



Identity Politics in the Practices of Current Indonesian Democracy: A Trigger of Declining?

Wawan Mas'udi
Universitas Gadjah Mada
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
masudi@ugm.ac.id

Abstract — Like democratic systems in various countries, Indonesia also faces challenges in maintaining the existence of democracy. Policy practices are often dominated by the interests and ambitions of elites, as well as the dominant role of capital. This results in general public interests being marginalized in the policy process, which ultimately weakens democratic policy practices in the governance of public affairs and the functioning of government. The potential for continued use of identity politics in the 2024 General Election (Pilpres) presents a real threat to the growth of quality democracy. The presence of identity politics has the potential to worsen the situation of democracy which in a number of contemporary analyzes is seen as experiencing stagnation and decline. Identity politics as an electoral strategy to gain vote support will not only worsen the quality of elections, but also trigger political polarization at the grassroots which can lead to social conflict and exclusion.

Keywords — democracy, general election, conflict and exclusion, Indonesia

I. INTRODUCTION

The democratic state is constantly in turbulence. Democratic countries face fundamental challenges in the form of; democratic decline, the rise of populism which promotes identity and nationalism, and political fragmentation which causes the government to fail to run effectively. The turbulence experienced in each democratic system is different, but is generally caused by a number of factors, namely: lack of quality and effectiveness of government in managing public affairs which has an impact on decreasing public support and trust in the existing system, weak state building, decreasing lack of trust. public towards democratic institutions, the rise of right populism and personal populism, as well as political patterns of clientelism and patronage.

Like democratic systems in various countries, Indonesia also faces challenges in maintaining the existence of democracy. Policy practices are often dominated by the interests and ambitions of elites, as well as the dominant role of capital. This results in general public interests being marginalized in the policy process, which ultimately weakens democratic policy practices in the governance of public affairs and the functioning of government. In the context of

electoral politics, the strong practices of money politics, patronage and clientelism [18], as well as the use of identity politics [11][19] have also given rise to serious democratic erosion. Among the many challenges to democracy, an aspect that has strengthened in the practice of democracy in Indonesia, especially in the implementation of elections in the last 10 years, is the strengthening exploitation of identity politics. In policy practice, identity politics is also widely used, especially referring to the emergence of policies that create exclusion for groups with certain minority identities.

The use of identity, especially religion, in electoral politics in Indonesia was very pronounced in the Presidential Elections of 2014 and 2019, as well as the Election for the Governor of the Special Capital Region of Jakarta (DKI Jakarta) of 2017. Various studies have analyzed the damaging impact of the use of identity politics in the electoral process, especially in society, including: extreme polarization, exclusion, and social conflict. However, in different cases, the use of identity politics, both in elections and policies, can actually provide positive benefits, especially for advocating for the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups. However, in the Indonesian political context, the practice and use of identity politics tends to aim to strengthen majority domination, and ultimately further encourage the exclusion of minority groups. The main question that requires further explanation is, what is the impact of the use of identity politics on the quality of democracy, especially in the 2024 elections?

II. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Identity Politics and Democracy: An Overview

In general, the practice of identity politics refers to the tendency of those from the same religion, race, or certain social background to form exclusive political alliances or groupings, with the aim of differentiating themselves from other groups. Identity is a complex concept, having many faces and being used flexibly in different contexts. Initially, identity politics was born as a response to the inability to reconcile or reconcile diversity and equality. Plurality in a social system tends to give rise to inequality and injustice, where one group will tend to have dominance or a certain position that is higher or better than other groups. The identity politics discourse in political science only emerged in the 1970s, as an approach to studying and analyzing the

aspirations and interests of certain groups. Very explicit expressions of the use of identity politics emerged along with the anti-colonialism movement [2], where countries under the control of colonialism would build national identities (nationalism) to fight colonialism.

In the development of contemporary democracy, two trends that are driving the rise of identity politics are the increasing diversity in liberal-democratic (Western) countries as a result of the migration process (both voluntary and forced) and the pressure of globalization on the territorial boundaries or jurisdiction of nation states. Although the motivation for the birth of identity politics in some cases is to fight discrimination, the expression that often appears is in the form of exclusion or negating other groups. Identity tends to be presented as something exclusive and non-negotiable, and is placed in a framework of co-existence with other identities. In practice, the use of identity politics is very difficult to reconcile with deliberative democracy [3], considering the very difficult of reaching a compromise [5], as a result of differences in values and identity roots [6].

