

Political Participation Of Indonesian Migrant Workers In 2019 Indonesia's General Election In Kota Kinabalu Sabah

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Abstract

This study examines the political participation of Indonesian migrant workers in the 2019 Indonesian General Election in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Migrant workers' political participation reflects their active involvement from political awareness that develops due to political literacy, media influence, social interaction, and their social environment, which influences political choices. Qualitative research methods were used in this study, including purposive interviews with 30 informants and direct observation. Documentation was collected from various sources, including the Indonesian Consulate General in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and the election committee. Secondary data included reference materials, journals, articles, and internet sources. The results showed that the 2019 general election in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, followed Indonesian election regulations despite challenges, including difficulties in obtaining key personnel and data collection. Media influence and political literacy significantly shape migrant workers' political attitudes, with those exposed to media having higher political literacy and making more rational political choices. Political education, media exposure, social environment, family, friends, community, and personal experience strongly influence political decisions. Media and political literacy were identified as the dominant factors in the election of the president and vice president. At the same time, community, family, friends, and personal experience influenced the election of members of parliament. For more effective and efficient elections, some electoral policies in Sabah may need to be revised to accommodate the unique conditions of migrant workers and the vast territory.

Keywords: Political Participation, Indonesian Migrant Workers, Indonesian Overseas Elections.

1. Introduction

According to the Global Democracy Index released by the Economist Intelligence Unit (E.I.U.) in 2019, Indonesia ranked 64th out of 167 countries scoring 6.48. This shows progress in strengthening the democratic system. In the ASEAN context, Indonesia ranks fourth after Timor Leste, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This ranking reflects consistent improvements in aspects of democracy, such as more transparent electoral processes, pluralism, and civic engagement in politics. However, this improvement must be matched by greater efforts to ensure that all segments of society, including migrant workers, have equal access to participate in the political process.

According to Abdul Bari A. (2017) one of the six principle requirements for a democratic state under the rule of law is regulating the implementation of free elections. In Indonesia, the elections of the President/Vice President and representatives of the people in the parliament or the House of Representatives (DPR) have been held every five years since the time of independence in 1945. Indonesian

elections (General Elections) have been held 12 times, namely in 1955, 1971, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019. Until now, there have been seven Presidents who have led Indonesia (Siakab, 2020).

Indonesian elections are the primary means for the people to express political sovereignty at the central and local levels. These elections include members of the People's Representative Council (DPR), Regional People's Representative Councils (DPRD) at provincial and municipal levels, and the President and Vice President. Since the 2002 constitutional amendment, these elections have been conducted directly by the people, replacing the previous system where representatives of the people elected regional heads and state leaders—the amendment aimed to increase transparency, fairness, and widespread involvement in the political process. In addition to national elections, regional head elections (Pilkada) allow the people to elect governors, regents, and mayors directly. This mechanism is designed to strengthen democracy in Indonesia, with three central institutions playing an essential role in organising the elections: The General Election Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), and the Election Honour Board (DKPP). There are political parties as participants in the elections and citizens as voters.

Instead, *Pilihanraya Indonesia* integrates all three elements, namely the Executive. Indonesian elections are also held outside Indonesia. The implementing institution of Indonesian elections abroad is called the Overseas Election Committee (PPLN) as a representative of the KPU and the Overseas Indonesian Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslu LN) as a representative of Bawaslu. Their expertise is open to all parties, i.e., including elements of Government officials serving in Embassies or consulates, *expatriates*, people living in a country (with permanent resident status), and other Indonesians working in various employment sectors, including migrant workers.

