

POLITICS AND SOCIAL WELFARE: DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS ON ELECTABILITY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT. This research aims to analyze the relationship between political policy and social welfare, with a focus on the dynamics of the Social Assistance Program (Bansos) and its impact on electability in Indonesia. In a dynamic political context, social assistance programs have a significant role in shaping public perceptions of government performance. This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. This research found that the main focus of social assistance is on the poor as the group most in need. Unfortunately, the practice of politicizing social assistance often occurs before general elections, obscuring its true purpose. Research notes cases of politicization, such as the use of the Family Hope Program as a campaign tool, detrimental to the essence of the welfare program. Regulatory reform, application of the concept of graduation, and policy focus on economic empowerment are crucial steps to maintain the effectiveness of social assistance, avoid the risk of politicization, and address the root causes of poverty in a sustainable manner. The decision of the Government and DPR to shorten the campaign period further increases the risk of politicization, especially with the existence of a socialization period which can be used to maneuver without sanctions. Criticism of the increase in the allocation of social assistance funds indicates the potential for pork barrel politics, where the government may use it selectively for the benefit of increasing electability. Increased supervision, transparency, political literacy, and a strong media role are key in overcoming the complex challenges of politicization of social assistance and pork barrel politics ahead of the elections.

Keywords: Politics; Social Welfare; Social Assistance; General Election; Pork Barrel Politics

INTRODUCTION

The existence of the state in the context of economic and social life forms a critical balance between providing guarantees and services to the community. The state is not only a political entity, but is also responsible as a provider of security and welfare for all its people (Pakpahan & Sihombing, 2018). When economic shocks occur, the role of the state becomes increasingly vital. The absence of a quick and effective response from the state in overcoming economic and social difficulties can be a form of system failure that can worsen the condition of society (Su. When many people face difficulties in meeting basic needs or fall into deep poverty, it can be considered an indicator that the state has not been able to provide adequate protection (Solikatun et al, 2014).

Economic shocks that are not handled properly can open up opportunities for increasing social disparities and inequality. Therefore, the state's responsibility lies not only in efforts to recover the economy, but also in creating inclusive and sustainable social policies (Firdaus, 2014). A well-functioning state will respond to economic changes with policies that not only balance market forces, but also maintaining social balance. Therefore, the government's efforts to maintain a balance between economic sustainability and social welfare are a reflection of the state's commitment to creating a fair and just society (Agusalim, et al, 2014)

The public welfare of a country is a reflection of the policies established to protect and improve public welfare. As stated by Pradana (2020), the

implementation of programs such as public health, pensioners' welfare, unemployment compensation, and simple housing are concrete steps in achieving this goal. Social protection through welfare policies is a crucial instrument for maintaining social stability and preventing inequality that is detrimental to society at large. Therefore, this policy is not only reactive to problems that arise, but also proactive in providing guarantees for community welfare (Habibullah, 2017).

In the context of economic conditions that are disrupted due to certain shocks, the government's policy response becomes very important. As stated by Ikhsan (2000), the transmission mechanism used by the government should still be able to work, although it may not be optimal, depending on the severity of the shock that disrupts a country's economic stability. A quick and appropriate response in the face of economic instability can include fiscal, monetary and social policies designed to mitigate adverse impacts and support economic recovery (Kresnawati & Imelda, 2020). The government's role in formulating community welfare policies is not only as a response to certain conditions, but also as a foundation that ensures resilience and sustainability of welfare amidst fluctuating economic dynamics (Suharto, 2015).

Indonesia, as a developing country, continues to be committed to improving the welfare of its people through various policies, one of which is the Social Assistance Program (Bansos) (Rahmanto, 2021). Presidential Regulation Number 63 of 2017 concerning Non-Cash Distribution of Social

Assistance provides the legal basis for implementing this program. According to this regulation, Social Assistance includes assistance in the form of money, goods, or services provided to individuals, families, groups, or communities that are poor, underprivileged, and/or vulnerable to social risks (Susantyo et al, 2020).

