Cellica Nurachdiana, delivered the highest minimum wage in all of Indonesia.

The Jokowi government has also imposed new restrictions on labour strikes and demonstrations, thanks to another new regulation which designates industrial complexes as 'special vital economic areas'. Demonstrations are not allowed in these areas and the military can intervene and evict protesters who are deemed to be jeopardising the 'vital economic interest'. Union protests against this regulation in mass May Day rallies in 2017 and 2018 have been to no avail. Since the regulation's enactment, the number of demonstrations and strikes has plummeted.

Outsourcing has also upset labour unions. By law, outsourcing is permitted only in five sectors: security services, catering, transportation, cleaning services and mining support services. In practice, however, employers are outsourcing in other sectors too, creating job insecurity for workers. Labour unions have responded to such practices by claiming that foreign workers have flooded the Indonesian labour market. Although such claims are unverified, the issue understandably angers union members and feeds neatly into the populist campaign narrative of Prabowo Subianto.

The KSPI actively supports Prabowo in 2019, just as they did in 2014 when they had forged a political contract with the former general. That 2014 contract contained 10 'demands' of Prabowo:

1. a decent wage
2. on-time minimum wage determination
3. pension coverage
4. health care security
5. 12 years of national education
6. no outsourcing
7. finalisation of the bill on domestic workers
8. protection for nurses and migrant workers
9. no flexible work
10. a national budget allocation to send workers' children to university, along with housing and free public transportation for citizens.

The KSPI hopes that a Prabowo victory in 2019 will eventually allow him to deliver on these demands.

Beyond forging political contracts, unions are also trying other political tactics to advance their interests. Some members of the metal workers union have joined the social media-inspired campaign

aimed at spreading opposition to Jokowi – #2019gantipresiden (change the president in 2019). A smattering of union members will also run as legislative candidates for various parties at different levels of government. A few unions even support Jokowi. But overall the labour movement's political prospects remain uncertain as neither of the two presidential candidates has been willing to be drawn into making binding policy announcements for workers.

### **Local authority**

The absence of a political deal between either of these constituencies and the presidential contenders also suggests that politics is becoming increasingly local for grassroots movements and fragmented for their organisers. Provincial and district level politicians have greater authority than national politicians to deal with housing and labour issues in urban areas. Grassroots movements are also becoming increasingly 'specialised' – choosing diverse strategies to advocate for the particular political or socio-economic rights that are of most importance to them.

The 2019 presidential elections may not deliver a better deal for either of these constituencies. And neither the urban poor nor workers unions are likely to supply a mass bloc of votes to either presidential contender. For many urban poor and labour activists, the presidential election is, in fact, not overly important – many may choose not to vote at all (golput). What really matters for them are electoral contests at the local level where each movement can make far more effective use of their numbers and strive for more direct benefits.

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- Inside Indonesia, Edition 135: Jan-Mar 2019, Mar 07, 2019:  
<https://www.insideindonesia.org/gaining-the-grassroots-vote>
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