In the era of growing globalization, the phenomenon of migrant workers has become an essential issue in many countries, including Indonesia. With a significant number of migrant workers, Indonesia not only acts as a labor-sending country but also as a country that fights for the rights of its citizens working abroad. Along with the development of the democratic system in Indonesia, which has been ongoing since independence in 1945, general elections have become the primary means of expressing the people's voice. However, the political participation of migrant workers in elections, especially abroad, is often overlooked. This is a challenge in itself, as migrant workers are an integral part of society who have the right to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

In this context, the political involvement of Indonesian migrant workers in elections, particularly in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, needs to be analysed in depth. Although migrant workers contribute significantly to the country's economy, both in their home and destination countries, their participation in the political process is limited by various factors. Their challenges include limited access to information, cultural barriers, and uncertainty in the electoral regulations that apply abroad. In this context, it is essential to explore migrant workers' political rights in elections abroad and the electoral mechanisms to support their participation. In addition, this study also focuses on the political attitudes and choices of Indonesian migrant workers, as well as the factors that influence their voting decisions. While several studies have been conducted previously, many of these studies only focus on aspects of voting rights and participation rates without delving deeply into the overseas electoral process. By conducting this analysis, it is hoped that the challenges and opportunities faced by Indonesian migrant workers in actualizing their political rights can be identified.

2. Methodology

This descriptive qualitative approach study was conducted in Kota Kinabalu Sabah. In this study, primary and secondary data sources are used. For primary data, in-depth interviews and surveys with 30 informants from the construction, services, agriculture, domestic helper, vegetable seller and fisheries sectors were conducted in addition to other informants involved with the election process. The informants were determined by purposive sampling. Observations were also conducted to deepen the existing data further. Secondary data was sourced by documenting information from journals, books, and reports. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

This section will discuss the process and mechanism of the elections in Sabah, the political choices of Indonesian migrant workers, and their political attitudes. However, the beginning of this section will discuss the history of Indonesian migrant labor migration to Sabah.

History of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Sabah

The migration of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah has existed since before Malaysia's independence and continues to this day. They come from the islands of Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Java, and East Nusa Tenggara. The historical presence of the Bugis people from South Sulawesi is an integral part of the migration. They traveled to Sabah before the British arrival in North Borneo in 1882 (Suraya, 2013). The Bugis community began to settle in Tawau around 1885. Another wave of migration consisted of Javanese contract laborers brought by the Dutch to work in the plantation sector in Sabah in the early 20th century, between 1914 and 1932 (De Silva: 2009:77). They worked as *coolie contracts* or *romusha* (Hugo, 1995). Ethnic migration from Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, to Sabah also began in the 1940s, influenced by economic and cultural factors, such as the tradition of earning a living to pay for *belies* (wedding gifts) in the form of elephant tusks (Haning Romdiati, 1996; BBC, 2023).

At the beginning of independence, Sabah's economy developed rapidly in the sectors of logging, farming, and coaching. The vast land in Sabah was utilized to develop the staple farming sectors of latex, oil palm, and others (Ramli et al., Kamarulnizam Abdullah, 2019). In the 1960s and 1970s, many Indonesians, especially from Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara, came to fill the labor shortage in these sectors. At its peak, the timber and oil palm industries in Sabah attracted many Indonesian migrants due to cultural, religious, and linguistic affinities with the local Population. Since the 1980s, most of the motives of Indonesian migrant workers to go to Malaysia have been dominated by economic motives (Jannes et al., 2011). The arrival of these Indonesian migrants is mainly because the local Population cannot work in the agricultural and plantation sectors due to low salaries and heavy workloads. At the same time, the need for labor is critical. Instead, migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia fill the need for labour. The large number of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah is also due to the Royal Malaysian Police, who only allowed migrant workers from two countries, namely Indonesia and the Philippines sahaja, to work in Sabah until 2010. Although the Malaysian Government allows workers from Vietnam, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh to work in Sabah, most employers in Sabah prefer migrant workers from Indonesia.

To date, Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah work in various sectors, such as farming, coaching, agriculture, fishing, and domestic. There are 167,543 Indonesian citizens in the Indonesian Consulate General's Kota Kinabalu working area who have documents, while the number of those without documents is estimated to be double or triple. Indonesian citizens form communities based on ethnicity

and religion, with thousands of Indonesian migrant children receiving education at Community Learning Centres (CLC) established by the Indonesian Government. Despite their critical economic contributions, many Indonesian migrant workers face challenges related to document status and immigration law violations, with most of them being poorly educated and working in the informal sector. The number of undocumented migrants is estimated to be much higher than those officially recorded.

