



Indonesia's Election to the UNHRC: The Irony?

By

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Synopsis/Abstract

Indonesia has just been re-elected as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the 2020-2022 period after securing 174 votes from 193 member countries. The election took place at the 74th UN General Assembly in New York on October 18th, 2019 with Indonesia chosen to represent the Asia Pacific region after competing with Japan, China, South Korea, Iraq, and Marshall Islands.¹ Indonesia's re-election to the UNHRC shows the country's persistent and continuous effort in resolving and protecting human rights issues at the global level. But then again, the re-election raises questions regarding Indonesia's commitment in addressing human rights issues considering its human rights track record is questionable. What does Indonesia's UNHRC membership mean to the country? How is Indonesia's domestic human rights situation?

Indonesia's Position in the UNHRC

Since the establishment of the UNHRC in 2006, Indonesia has been three times elected as a member of the UN body for 2007-2010, 2011-2014, and 2015-2017 period. In addition, during the 2006-2007 period it was also a founding member.² Due to Indonesia's positive image in international affairs recently – such as being selected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2019-2020 period thanks to remarkable efforts put by Foreign Minister Retno L.P. Marsudi these past few years - Indonesia's re-election as a member of the UNHRC is not surprising.



Since the beginning of this year, Indonesia has begun preparations in campaigning for its current position in the UNHRC. The theme of Indonesia's campaign for its candidacy is "A True Partner for Democracy, Development, and Social Justice". Through this campaign, Indonesia is aiming to convey the values of tolerance, democracy, and social justice in promoting human rights. Given the idea of this campaign and Indonesia's past history in promoting human rights abroad, it is no wonder why Indonesia managed to garner support from fellow UNHRC members and secured the most votes for the Asia Pacific region.

Indonesia's Track Record of Human Rights Promotion

Indonesia has been very vocal in expressing its stance in supporting human rights. At the regional level, Indonesia was the first ASEAN country to establish a national agency on human rights, *Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia* or Human Rights National Commission (Komnas HAM), in 1993. Indonesia was also the initiator of the foundation of an ASEAN body concerning the protection of human rights, ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009. Since then, Indonesia has actively participated in various discussions on human rights and provided recommendations.

For example, Indonesia has explicitly stated its support for Palestine by cutting diplomatic relations with Israel, including boycotting products. The latest statement regarding the issue of Palestine was made by then Vice-President of Indonesia, Muhammad Jusuf Kalla, at the 74th Session of UN General Assembly. He stated that, "Peace in the Middle East will not be possible if we cannot solve the issue of Palestine". Mr Kalla also urged the international community to find a solution.³ Indonesia has long condemned Israel's occupation of Palestine and the violation of Palestinian rights, calling on all world leaders to respond to the longstanding conflict.

Regarding the issue of the Rohingya people in Rakhine State in Myanmar, Indonesia has submitted several proposals to help solve the humanitarian crisis, one of which is the "Formula 4 + 1" to restore the stability and peace in the region, protect the people in Rakhine, and open direct access humanitarian assistance.⁴ The conflict in Rakhine state has been a priority of Indonesia's foreign policy since Joko Widodo was sworn in for his first term in office.





Highlighting significant results and achievements of Indonesia in promoting and protecting human rights issues at the international level, it is truly deserving of Indonesia to be elected as a member of the UNHRC. According to Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, Indonesia is pushing the UNHRC to be more efficient and cooperative as well as results-oriented.⁵

Human Rights Condition in Indonesia

While it is true that Indonesia's track record in addressing human rights issues at the international level is proven to be positive, the human rights situation inside the country is arguably quite the opposite. Indonesia has a checkered history of human rights abuse cases, perhaps the most notorious being during the authoritarian rule of Soeharto who was in the office during the New Order era (1966-1998). Having ruled the country for more than three decades, Soeharto was forced to resign following massive student protests that broke out in Jakarta in 1998.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's sitting president, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo who will serve his second and final term, has been criticised by some for his lack of commitment towards human rights in Indonesia. Critics point to how the human rights track record in Indonesia under his administration has been declining. "Human rights tragedies are just political commodity used to get more votes," activist Maria Sumarsih told *The Atlantica*.⁶ President Jokowi has been known for being nonchalant towards human rights issues. In his recent inauguration speech, he emphasised economic development and bureaucratic reform, but did not once mention or address human rights issues as he once claimed he would respect and protect. His statements raised concerns among human rights bodies and activists in the country.

