

**The Pious and the Secular:  
the Faces of Indonesian Female Legislative Candidates  
in 2014 Indonesian Election**

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To increase the number of women represented in the House of Representative, the Indonesian government had issued Laws on elections and political parties consecutively for the 2004, 2009 and 2014 Elections. The affirmative policy required that a minimum of 30 per cent quota be given to female candidates. For the 2014 Election, a political party that failed to meet the required 30 per cent would be disqualified to compete in the related electoral constituency. True to expectation, the number of female candidates in the 2014 Election increased to 37 per cent compared to the 33.6 per cent in the 2009 Election. The increase in the numbers of the female candidates could be directly felt in the campaign weeks before the Election where pictures of the candidates appeared in posters, banners, billboards all over the cities in Indonesia, not to mention the Internet. The swarm of tens of mostly foreign faces that would represent the people were really unsettling for the voters as they need to choose based on just the pictures without having any information on the reputations and qualifications of these female candidates. This condition was made worse when some political parties decided to recruit female *dangdut* singers, female photo models for male magazines and female celebrities to fulfill the 30 per cent quota, frivolous of their competence. As the voters would give their votes based on the pictures of the female candidates, the candidates presented themselves in manners that they deemed would attract voters. In general, the images could be divided into two categories, the pious and the secular. Some of them emanated the image of piusness using religious symbols, some other posed in a sensual manners, and others adopted motherly aura, successful professionals, assertive and firm leaders, or commanding individuals. Despite the images that they wanted to present, the question remained whether voters were able to decode these images. Based on a research funded by the Indonesian State Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education, this paper described on how the images of the female candidates were decoded by voters in Surabaya who has a female mayor.

Keywords: female candidates, Indonesian 2014 Election, pious images, secular images,

Surabaya voters

## Historical Context

Historically, women's involvement in politics in Indonesia were very limited. There were some influential women organizations such as Perwani (Persatuan Wanita Indonesia/Indonesian Women Association) and Gerwani (Indonesian Women Movement) during Soekarno's era, yet, these organizations were dissolved in Soeharto's era. Instead, a ministry dedicated to take care of women's affairs was established in 1987 and the ministry was several times renamed. It was first named as Ministry for Women's Affairs, then to State Ministry for the Role of Women. In Abdurrachman Wahid's era, it was renamed to State Ministry for Women's Empowerment and in Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's era until the present, it is named Ministry of Female Empowerment and Child Protection. The existence of this ministry is seen as a symbol of legitimization given by the state to the Indonesian women to participate in the public sphere (Darwin, 2005, p. 49), including the political life which is traditionally dominated by men.

Despite the state legitimation, women's participation in politics was still considered unacceptable as seen in the 1999 Election when PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) won the national election. Megawati Soekarnoputri who was the presidential candidate of PDIP, could not take her seat as president because "the People's Congress, with its predominantly male and devout Muslim members, refused to accept a woman as president" (Berninghausen, Kerstan and Suprpto-Jansen, 2012, pp. 127-128). She had to take her seat as vice-president of Abdurrachman Wahid. It was only after Abdurrachman Wahid was removed from his seat as president that she became the first woman president of Indonesia. As it turned out, having a woman president did not automatically gave Indonesian women benefits that could legally warrant their participation in politics.

Megawati's rise to the presidency was unfortunately no cause for the celebration in the feminist ranks either. They reproached her for neglecting women's rights and for appointing only two women to cabinet posts. She had no specific agenda to improve the situation of women in Indonesia, she had no ties to the women's movement worth mentioning and she showed little interest in promoting women's cause. She is a prime example for the fact that a woman reaching high office is no guarantee for a shift in

policy regarding women's interests. During her term, women had as low a profile in politics and public affairs as ever (p. 128).

As a woman who had suffered the injustice of the dominant patriarchal ideology, Megawati did not seem to regard her experience as a cause to support more women's involvement in politics. She even appointed Hamzah Haz, a "vociferous opponent to a woman in the top leadership post" as her vice-president (ibid.). During her two years of presidency, "[w]omen's groups do not rejoice in the first woman president of Indonesia, because she seemed 'gender blind' and does not have strong perspectives on the empowerment of women" (Porter, 2005, p. 145).