Process and Mechanism of Implementing Indonesian Elections in Sabah

The schedule for the implementation of the Indonesian elections is prepared according to the suitability of the state and the location of the implementation. In general, the process and mechanism of the implementation of the General Election in Sabah is divided into four stages, -namely: (i) the establishment of the Indonesian Election Adhock Board; (ii) the preparation and updating of the Overseas Voters List; (iii) the voting and vote counting; (iv) lastly, the result of voting recapitulation will be officialised nationally. To be precised, at every stage of the Election, there is a significant involvement of the Indonesian citizens and Indonesian Migrant Workers, which includes their involvement as voters finders or middle-man between the public and certain political parties and election participants.

Indonesia's 2019 overseas elections began with establishing adhoc implementing institutions or bodies, namely the Overseas Election Committee (PPLN) and the Overseas Election Supervisor (Panwaslu). As the election organizer in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, PPLN was inaugurated by the Consul General of the Republic of Indonesia, Kota Kinabalu, representing the KPU. A total of six committee members and a chairman have been appointed. The Kota Kinabalu Overseas Election Supervisory Committee or Panwaslu LN Kota Kinabalu is a member established by Bawaslu to supervise the implementation of Indonesian Elections in the KJRI Kota Kinabalu working area. Panwaslu LN Kota Kinabalu, appointed by Bawaslu, has two committee members and a chairman. There are several requirements for becoming a member of PPLN and Panwaslu. Among them, (i) are not registered as members of certain political parties; (ii) have a minimum high school education; (iii) have never been in prison; (iv) have a passport and work permit.

Upon the inauguration of PPLN and Panwaslu, these two institutions have responsibility of conducting the election process and mechanism. For PPLN, four significant tasks are carried out, including (i) updating and determining voters' data, (ii) socialization of elections, (iii) conducting voting and ballot counting, and (iv) officialization of national vote count result.

To update the voters' data, PPLN Kota Kinabalu inaugurated 70 Voter Data Updating Officers (PPDP) to conduct matching and research (Coklit) or verification of DP4LN voters' data. These officers, consisting of Indonesians, KJRI Kota Kinabalu staff, Community Learning Centre (CLC) teachers, and Indonesian community leaders, will work for one month by visiting the homes of Indonesian citizens and inputting new data. Data was collected through direct and indirect meetings, including contacting potential voters via phone, email, or PPLN's online platform. Due to the large working area, CLC teachers and palm oil plantation administrators were also involved in the data collection process. The data collection results were then submitted to PPLN and compiled into an Overseas Temporary Voter List (DPSLN). PPLN Kota Kinabalu determined the DPSLN as 51,528 people, which was then announced to the public for correction. PPLN then determines the Overseas Final Voter List (DPTLN) based on DPSLN data and passport applicant data at the Consulate General in Kota Kinabalu. After going through improvements, the DPTLN was determined with 140,534 voters. In this context, Panwaslu acts as a supervisory party in providing DPSLN and DPTLN by PPLN.

Each PPLN can determine its own method of conducting the election's voting methods according to the suitability of the conditions in a country. In this case, PPLN Kota Kinabalu uses two of the three voting methods that can be carried out abroad, namely; Polling Stations (TPS) and Mobile Ballot Boxes (KSK). The voting at polling stations is carried out in one designated place, while KSK is aimed to facilitate voters who cannot come directly to the TPS or unable to vote by post. This KSK method is carried out by carrying ballot boxes to designated strategic locations. In the 2019 Indonesian elections, PPLN Kota Kinabalu has designated 433 KSKs and 26 polling stations throughout its territory. The number of voters available at KSK and TPS differs namely, there is a maximum of 300 people for KSK and 500 people for TPS. In conducting the vote, PPLN is assisted by the Overseas Voting Organiser Committee or KPPSLN. They were established and appointed by PPLN Kota Kinabalu to assist the election's technical conduct for the period two months.