The answer to the question, whether the use of identity politics is something positive or negative, good or bad, destructive or promising, really depends on the perspective developed. In certain cases, identity politics can generate a sense of belonging and clarify the goals of a group or community, but at the same time it can also cause division and conflict as a result of a diametric perspective, us versus them. For support groups, the use of identity politics is a strategy to create solidarity to overcome repression from other groups and can be a tool to fight for social, political and economic equality (or rights). Meanwhile, for opponents of the use of identity politics, this is seen as a political deviation that will only weaken the democratic system. In a democratic system in a pluralistic society (pluralistic democracy), identity politics is embedded in electoral competition. Identity politics reflects the desire of a group to find a platform to compete with other groups, especially if there is a situation that threatens the existence of the group within the existing power structure. In countries that have a long tradition of pluralistic democracy, political groupings based on certain social and economic identities will usually be followed by a programmatic political model.

In the context of electoral democracy in a pluralistic society, the ongoing process not only shows the relationship between voters and the representation they will elect, but also involves the interplay between constituents, political parties, as well as alliances and identity groupings. The attachment of substantial elements of interest describes the meaning and aspirations of certain collective identities (ethnicity, race, regional origin, religion, etc.) as the basis of identity politics. This situation shows that identity politics is not completely given and constant, but also experiences a continuous construction process, especially in facing existing situations or challenges. By defining interests, identity politics can be used strategically by groups that have internalized their identities to achieve mobilization effects [1].

Indonesian political analysts tend to place the use of identity politics as a variable in the decline of democracy, rather than as a tool for the struggle of certain groups (especially marginalized groups) to gain recognition and equal rights. The use of identity politics tends to have negative impacts and become a disease in Indonesia's

pluralistic society, as well as being a trigger factor for the decline of democracy. Douglas Webber (2006) [17] calls Indonesian democracy a regressing democracy, mainly due to the difficulty of political consolidation as a result of the state's weak capacity to uphold the supremacy of law and weak implementation of policies oriented towards universal goals. Meanwhile, Thomas Power (2018) [15] assesses that the decline in the quality of Indonesian democracy is characterized by the strengthening of the legitimacy of conservative and anti-pluralistic political Islam, the manipulation of partisanship towards state institutions, the emergence of acts of repression by state officials, and the increasingly open weakening of political opposition. In a global context, Freedom House's analysis of the future of democracy also implies pessimism towards democracy, and comes to the conclusion that democracy has been in decline since 2006, as a result; 1) the strengthening use of identity politics in the form of right-wing populism in advanced democratic countries which are facing economic and political performance problems; 2) strengthening the confidence of authoritarian political leaders; and 3) geopolitical shifts between democratic and non-democratic countries [14].

Analyzing from the electoral aspect, Ben Bland (2019) [4] said that Indonesia had built a strong system to hold free and fair elections, amidst major logistical and political challenges. However, there is ongoing tension between the implementation of routine elections and the strengthening of defective democracy practices, as a result of political compromise between the new elite and the old elite. Defective democracy has the potential to "increase" with the rise of Islamic identity, the increasing political role of law enforcement agencies and the military, and established political parties that continue to form strong cartels, which hinder the birth of democratization in the party system. Marcus Mietzner (2019) [11] and Eve Waburton (2020) [16] put forward a similar analysis, that Indonesian democracy is increasingly experiencing polarization due to the narrowing of healthy competition in elections as a result of high-cost politics, as well as the use of identity politics, especially by politicians and elites as an instrument to gain group support. majority (albeit at the expense of minority groups). Although in practice the most massive non-governmental forces use identity politics, the ruling party (government) tends to use non-democratic instruments to maintain its position, for example by controlling the media, using security forces to control government critics, and other legal politicization instruments.

Identity Politics and Election

The use of identity politics that based on ethnicity, religion, race, and even ideology as a political strategy and instrument has a long history in Indonesia. The use of identity politics was used as a tool of struggle, especially to raise nationalism during the independence revolution. After independence, the emergence of regional rebellions also reflected the strength of regional identity, as part of the dynamics of state formation. The 1955 elections, which were known to be very democratic, were also inseparable from the strong use of identity politics, and there were even political parties with certain regional identities or ideologically tended to be attached to certain regions, as well as political parties based on religious identity. The 1998 political reforms, which were followed by the adoption of electoral democracy, decentralization, and regional autonomy, were imbued with

religious and ethnic repertoires. This is mainly used by political elites to support their political ambitions by mobilizing community support by utilizing regional, tribal and religious identity sentiments [12]. In the implementation of elections, the use of identity politics is also very intense, both in local and national, executive and legislative political elections. The DKI Jakarta Governor Election in 2017, as well as the Presidential Elections in 2014 and 2019 are clear examples of how identity politics is used as an instrument for voter mobilization. The resulting impact is very corrosive to the entire democratic system, and even the most dangerous has caused social disintegration.