Social risk, as explained in the regulation, refers to events or occurrences that can give rise to the potential for social vulnerability borne by individuals, families, groups or communities. Social risks can arise due to social crises, economic crises, political crises, natural phenomena and disasters (Anwar, 2017). The importance of Social Assistance in this situation lies in its role in mitigating the impact of the crisis which can result in increased social vulnerability. With this program, it is hoped that vulnerable communities can be given adequate support, so that they can survive and live in reasonable conditions, even though they are faced with various social risks (Gemiharto & Rosfiantika, 2017).

The Social Assistance Program (Bansos) in Indonesia has a main focus on poor and vulnerable communities, with funding sources coming from the Government through a Non-Contributory system. A number of social assistance programs provided by the central government involve various aspects of life, such as the Family Hope Program (PKH), Basic Food Cards, Smart Indonesia Program, Smart Indonesia College Card Program, National Health Insurance Program Contribution Assistance, and special assistance for the elderly and disabled. (Fadhli et al, 2021). In 2021, the government is redesigning the social protection program, especially social assistance, through the Ministry of Social Affairs (Kemensos) with the aim of making it accessible to all Indonesian citizens through updating the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS) on a national scale (Huraerah, 2022).

The distribution of social assistance, which should be an instrument for improving social welfare, unfortunately often becomes the target of politicization with political interests, especially ahead of general elections. This phenomenon is illustrated by the suspicious trend of increasing social assistance funds approaching general election time, both at the national and local levels (Martini, 2010). The use of grant and social assistance programs for the interests of certain political actors is one of the impacts of the populist nature of the program, often used to achieve certain interests in general elections, both national and local levels, especially by those in incumbent positions (Saragintan & Hidayat, 2016).

Social Assistance spending is a shopping item that can be utilized by incumbent candidates to gain support from the voting public. This situation raises

suspensions that the politicization of social assistance is a strategy to increase electability (Habibi et al, 2015). Observation of the social protection budget allocation for 2024, which reached IDR 496.8 trillion, shows a significant increase compared to the budget in 2023 of IDR 433 trillion. In fact, this allocation remains higher compared to during the Covid-19 pandemic, namely IDR 468.2 trillion in 2021 and IDR 460.6 trillion in 2022 (Indonesian Data, 2024). This condition provides an indication that social assistance has most likely been politicized for electoral interests, considering that there has been a substantial increase in funds amidst changes in the situation and needs of society due to the pandemic (Halim, 2018).

The policy of distributing social assistance (bansos) ahead of the elections which was scheduled long ago does have a legitimate basis and can be considered as a form of government responsibility to ensure the welfare of the community, especially in sensitive times such as before the general election (Mansyur, 2022). Distribution of social assistance in this period can be interpreted as a concrete step to respond to the urgent needs of society, as well as an effort to create a stable and conducive social climate. The government, as an institution responsible for the welfare of the people, can take advantage of the election momentum to provide extra support to people in need, thus creating a positive perception regarding the role of the state (Hamid, 2011).

However, it should be noted that this policy also carries potential risks, as warned by several parties regarding the potential for confusion and indications of political intentions that may emerge in public perception. Social assistance management must be carried out in a transparent and accountable manner to prevent political manipulation that could harm the principles of justice and equality. Increasing public awareness of these kinds of practices is also important so that people can distinguish between real efforts to improve welfare and the use of social assistance as a political tool.

Social assistance is defined as the provision of assistance in the form of money or goods from the central or regional government to individuals, families, groups or communities that is not continuous or sustainable and selective with the aim of protecting against possible social risks (Renaningsih, 2020). The social risk in question is an event that can give rise to potential social vulnerabilities borne by individuals, families, groups and/or communities as a result of social crises, economic crises and political crises. Natural phenomena and natural disasters, if social assistance funds are not provided, will make them worse off and will not be able to live in normal conditions (Susanto, et al, 2021). Top of Form

The provision of social assistance is intended to support the achievement of the goals of government programs and activities by paying attention to the principles of justice, decency, rationalism and benefits for society (Samsudin et al, 2017). Social assistance to community members/groups as intended as follows:

1. Individuals, families and/or communities who experience unstable conditions as a result of social, economic, political crises, disasters or natural phenomena to meet minimum living needs in a reasonable manner.
2. Non-governmental/non-governmental organizations in the fields of education, religion and other fields whose role is to protect individuals, groups and society from possible social risks.