In fact, as many as 1,299 KPPSLN people have been appointed by PPLN to serve in 433 KSKs and as many as 130 people as officers at 26 polling stations. On the Panwaslu LN Kota Kinabalu side, a supervisor was inaugurated in each KSK and polling station. However, due to registration information not being received by most Indonesian citizens and a short registration period, only 113 Supervisors were appointed. Compared to the 459 Supervisors required for the whole region. Of note is that the recruitment of KPPSLN members was hindered by the low level of education of migrant workers, who are generally graduates from primary school and junior high school. Because the need for KPPSLN members is quite large, while the number of professional community members and Indonesian teachers in CLC is limited, so that, PPLN Kota Kinabalu through the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed to the KPU that the requirements for the education standards of KPPSLN members be minimized to meet the required number, namely being able to read and write well. The implementation of voting through the KSK is carried out by visiting the location of residence and work of registered voters. The KSK officers are on duty according to the designated area by carrying ballot boxes, ballot papers and several other equipment. They moved from one place to another to reach and facilitate voters to exercise their right to vote. Election logistics were distributed to all areas the day before. Before voting, KSK officers will explain to voters about voting procedures, including voting for election candidates by voting for their names or party symbols and photos listed on the ballot. After the implementation of the KSK vote is completed, the ballot box containing the used ballot papers is then taken to the designated collection centre in each region. Each region will be led by a PPLN member and assisted by several staff. After all the KSK returned the ballot boxes and other election documents, they were then taken to Kota Kinabalu and stored to await the counting of ballot papers.

The day of voting at the polling station in Kota Kinabalu coincides with the day of the 2019 General Election in Indonesia. The number of TPS or polling stations is 26, and they are located in two locations, namely: 19 polling stations at the Consulate General's Office in Kota Kinabalu and seven polling stations at Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu, Sepanggar. The registered voters came to the designated polling stations according to the invitation letter delivered to them by KPPSLN a few days earlier. Voting at KSK and TPS is supervised by witnesses from presidential and vice-presidential candidates, representatives of parties and candidates contesting, supervisor officer, and the public. The result of the 2019 General Election in Kota Kinabalu of 88,408 voters, or 62.90 percent of the Kota Kinabalu Overseas Final Voter List, and was claimed to be a better result than the 2014 General Election, which was 31.96 percent. However,

according to data from the Election Commission, it was found that the number of registered voters or DPTLN voters was only 31,846 people.

In comparison, the remaining 56,562 people were newly registered voters on the day of the election or, called DPK or Special Voter List voters. This means that the number of new voters is 63.80 percent of 88,429. Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidate Jokowi-Ma'ruf received 71,109 votes or 82.05 percent, while Prabowo Sandiaga Uno received 15,555 votes or 17.95 percent. For the parliamentary vote count, the Golkar Party dominated the Kota Kinabalu vote with 31.59 percent of the vote, followed by the PDI Party with 18.78 percent of the vote and the Nasdem Party with 9.50 percent of the vote; the other 17 other parties.

Socialization of the 2019 Indonesian Election in Kota Kinabalu

Socialisation is another critical aspect of implementing the 2019 General Election in Sabah. According to NGO's Kemitraan and Perludem (2015) one indicator of the quality of democracy can be measured through the public's participation in its organising process. To increase the participation of voters in the 2019 General Election, PPLN Kota Kinabalu has carried out socialization activities for Indonesians in the region. The form of activity carried out by PPLN Kota Kinabalu is to hold meetings with Indonesians in the PPLN Kota Kinabalu working area and hold information sessions about the purpose of the election, registration of voters, election schedule, introducing Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates and competing parties, how to vote, and the date of the vote. Meanwhile, Panwaslu Kota Kinabalu explained how to monitor and prevent misconduct in the election process.

