

Upholding human rights essential for national unity

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Thumbs down to both presidential candidates for failing to take up the human rights issue more seriously during the presidential debate on Thursday. They missed a chance to show to the nation their commitment to respect and uphold human rights and to end all forms of persecution and discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, culture or language.

If they are truly passionate about defending the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), they know that human rights violations, persecution and discriminatory practices are sure recipes for breaking up the nation.

The General Elections Commission (KPU) picked human rights along with law enforcement and corruption as topics for the first round of five presidential debates, to reflect their importance in the national political agenda.

Both pairs of candidates

— incumbent president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo with running mate Ma'ruf Amin, and challenger Prabowo Subianto with Sandiaga Uno — ducked the issue and instead used the questions as an opportunity to engage in rhetorical statements about stronger law enforcement.

Prior to the debate, there were raised expectations that human rights would take center stage and might even become one of the main election campaign themes.

The questions about the human rights situation in Indonesia, which were provided to the candidates in advance, were to the point and relevant, and the moderators who posed the questions even asked candidates to refer to cases and examples in their responses. Both candidates blew their opportunities.

Jokowi in his response cautioned that no one should set human rights against law enforcement, and went on about the need for strong law enforcement. As

COMMENTARY



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if they were in collusion, Prabowo picked the same angle, and as with many of his answers, promised better pay for law enforcement agents.

Left unaddressed were the real problems of human rights in the country, old and new ones.

Lest we forget, one of the reasons why the Soeharto regime collapsed in 1998 was because of the endless violations of human rights throughout his reign, going back to the massive killing and jailing of millions of people in the wake of the abortive 1965 coup.

Many of these issues have re-

mained unresolved.

The stigmatization of members and supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), blamed for the 1965 putsch attempt, has been revived and is now being used against their children and grandchildren. Even Jokowi himself has been the target of fake news about his alleged PKI membership.

The 1960s killing campaign, and the various human rights abuses in trouble spots like Aceh, Papua and East Timor (now Timor Leste), and many others, have been left unattended and the perpetrators allowed to get away, literally with murder.

Not surprisingly, more than 20 years after Soeharto's departure, impunity remains the default in most new human rights cases. Some of these have been in the form of persecution and discriminatory practices that come with the rise of identity politics. While the state may not be directly involved, it is still responsible for

allowing them to happen and for failing to defend people's rights.

We now have cases of persecution and discrimination against Ahmadiyah and Shia followers, members of the homegrown belief system Gafatar, and the forced closure of places of worship. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people have been targeted of late. In all these cases, the police have done virtually nothing to protect citizens whenever they have come under attack.

President Jokowi is right in saying no one should set human rights against law enforcement, but the job of law enforcement agencies is first and foremost to guarantee the basic rights of all citizens. The oath of office of the president is to uphold the constitution, meaning to protect and guarantee the rights of all citizens.

If we put law enforcement first before human rights, we go back to where we were with Soeharto when he justified the violation of people's basic rights, such as the

freedoms of speech, of association and of religion, in the name of law enforcement for the sake of national unity.

Both Jokowi or Prabowo admittedly have image problems when it comes to human rights, the first for failing to live up to expectations in the last five years, and the second for his poor track record when he was active in the military. But irrespective of their backgrounds, the nation has the right to demand better commitments to human rights from whoever wins the April 17 election.

Human rights are not a Western concept imposed on Indonesia. They are a concept that will guarantee that everyone in this country enjoys the same rights and obligations, free from persecution and discrimination, and enjoys the same protection when they come under attack.

Upholding and protecting human rights will strengthen rather than undermine national unity.