Social assistance is assistance that is non-binding and not mandatory, and must be used in accordance with the approved proposal. The social assistance provided to the community is only temporary and not sustainable, unless under certain conditions it can be maintained continuously (Anggreni & Subanda, 2020). Utilization of Social Assistance Based on APBN funds is grouped into four areas, namely:

1. The education sector includes the boss program and educational scholarships for poor students.
2. The health sector includes the Jaskemas program and health services in class III hospitals.
3. Community Empowerment Sector (Rural PNPM includes PPK District, P2KP, Urban PNPM, Rural Infrastructure PNPM/PIIP, Disadvantaged Regions PNPM/PDT, Regional Socio-Economic Infrastructure PNPM).
4. In the area of social protection, including the family hope program/PKH, and direct cash assistance/BLT.

The objectives of providing social assistance to the community based on type are as follows:

1. Social rehabilitation is aimed at restoring and developing the ability of someone who experiences social dysfunction to be able to carry out their social functions well.
2. Social protection, which is aimed at preventing and managing risks from social shocks and vulnerabilities for individuals, families and community groups so that their survival can be met in accordance with minimum basic needs.
3. Social empowerment is aimed at making a person or group of people experiencing social problems have strength, so that they can fulfill their basic life needs.
4. Social security is an institutionalized scheme to guarantee that aid recipients fulfill the basic needs of a decent life.
5. Poverty alleviation is a policy, program and activity carried out for people, families, community groups

who do not have or have a source of livelihood and cannot fulfill their human needs.

6. Disaster management, namely a series of efforts aimed at rehabilitation.

METHOD

In this research, the method used is descriptive qualitative with a literature study approach. The descriptive qualitative method is a research approach that aims to produce data in the form of descriptions or written words (Yulianah, 2022). This research also applies a literature study approach to collect information relevant to the research focus from various sources such as books, journals, the internet, which are closely related to the dynamics of the social assistance program on electability in Indonesia in the 2024 general election (Farida, 2019). The qualitative method was chosen because it is in accordance with the research objective which is to find out whether social assistance by the government has an influence on the electability of legislative candidates and political parties in the 2024 general election. By using this approach, research can provide an in-depth picture of the dynamics of the relationship between social assistance programs and electability. Data analysis was carried out on secondary sources, such as books, journals, information media and the internet which report about dynamics of social assistance (Bansos) programs on electability in Indonesia. Data presentation methods involve matrices, graphs, charts, and narrative text to provide a comprehensive picture. Finally, drawing conclusions or verifying the results of data analysis is carried out through careful reflection on research findings (Gumilang, 2016). Thus, it is hoped that this method can provide an in-depth understanding of the interaction between the Social Assistance Program and electability in Indonesia in the context of the 2024 general election.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politicization of Social Assistance in General Elections

Law No. 39 of 2012 concerning the Implementation of Social Welfare provides the legal basis for the implementation of social assistance in Indonesia. According to this law, social assistance can take the form of providing money or goods to people in need, with the basic aim of improving their welfare. This concept reflects the government's commitment to providing direct support to those in difficult economic conditions, so that they can feel a real positive impact. Poor people are the most appropriate targets for receiving social assistance from the government because they are in a condition

that really needs to fulfill basic needs, such as clothing, food and shelter, which are the foundation for the viability of life for every individual. Social assistance to this group of people reflects the government's positive response to the inequality and economic disadvantage faced by some citizens (Iping, 2020).

The economic incapacity of poor people makes them more vulnerable to the risk of poverty and uncertainty in daily life. Therefore, providing social assistance to them is a humanitarian and strategic action. This assistance can take the form of providing cash, food, or other social services that can have a real impact in meeting daily living needs. By providing social assistance to the poor, the government not only plays a role in maintaining social welfare, but also helps create a more solid basis for social and economic development. This is in line with the principles of justice and equality in society, where the government plays a role as a welfare organizer to ensure that the basic rights of every individual, especially those in the most vulnerable conditions, can be adequately fulfilled (Yendra & Wetsi, 2021).