A woman group that had a very significant role in fighting for women's cause, the Indonesian Women's Coalition (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia), pushed the agenda for mainstreaming gender concerns known as the 'affirmative action' to be included in the Bill for Political Parties and the Bill for the 2004 Election, demanding a 30 per cent quota for women candidates. To the surprise of many, Megawati stated her refusal for the proposed affirmative policy in her speeches given on two occasions, the Mother's Day (22 December 2001) and again on Kartini Day (21 April 2002), stating that Indonesian women did not need to beg for pity to be given important positions in the government, as it would lower their dignity (Supriyanto, 2013, p. 132). Megawati's refusal to adopt the affirmative policy was generally considered as the main cause of the failure to pass the affirmative action policy into the Bill on Political Parties and the Bill on the 2004 Election. It was only after a very long fight of the feminist activists that the government passed the Law on Political Parties of 2002 and the Law on Election of 2003 that adopt the affirmative action policy by setting the regulation of 30 per cent quota for female candidates. But the law did not state any sanction if a political party failed to meet the quota. As can be predicted, with the exclusion of sanctions, the result of the 2004 Election did not show significant result to increase the number of the representation of women in the legislative bodies. Yet, the 2 per cent increase was seen an important achievement by many who fought for women's cause, because women's participation in politics were at last guaranteed by the law.

The Law on Political Parties of 2008 and the Law on Election of 2008 reaffirmed the required 30 per cent quota for female candidates. The Law of 2008 adopted a zipper model: at least one female for every three legislative candidates (Puskapol UI, 2011), thus in the 2009 Election, female representatives in People's Representative Council (DPR) rose 7 per cent, from

11 per cent in the 2004 Election to 18 per cent in 2009. This significant increase brought up some optimism that in two consecutive elections, the number of women’s participation in politics kept increasing. Thus it was expected that the 2014 Election would bring more significant increase, especially when Law on Political Parties of 2011 and the Law on Election of 2012 readopted the zipper model and the General Election Commission (KPU) decided to “employ penalties for political parties that failed to fulfill the requirement of 30% quota of female legislative candidate”, stating that a political party that failed to meet the required 30 per cent would be disqualified to compete in the related electoral constituency (Soeseno, 2014, p. 10). The result of this regulation boosted the number of female legislative candidates which rose to 37 per cent, 7 per cent more than the required 30 per cent quota. One would hope that with this increase in female candidates, the result of the 2014 Election would yield an increasing number of the female representatives. Surprisingly, despite the increase in the number of the female candidates, the number of the female representatives decrease to 17.3 per cent compared to the 18 per cent in the 2009. Even though the decrease is below 1 per cent, it was really unexpected considering the trend in the previous two elections. The summary of the female representatives is shown in the table below.

Election Year	Total Members of DPR	Female Representatives	Percentage
1999	500	45	9.00
2004	550	61	11.09
2009	560	101	18.03
2014	560	97	17.3

The question is why is there a decrease in the number of the female representatives despite the improvement of the Law on Political Parties and the Law on Election and a more rigid application of the required 30 per cent quota? Logically, the improved regulations would yield more women’s participation in politics.

## Social Context

In the campaign weeks before the 2014 General Election, the increase in the numbers of the female candidates participating was very obvious as pictures of female candidates appeared in posters, banners, and billboards all over the cities in Indonesia, not to mention the internet. The swarm of tens of mostly foreign faces that would represent the people were really unsettling, as to-be-voters were presented with pictures, names and the political parties that they represented. In some ways, many candidates were aware that they were not known by to-be-voters that they used of prominent political figures set at the background of their pictures based on the political parties they represented. Some examples of the use of the pictures are Megawati and Soekarno for Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), Prabowo for Great Indonesian Movement Party (Gerindra), Aburizal Bakrie for Party of the Functional Groups (Golkar), Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for the Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat) or Surya Paloh for National Democratic Party (Nasdem). The pictures of the leaders of the political parties had the same size as the pictures of the candidates and to-be-voters might wonder whether they should choose the candidates or the political parties. The similarities of one campaign poster to the other made it difficult for to-be-voters to discern the difference among the candidates.