PPLN more often carries out election socialisation activities than Panwaslu. According to records (PPLN Kota Kinabalu, 2019). Meanwhile, Panwaslu Kota Kinabalu only held a few times due to limited budget. This activity targets community/religious leaders, foremen, and teachers of Indonesian community learning centers. These people are considered influential so that they can spread the information provided by PPLN / Panwaslu.

Apparently, the socialisation on the election process were less effective, given that not everyone involved or registered in the elections received the said information. With the vast size of PPLN Kota Kinabalu's working area, as many as 459 in total of KSK and TPS, were placed through out Kota Kinabalu, and Indonesian migrant workers mostly live in palm oil plantation area which are far from the cities, therefore, the election information socialization activities conducted by PPLN/Panwaslu were unable to reach all of those voters. Other issues related to socialization are the limited budget and a rigid financial system, which hinder the implementation of election socialization. Some respondents had to obtain information about the 2019 Indonesian General Election from social media, TV, and the internet, because they were unable to receive direct information from PPLN Kota Kinabalu or members appointed in their area (KPPSLN at KSK / TPS). The implementation of socialisation helped them to understand more about the process of implementing elections in Kota Kinabalu.

Political Attitudes and Political Choices of Indonesian Migrant Workers

There are four important aspects related to the political attitude of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Sabah. These aspects include; (i) political education; (ii) media influence and political literacy; (iii) social environment, family and community; (iv) personal experience. Political attitudes will usually determine the political choices of migrant workers. Particularly the choice of presidential and vice presidential candidates, as well as members of parliament.

Political education is a conscious effort to change the political socialisation process of the community so that they understand and fully appreciate the values contained in the ideal political system to be built. In the context of elections in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, political education for Indonesian migrant workers is carried out by PPLN/Panwaslu through socialisation activities. Socialisation is how individuals learn and internalize the norms, values, and behaviors accepted in a particular society or social group. This process involves interaction with other people, either directly or indirectly, and through various social institutions such as family, school, peers, mass media and other institutions. Socialization in this context refers to efforts made by relevant institutions, such as political parties, the Government, civil society organizations, and the mass media, to improve people's understanding of and political participation in the electoral process. This can include education about voting rights, understanding political candidates and programme, and the electoral process (Huckfeldt, R., 2020).

Media plays a vital role in shaping people's political perceptions and attitudes through various channels such as television, newspapers, radio, and social media platforms. Different media types provide different political viewpoints and narratives, which can influence people's opinions on specific political issues. With broad access to political information, individuals can shape their political preferences. However, political literacy is critical in understanding and analysing political information presented by the media. Individuals with a high level of political literacy tend to be more critical in filtering information and can make more rational and informed political decisions. Media provides access to information, while political literacy enables critical information processing, so these two aspects complement each other. In the context of Indonesian migrant workers, the dominant media used is social media (WhatsApp et al.). These media are social networks of Indonesian migrant workers in the workplace and in the place of origin, including family, relatives, friends, and other social networks, including networks of friends on social media, work networks in the workplace, or networks of family and local communities.

For the election of presidential and vice presidential candidates, the information obtained includes information about the success of the presidential candidate (Joko Widodo), development in Indonesia, especially infrastructure development and toll roads, negative things related to his political opponents, and his character and personality. In addition to social assistance such as Direct Cash Assistance (BLT), and all positive images. As for the parliamentarians contesting in the Kota Kinabalu region, the Indonesian migrant workers were not exposed to any information about them. So, the choice of parliamentarians is made according to the competing party or following the instructions of community/religious leaders, party agents, foremen, and workplace managers.

In addition, electronic media (TV, radio, internet) is also an essential source of literacy for Indonesian migrant workers. In particular, the internet is an often used medium. The use of the internet is an essential source of political literacy. It is also easily accessible through mobile phones. Workers usually have mobile phones used as a tool to communicate with family in their home town. Apart from connecting with colleagues and neighbors. The Internet media is used as a tool for (i) access to political information, (ii) political discussions, (iii) political alert report decisions, (iv) political opinions, and (v) political events.