Unfortunately, social assistance which should be directed at improving people's welfare is often trapped in politicization, especially before general elections. This practice reflects an abuse of the true purpose of social assistance, which should be designed to provide real support to people in need, without any political motives. Politicization of social assistance often occurs when these programs are directed or prioritized towards certain groups that have the potential to provide electoral support. Political actors can use social assistance as an instrument to increase their electability, in the hope of gaining political support from aid recipients. This can lead to unequal distribution, where social assistance does not reach groups of people who objectively need it, but is instead provided taking political interests into account.

In general, the politicization of social assistance is carried out by incumbents to gain electoral political benefits, this occurs at the local and national levels. The politicization of social assistance has had serious impacts on transparency, accountability, and integrity in the implementation of welfare programs. This practice can blur the lines between political interests and objective public services. As a result, social assistance programs that should be a tool to improve people's welfare are compromised, harming their overall credibility. People who feel that social assistance is treated as a political tool tend to lose trust in the government, threatening the essence of social welfare efforts.

A number of studies have revealed many cases of politicization of social assistance by legislative candidates in electoral districts. One example is the

Family Hope Program (PKH) manipulation method. Legislative candidates use this program as a campaign tool, using the message that voters in the area provide support by voting for the legislative candidate. This practice not only involves the use of social assistance funds for political interests, but also undermines the essence of welfare programs which should provide direct and non-discriminatory benefits to community groups in need (Sekarwidhi et al, 2018). Therefore, serious handling of the politicization of social assistance needs to be carried out to ensure that these programs remain in accordance with the principles of justice, transparency and the goals of community welfare.

Recent findings regarding social assistance containing messages or images of certain candidate pairs highlight serious issues related to politicization in the administration of welfare programs. Social assistance, which should be aimed at helping people in need, has now become a means of political campaigning, as has happened in several areas in Central Java. Aid in the form of 10 kilograms of rice with pictures of presidential election candidates was found, and the photos spread via the WhatsApp chat application.

A statement from the General Chair of the National Mandate Party (PAN), Zulkifli Hasan, who stated that social assistance was an affirmation program for poor people with no connection to the election process, caused widespread polemic. Even though it is called an affirmation program, the presence of images of certain presidential candidate pairs in the social assistance raises serious questions regarding the neutrality and true purpose of the social assistance program. The polemic is getting bigger with the emergence of photos and videos showing similar social assistance being spread across various regions in Central Java. This incident raises concerns about politicization which is detrimental to the essence of social welfare programs. This practice not only blurs the lines between public welfare and politics, but can also undermine public trust in the integrity of social assistance administration.

Social assistance (bansos) indicates the state's presence in protecting its citizens who are "poor" or "in need," and is an integral component of the social protection scheme. The source of funds for the social assistance program comes from the State Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBN), reflecting the government's commitment to providing direct support to those in need. However, the characteristic of this program which has a direct impact on its recipients makes it very vulnerable to politicization, especially ahead of the democratic party.

According to Aspinall & Berenschot, (2019), the practice of politicizing social assistance is not new

and continues to be repeated every time the general election process approaches. The two main challenges related to social assistance are related to policy and distribution. Ministries and government institutions have their own social assistance programs, and this also applies at the regional level, from the central, provincial, to district and city governments. The existence of these various programs not only makes supervision difficult, but also increases the potential for overlap in the distribution of social assistance. This complexity is exacerbated by frequent changes in program names and types of social assistance, the difficulty of recording a consistent road map for implementing social assistance programs by the government.

Social assistance (*bansos*) should experience a reduction in coverage in line with progress in people's welfare, not the other way around, namely becoming more widespread amidst claims that the economy is getting better. The existence of social assistance should be responsive to emergency conditions of poverty, such as maintaining minimum consumption levels, preventing people from sinking into deeper poverty, or strengthening the purchasing power of lower class groups. The basic principle of social assistance is that it should be temporary and must be stopped and reallocated to new recipients when the old recipients no longer need them, especially when their level of welfare has increased.

In this context, the concept of "graduation" in social assistance should have become common practice. Graduation refers to the end of a person's participation in a social assistance program because they no longer meet the requirements or needs. When a person is no longer in an "emergency" situation of poverty, he will experience graduation or will no longer be a recipient of social assistance. This concept reflects a natural cycle in which social assistance provides temporary support to enable individuals or families to escape difficult conditions and become economically independent. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate and adjust the implementation of the social assistance program so that it is more in line with these basic principles and can be effective in overcoming social inequality and stimulating improvements in community welfare.