There are many alarming human rights-related issues in Indonesia under President Jokowi's administration. According to Human Rights Watch 2018 Report⁷, Indonesia is still witnessing many serious human rights violation cases in 2018. The issues range from freedom of expression where individuals have been barred from criticising the government to oppression of individual liberties. The level of religious tolerance in Indonesia is also worrisome. The blasphemy law has seen minorities facing harassment and jailed, the most notable case being that of former Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaya Purnama or 'Ahok'. Women and children's rights have also been discriminated. More recently, the human rights situation in Papua came into the spotlight. Allegations of unlawful killings by the Indonesian military and the lack of punishment for those





responsible has led to human rights activist such as lawyer Veronica Koman to be persistent in demanding justice for the Papuans.

The recent developments surrounding the human rights situation in Indonesia proves there are still areas that can be improved. Other than the President's seemingly lack of commitment to the preservation of human rights, the new proposed criminal code is has also been controversial. Critics argue the new code would lead to the criminalisation of marginal communities including the LGBTQ+ and women, as well as violating the freedom of speech and association. Massive student-led protests last September urged the government to quickly revise the bills. Although the President has postponed the new code from passing into law, no actions have been taken to address its controversial elements.

The appointment of several names as ministers among the President's new cabinet also sparked controversy. Names such as Prabowo Subianto, Tito Karnavian, and Yasonna Laoly stirred debates and disappointment among human right activists and associations. Prabowo Subianto, the President's former election rival who was also a former military general, was accused of kidnapping activists during the 1998 riots but has never been charged. Tito Karnavian, former national police chief, has disappointed some for his failure in uncovering the truth behind the attack on a senior official of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), Novel Baswedan. Meanwhile Yasonna Laoly was controversial for his strong support of the passing of a new KPK law that many critics have said has potential to weaken KPK as an anti-corruption agency.

Analysis/The Verdict

Serving as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the fifth time is an honour for Indonesia. This means Indonesia's human rights record is being recognised by the international community as one of UN countries that is active in promoting and protecting human rights issues. This membership demands Indonesia to be more active and aware about human rights issues around the world and give actual contributions towards the promotion and advancement of human rights at the national, regional, and international scale. It is also a form of Indonesia diplomacy success, particularly in its lobbying efforts to gain votes from fellow UNHRC members. With Indonesia securing a seat in UNHRC, Indonesia is predicted to carry on its role as a mediator and promoter of human rights issues. However, given Indonesia's domestic human rights situation, it is hoped that Indonesia will be active in promoting and protecting human rights issues both at home and abroad.





Endnotes

- ¹ Medcom. (2019, October 28). 'Indonesia Re-elected as UN Human Rights Council Member'. Retrieved from <https://www.medcom.id/english/world/3NOXL63b-indonesia-re-elected-as-un-human-rights-council-member>.
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- ³ Anadolu Agency. (2019, September 27). 'Indonesia urges int'l community to unite for Palestine'. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/74th-un-general-assembly-2019/indonesia-urges-intl-community-to-unite-for-palestine/1596081>.
- ⁴ The Insider Stories. (2019, October 18). 'Indonesia Officially Become Human Rights Council Member'. Retrieved from <https://theinsiderstories.com/indonesia-officially-become-human-rights-council-members/>.
- ⁵ Medcom. (2019, October 29). 'Indonesia wants UNHRC to be more efficient'. Retrieved from <https://www.medcom.id/english/national/4KZ6r86K-indonesia-wants-unhrc-to-be-more-efficient>.
- ⁶ The Atlantic. (2019, Januari 18). 'Indonesia's Right Struggle: Deciding Which Candidate Is the 'Lesser Evil''. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/indonesia-president-human-rights-jokowi-subianto/580762/>.
- ⁷ Human Rights Watch. (2019). 'Indonesia: Events of 2018'. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/indonesia>.





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