This condition was made worse when some political parties such as Indonesian Justice and Unity Party (PKPI) and United Development Party (PPP) decided to recruit female *dangdut* singers, such as Angel Lelga and Camel Petir; female photo models known for their hot poses for male magazines, such as Destiara Talita, Venna Melinda, Lyra Virna and not to mention the recruitment of female celebrities to fulfill the 30% quota, frivolous of their competence. Many of the Indonesian media, printed as well as online, and TV talk shows exposed these female candidates in connection with their professions. They became the topics of conversations and their 'old' sexy pictures suddenly appeared on the internet and they became guests of talk shows. Angel Lelga even appeared in one of the most popular and prestigious talk show 'Mata Najwa', hosted by Najwa Shihab. Lelga's inability to answer Najwa's questions seemed to justify the negative stereotyping against *dangdut* singers and that they were not to be taken seriously (Effendy, 2015, pp. 221-225; Mochtar, 2014). The frequent exposure of these celebrities, made them to be more famous when they became legislative candidates than when they were in their professions. Although many of them failed in their efforts to be a representative in the election, their involvement to participate in the politics was regarded as the flippant manner of some

political parties in their effort to fulfil the 30 per cent quota. Political parties as well as these female celebrities seemed not to take women's involvement in politics seriously and instead they were more concern for their own gains. This incident could be seen as a backlash against the women's organizations' efforts to fight for women's cause. The negative exposure of these female candidates eclipsed female candidates who have the qualification and competence as representatives as they did not get as much exposure.

### **Decoding the Pictures of the Female Candidates**

It was in such historical and social context that underlie the events before the 2014 General Election that this research was done. Voters were expected to give their votes based on the pictures of the female candidates and many of them were 'new faces', strangers for most voters. The candidates presented themselves in manners that they deemed would attract voters. Despite the images that they wanted to present, the question remained whether voters were able to decode these images. Based on a research funded by the Indonesian State Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education, this paper presents the result of the study on the voters' ability to decode pictures of the female candidates and to associate the pictures to what aspects they wanted to find in their representatives. As the female candidates had to depend only on their pictures to get voters, they needed to use codes that they assumed would make voters to choose them. And at the voters should be able to interpret the codes.

This process of *encoding-decoding* would be effective if the result of the decoding gives the same meaning as what is encoded or as it is intended to be. The way voters find meanings in the pictures of the candidates can be described by using Stuart Hall's (2013) definition of representation.

Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any systems which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. . . . things, objects, people, events in the world - do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another. . . . Producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code – encoding, putting things into

the code – and by the person at the other end interpreting or decoding the meaning (p. 45).

Hall also explains that one makes meanings “by forging links between three orders of things; what we might broadly call the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world – the mental concepts we carry around our head; and the signs, arranged into languages, which ‘stand for’ or communicate these concepts” (ibid.).

With this definition in mind, it can be assumed that when voters decode the pictures of the candidates, there are three aspects that work, events that happen at that time, the voters’ backgrounds/profiles that shape their ability to make meanings and the codes that are presented. The research was done around six months after the result of the election was announced, so the respondents had all gone through the events surrounding the election. The events that happened during the 2014 General Election have been discussed in the historical and social contexts in Indonesia. The sixty respondents, male and female, who were interviewed were those who voted in the 2014 election in Surabaya (the capital of East Java). Their age were between twenty to sixty, their education levels were from senior high to post graduate, their religions and professions vary.

In general, the pictures of the candidates could be divided into two categories, the pious and the secular. Some of them emanate the image of piety using religious symbols, some other pose in sensual manners, and others adopt the motherly aura, successful professionals, assertive and firm leaders, or commanding individuals.

### **The Pious and the Secular**

In Indonesia, religion plays a very strong role in every aspects of life that it is a compulsory for every citizen to have a religion and to state their religious affiliations based on the six official religions. The examples of how significant is the role of religion in Indonesia can be seen in several aspects of life, such as in a marriage. It would be difficult for couples with different religions to get their marriage certificate from the state, because the marriage should first be recorded by their affiliated religious office. Even though Indonesia is known for its religious tolerance, outburst of religious conflicts in many parts of Indonesia still ensue (Ethnic And Religious Violence in Indonesia, n.d.; Susanto and Muryanto, 2013). During the Ramadhan months, controversies surrounding whether or not restaurants and food stalls can serve their

customers during the fasting hours still happen in 2016. Lifestyles, such as fashion, is also very much influenced by religion.

