

Komnas HAM drafts antiracism guideline

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The National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) recently released in Jakarta a draft guideline aimed to help mitigate racial and ethnic discrimination that might disrupt next year's presidential election.

With more than 300 ethnic groups in Indonesia, it is common for parties to politicize race and religion to win voters as they compete for public office at all levels of government.

In the latest instance, politician Djarot Saiful Hidayat from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) was subjected to a racial smear campaign last month while running for North Sumatra governor.

His political rivals urged locals not to vote for him because he hailed from Java and once worked with a "non-Muslim" politician — a reference to then-Jakarta Governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, who is a Christian of Chinese descent.

Human rights group Setara Institute described the North Sumatra election as the worst case of racial and religious discrimination in last month's simultaneous regional elections.

Komnas HAM commissioner Choirul Anam said the draft guideline would help crack down on racism by addressing grey areas in the legal understanding of racial and ethnic discrimination as stipulated in the 2008 law on eliminating racism.

"For example, when [adherents of minority religions] are exercising freedom of religion, local administrations would call it an offense to [adherents of majority religions], and that is discrimination," he said.

Choirul also pointed out that the guideline would evolve to accommodate the changing socio-political conditions in Indonesia, thereby allowing authorities to always have an up-to-date view on what constituted racial discrimination.

Asfinawati, chairwoman of the

Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation, added that the guideline was also expected to be equally useful beyond the general elections, as it helped the public to better understand different forms of racial discrimination. The guideline addressed hate speech, racial segregation, electoral discrimination, and affirmative action policies, as well as other related issues.

She explained that for example, the guideline defined the forced transmigration of persecuted minority groups as discrimination, even if local administrations justified the relocation as an effort to ensure the groups' safety.

"They [local administrations] mean well, but they're actually deepening the social division," said Asfinawati.

"Sometimes, officials in the legislative and executive branches of government forget that human rights is the way for Indonesia," she added.

Komnas HAM is giving 30 days to other stakeholders, including ministries, lawmakers, civil society and the media to review the document online and provide input through its official website, komnasham.go.id.

The initiative comes following a series of election campaigns that were marred by hate speech over racial and religious differences. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was arguably among the most divisive democratic elections that the country has ever seen. Ahok, an incumbent with strong approval ratings, was eventually defeated by Anies Baswedan, who lagged at the beginning of the race.

Observers believed that Ahok's blasphemy conviction, following a controversial statement he made that was deemed insulting to Islam, was the key factor that led to his loss. Regions with a history of racial and religious tensions were also prone to divisive elections, and the time was ripe for politicians to mobilize voters along the community divide for their own benefit ahead of the 2019 elections. (nor)