As the 2024 election is getting closer, although public discussion is filled with negative assessments of the possible

use of identity politics, as well as encouragement to strengthen the generation of programmatic politics, it appears that the potential for exploitation of identity for electoral interests will still continue. A situation that seems very difficult to avoid, considering that the logic of electoral political competition is still dominated by the dimension of territorial identity and also community groupings that based on parochial identities (religion, ethnicity, race and regionalism). In general, the opinions of political elites and observers regarding identity politics are also varied that may be ranged from rejection, the opinion that identity politics is inevitable, and the lack of relevance of identity in contemporary politics, as shown in the Tabel 1.

Table 1: Opinions on Identity Politics Toward Indonesian Election of 2024

Reject the Identity Politics	Identity Politics as Undeniable	Identity Politics as Lack of Relevance
<p>President Joko Widodo</p> <p>"We hope that in the 2024 election there will be no identity politics, because the name of a democratic party should be joyful, not hating each other, not blaspheming each other, not being hostile to each other. So I hope that no one will use identity politics. Don't use identity politics at the expense of the unity and unity of our nation, at the expense of "Our harmony is only for personal, group and party interests because we will be the ones who will lose out later."</p> <p>- Fikri (2023) [8]</p>	<p>Anies Baswedan</p> <p>"Identity politics is something that is inevitable. For example, the competing candidates are male and female, then there is gender identity."</p> <p>- Liputan 6 (2023) [9]</p>	<p>Executive Director of the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), Djayadi Hanan</p> <p>"... It seems that identity politics is less relevant to use as a political weapon. I think it's unlikely because those fighting don't have different identities, say the three pairs of presidential candidates running Prabowo, Ganjar, Anies. Everyone from the same religion is Islam. It seems that none of the presidential candidates are non-Islamic." Then the religious level is not much different."</p> <p>- Nugraha (2023) [10]</p>

Source: Primary data

The strong tendency to use identity politics in the 2024 elections is caused by a number of factors, both cultural, structural and political. From a cultural perspective, the continued use of identity politics indicates that there are still big challenges in a culture of tolerance amidst enormous diversity. Another thing is that there is still a tendency to think and have prejudiced attitudes towards certain groups. From a structural perspective, the emergence of identity politics is due to social and economic inequality between groups, which creates social strata that overlap with identity-based group identification. A situation that makes identity groupings increasingly stronger as a result of existing socio-economic stratification. In practical politics, identity politics is used as an elite political bargaining instrument for power sharing and as a tool for electoral mobilization. What develops at the elite level then develops at the grassroots level, and often triggers political behavior and expressions based on SARA (Ethnicity, Religion and Race) [7][13].

III. CONCLUSION

The potential for continued use of identity politics in the 2024 General Election (Pilpres) presents a real threat to the growth of quality democracy. The presence of identity politics has the potential to worsen the situation of democracy

which in a number of contemporary analyzes is seen as experiencing stagnation and decline. Identity politics as an electoral strategy to gain vote support will not only worsen the quality of elections, but also trigger political polarization at the grassroots which can lead to social conflict and exclusion. This vulnerable situation for democracy requires active steps from pro-democracy forces to encourage an election process that minimizes the exploitation of identity politics. The potential for continued use of identity politics in the 2024 General Election (Pilpres) presents a real threat to the growth of quality democracy. The presence of identity politics has the potential to worsen the situation of democracy which in a number of contemporary analyzes is seen as experiencing stagnation and decline. Identity politics as an electoral strategy to gain vote support will not only worsen the quality of elections, but also trigger political polarization at the grassroots which can lead to social conflict and exclusion. This vulnerable situation for democracy requires active steps from pro-democracy forces to encourage an election process that minimizes the exploitation of identity politics.

The quality and degree of democracy are not given and fixed, but must be continuously fought for. Many countries are able to keep democracy alive, at least in basic procedural measures, but many have difficulty achieving the level of

quality of good governance as one measure of substantial democracy. Likewise, within an inclusive citizenship framework, especially in societies that still face the challenge of consolidating identity-based political groupings, efforts to promote the quality of democracy also face challenges that are not easy. Experience in many countries shows that the strength of democratic buildings is not determined by political parties or leadership elites (because these democratic actors are often trapped in anti-democratic practices), but relies on how strong and active civil society forces (and pro-democracy movements) exercise control. continuously over the functioning of democracy and practices of power as well as the use of identity politics which is corrosive to democracy.

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