However, since many Indonesian migrant workers live in rural areas, they find it difficult to access the internet. So, their use is limited. They usually use it in certain places, such as market areas and cities, on certain days. This situation is a barrier for migrant workers to get information regarding their election on an ongoing or occasional basis. This causes their political literacy to be low. Migrant workers can evaluate political candidates based on their track record, political platform, and commitment to important

issues. This helps them make more informed political decisions that align with their interests and values. Overall, the influence of media and political literacy is crucial in shaping the political engagement of Indonesian migrant workers, enabling them to participate more effectively in the democratic process and make political decisions based on a deeper understanding.

Friends, family, and community are social networks that play an essential role in shaping the political attitudes and political choices of Indonesian migrant workers in the 2019 elections (Tarek et al., 2015; Mario, 2017). Within the social network, there can be two categories of close friends and family members, including those in direct contact with each other. In addition to friends who are in indirect contact. Both can be significant factors in forming political solidarity (Soesilo 2017). Close friends such as co-workers, neighbors at work, and foremen have a strong influence as they often interact directly in daily work situations. The exchange of opinions, experiences, and political knowledge can change political views or take a firmer political stance. The same goes for the influence of family living in the same house with close emotional ties and relationships. On the other hand, friends or family who have indirect contact with Indonesian migrant workers, such as friends of Indonesian migrant workers working elsewhere or family in the Village, can also play an essential role in building political solidarity. Although their interaction is not as intense as direct contact, the exchange of information and experiences through long-distance communication can also influence the political views of Indonesian migrant workers.

Personal experiences include events, interactions, and experiences that individuals have had. These can be direct experiences or influences from their social environment. Personal experiences have a significant impact in shaping one's political attitudes and choices. Each individual has unique backgrounds and experiences that shape their views on political issues. From day-to-day associations to more in-depth experiences, personal experiences can be one of the main determining factors in shaping one's political attitudes (Nugroho S, 2016 and Muda R Dkk, 2017). Personal experiences can include a variety of things, starting from family experiences, education, work, and major political events in the surrounding environment. In the context of this study, migrant workers' personal experiences, including previous electoral experiences, experiences of working and living in the destination country, interactions with employers and co-workers, and relationships with family back home, can influence their political attitudes and political choices. These experiences can influence their views on specific political issues and their decision to vote for a candidate or party in the General Election. In addition, the personal experiences of migrant workers can influence their political views and choices. For example, the personal experiences of Indonesian migrant workers have a significant influence on their political preferences, as seen in their support for Joko Widodo in the 2019 elections. In the case of migrant workers from Flores who were deported from Sabah, they were satisfied with the services provided by the Jokowi administration, including facilities and financing to return home. This positive experience led them to support Jokowi, because his government is considered responsive and concerned about the well-being of its citizens. Government policies that directly impact people's lives, such as the protection of migrant workers and migration-related policies, increase legitimacy and political support. Migrant worker groups feel represented, especially on issues relevant to them, such as migrant worker labor protection and foreign policy. Personal experiences, therefore, play an essential role in shaping their political attitudes and choices.

4. Conclusion

The history of the arrival of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah began with the need for labor in the plantation and logging sectors. Many migrant workers enter the country legally or illegally due to economic necessity. Despite their essential contributions, migrant laborers often experience problems related to documents and legal status. Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah play an essential role in Indonesian elections, despite being far away from their homeland. Their participation is facilitated by socialization through the Government, community organizations, and political parties, with social media and social communities as the primary means of information dissemination. However, their political attitudes and choices are more influenced by informal information from daily conversations, personal experiences, and welfare issues, such as labour rights, access to public services, and immigration policies. Geographical distance and limited access to formal political information in Indonesia make them rely on migrant networks to determine their political attitudes. Emotional closeness to candidates or parties that understand their needs is also an essential factor in determining political choices. Migrant workers tend to vote for candidates who offer concrete solutions to their problems abroad. The dynamics of this political engagement reflect their hopes for change that can improve their welfare as Indonesian citizens abroad.

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