



**Adapting to COVID-19: Indonesia, The United States, and the Indo-Pacific
Session #5: “Elections in the Time of COVID-19”
June 23, 2021 (US) | June 24, 2021 (Asia)**

Key Findings

On June 23, with support from the US Embassy Jakarta and in partnership with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Pacific Forum hosted the fifth session of the “*Adapting to COVID-19: Indonesia, the United States, and the Indo-Pacific*” *Virtual Forum Series*. The topic of discussion in this session was “Elections in the Time of COVID-19,” with over 70 participants from government, private sector, academia, and other non-governmental organizations.

Dr. Staffan Darnolf, Senior Global Election Operations & Administration Advisor, International Foundation for Electoral Systems; Ms. Evi Novida Ginting, Commissioner, General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia (KPU RI); and Mr. Fritz Edward Siregar, Commissioner, Election Supervisory Body of the Republic of Indonesia (BAWASLU RI) shared their perspectives on the challenges faced by the United States and Indonesia in conducting democratic elections at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Philips J. Vermonte of CSIS Indonesia moderated the discussion.

Key findings from the virtual dialogue are described below:

The Implications of COVID-19 on Democratic Expression

In Indonesia and the United States, elections are enshrined as a citizen’s basic right, and a fair and free election cements an individual’s right to express their political opinion. Ensuring social distancing precautions complicated the electoral process and, as not always enforced, made the guarantee of public health difficult. Policymakers in Jakarta and Washington faced the dilemma of developing electoral best practices to navigate elections without compromising public safety. In Indonesia, following discussions between the People’s Representative Council of Indonesia (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia), the government, and the General Elections Commission of Indonesia (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), the decision was made to postpone the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections from September to December due to public health concerns. In contrast, the United States kept to its quadrennial schedule, and carried out its 59th presidential election on November 3, 2020.

Ability to Adapt to Changing Public Necessities

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have shown remarkable resilience in their ability to adopt public health requirements for the purpose of hosting physical elections. Indonesia and the United States are two of the many countries that decided to move forward with elections in the face of the pandemic. KPU worked closely with Indonesia’s national COVID-19 task force, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Ministry of Politics and Law and Security, among others, to implement public health measures during the simultaneous regional head elections. In the 298,938 polling stations scattered throughout Indonesia, such measures included: restrictions on physical gatherings and celebrations; a push

for campaigns organized and hosted via online media; specific protocols for voters with a body temperature of 37.3°C (99.14°F) or above; mandatory mask wearing and social distancing measures; and polling staff dripping ink onto voters' fingers to signify participation, rather than the customary communal pool of ink. In addition to these processes, criminal provisions were created to help ensure compliance with the public health measures. Similarly, in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidance measures for polling stations intended to keep voters and staff safe. In particular, the CDC guidelines empathized hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, mask use, social distancing, ventilation systems, physical barriers and guides, scheduled or staggered voting, and mail-in ballots.

Centrality of Physical Voting Systems

Pilot studies of e-voting systems have been carried out in a number of countries, including Norway, Germany, and Austria. However, difficulties in guaranteeing the secrecy of individual votes and concerns related to hacking have consistently prevented the adoption of such technology in those countries. In Indonesia, although e-voting would be enormously beneficial from a public health perspective, many Indonesian citizens still lack Internet access. Additionally, the transparency brought by tangible and quantifiable ballot papers remains much preferred by Indonesian citizens distrustful of the electoral process. In the United States, voting using direct-recording electronic voting machines (DREs) is quite common, but Internet voting remains limited to citizens in special circumstances, such as nationals living abroad or military personnel deployed overseas. Early voting and postal votes are also two important electoral processes that help to reduce the risk of COVID-19 on election day. Although in-person voting can be perceived as complicating a government's duty to ensure public health, the elections held in Indonesia and the United States demonstrated that with proper planning, an extensive information campaign, and strict adherence to proper pandemic protocols, elections can be held during a pandemic.

This document was prepared by Tom Connolly. For more information, please contact Dr. Crystal Pryor (crystal@pacforum.org), Director of Nonproliferation, Technology, and Fellowships at Pacific Forum. These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants. The speakers have approved this summation of their presentation.