From about a hundred posters of the female candidates all over Indonesia that were collected and analyzed, symbols of piety can be found in signs conventionally connected to a certain religion. In his book *Identity and Pleasure*, Heryanto (2014) explains that wearing *hijab* (headscarf) among the middle-class is not only about fashion, but also a form of new identity to show piety among the Muslim. Sixty per cent of the female candidates wore *hijab* in their posters, from modern and colorful *hijab* to the conventional ones. The *hijab* of the candidates are fashioned colorfully in pleats, knots, or laces. The colorful and fashionable ways of using the headscarves, prove that they also serve as fashion, not mainly for religious purpose. Some of the headscarves are worn with the hair partially visible. This is the way that Javanese women traditionally wear their headscarves as an important accessories in the wearing of *kebaya* (traditional Javanese costume). It can also suggest femininity, because women who wear headscarves need to act according to the feminine characteristics dictated by tradition and religion. The combinations of the Javanese tradition and the religious purpose can be seen as the proofs how culture, religion, and fashion are blended in. In this way, *hijab* can serve as the codes of piety, tradition, femininity and modernity, suggesting that the wearer has all of those aspects. The research respondents were unable to specify particular candidates to choose from, it might be because there are many candidates who use the symbols.

Other religious symbol that can be read is the symbol of Christianity as seen in the use of Christmas tree, Christmas ornaments and Christmas greeting in the background of the portrait of one candidate. The research respondents assumed that the candidate is a Christian, whereas it was a common practice that political figures, regardless of their religious affiliations, would put up banners with Christmas greetings to show religious tolerance. Surprisingly, Chineseness and Mandarin letters are also read as the symbol of Christianity. In one other picture of a candidate, she accentuated her Chineseness using Mandarin letters to convey her message. Her Chineseness and the Mandarin letters were decoded as the signs of her being a Christian. This association of Chineseness to Christianity was done by respondents' who had the similar background and rooted in the dichotomy that Chinese-Indonesian are Christians and indigenous Indonesian are Muslim. Other religious symbols are absent in most of the posters. Without the religious symbols, the respondents decoded meanings from the use of make-up, the style of their clothing,



the similarity of the candidates to a certain prominent female leader, and the familiarity of a candidate's name.

The result of the interviews reveal that the aspects the respondents prefer in their candidates, respectively are assertive (including bold, firm, brave, and charismatic), nurturing (including patient, gentle, loving, motherly), jaunty (including cheerful, friendly, merry, jolly), humble and modest, educated (intelligent, smart), and beautiful (pretty, graceful). One female candidate, Indah Kurnia, stands out (top position with 62 per cent) because of the respondents' familiarity with her from media coverage, and that she emanated assertiveness, firmness, and seriousness. Indah Kurnia, not a celebrity, but was well-known as a banker for BCA (one of the biggest bank in Indonesia) and former manager of Persebaya (a professional football club based in Surabaya). Her career in the profession that is traditionally dominated by man, was assumed as the most desirable quality in a female representative.

To assume that a female candidate is preferred because of the traits considered to be masculine is too superficial. Applying Hall's concept of the "links between three orders of things", and considering the respondents were the Surabayan, another context should be considered. Surabaya has a female mayor, Tri Rismaharini who took office since 2010. She is the first directly-elected and first female mayor of Surabaya. She has won many national and international awards and she is well-known for her boldness and firmness. She is considered to be very motherly because of her concerned over the marginalized and in some interviews, she shed tears when talking about them. But in some other occasions, she also showed her anger, boldness and firmness. For Surabayan, she is a controversial figure, but much loved by the people (Aritonang, 2014). With Risma as a reference figure in mind, the respondents associated Indah Kurnia to Risma because of their similarities. Both of them are not pretty in a feminine way, they do not wear much make-up, they work in a profession dominated by men and they are both successful in what they do. Therefore, the Surabayan decode meanings not only from the symbols embedded in the picture, but also from the events and experience that shape their mental concepts.

The ability to understand how the proses of encoding and decoding work would raise the electability of the female candidates. Symbols of pioussness, femininity, or modernity used by the candidates did not attract voters. They wanted a guarantee that the female representatives would really work for the people's cause. Therefore it is urgent that female candidates should provide

information on their achievements that can easily accessed by to-be-voters. The used of posters and billboards to promote their candidacy are not enough as to-be-voters want and need assurance that the choice they make would benefit them. The failure to understand this phenomena would only harm the number of female candidates chosen to be the people's representatives. The women's organizations hard work to legally warrant women's involvement in politics, would not be able to improve the number of women in politics if female candidates are unable to convinced to-be-voters of their qualifications and competence. It is true that female candidates would need more efforts compared to male candidates, but it is for a wothy cause.

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