By implementing the graduation concept, the number of recipients of social assistance (*bansos*) should decrease along with improving economic conditions. Using the Family Hope Program (PKH) as an example shows that the number of recipients should have decreased, not increased significantly ahead of the 2019 general election. Even though several years have passed and the 2024 election is approaching, the number of PKH recipients has remained at 10 million families. By applying the

concept of 5% graduation every year, the number of PKH recipients between 2018-2023 should have decreased by 2.3 million, so that in 2024 there should only be around 7.7 million.

The mismatch between the concept of graduation and the reality of the number of social assistance recipients remaining large, especially ahead of the 2024 election, raises concerns regarding the motive for the politicization of social assistance. The provision of ad-hoc assistance such as rice social assistance and El-Nino Direct Cash Assistance (BLT) further confirms allegations of politicization, which is more indicative of an attempt to gain electoral advantage than a real commitment to poverty alleviation. Apart from that, this phenomenon also reflects weaknesses in efforts to empower the community's economy and create jobs which should be the main focus in overcoming the problem of poverty.

To prevent the politicization of social assistance, it is important for us to reform social assistance. Some of the critical social assistance regulatory directions include: The first step that needs to be taken is to establish clearer and stricter regulatory directions. One crucial step is to ensure that the ceremonial distribution of social assistance can only be carried out by career State Civil Apparatus (ASN) officials, not by political officials, especially those at high levels, even up to the Presidential level.

The involvement of political officials in the distribution of social assistance often opens up opportunities for politicization and abuse of welfare programs. By limiting the role of political officials in this ceremony, it can reduce the risk of manipulation for certain political interests. ASN as career officials are expected to have a more neutral and professional public service orientation, without being influenced by political agendas. This reform not only minimizes politicization, but also creates higher ethical standards in implementing social assistance programs, so that the main focus remains on providing support to those in need.

Apart from that, regulations also need to accommodate stricter evaluation and monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of social assistance programs. Transparent and accountable monitoring will provide clarity regarding program implementation and can identify potential misuse or inappropriate policies. Reforming social assistance regulations which includes enforcing standards of professionalism and involvement of ASN can be a strategic step to increase program effectiveness and minimize the risk of politicization in poverty alleviation efforts.

Second, apply the concept of "graduation" to programs that are "sharing money" or "sharing goods," such as the Family Hope Program (PKH), Non-Cash

Direct Cash Assistance (BLT), or basic food social assistance. The concept of graduation implies that the number of social assistance recipients must decrease as the economic conditions of the recipients improve, and this must be a principle that cannot be ignored. Applying the concept of graduation is important to avoid an irrational increase in the number of social assistance recipients which could trigger potential abuse or politicization of the program. Programs such as PKH and BLT must continue to be evaluated to ensure that they remain in accordance with the principles of graduation. Strong rationality must be the basis for determining the number of social assistance recipients, and an increase in the number of recipients must be supported by clear and measurable reasons, for example an increase in the number of poor families who meet certain criteria.

By applying the concept of graduation, social assistance programs can be more effective in achieving their goal of helping those in need while gradually reducing dependence on such assistance as economic conditions improve. An emphasis on rationality and regular evaluation will ensure that social assistance remains an efficient instrument in poverty reduction efforts, while minimizing the risk of politicization and misuse of funds. This reform is a crucial step to uphold the principles of justice, transparency and effectiveness in the implementation of social assistance programs.

Finally, the focus of poverty reduction policies should be on empowering the people's economy and creating quality jobs, not solely on providing social assistance (bansos). This step is a pivot to change the poverty reduction paradigm from a reactive model, such as social assistance, to a more sustainable, proactive approach. The main priority should be focused on efforts to provide opportunities for communities to become economically independent and improve their welfare through economic empowerment.

People's economic empowerment involves various strategies, including education and skills training, access to business capital, and support for the development of small and medium enterprises. This policy will create an environment that supports economic growth at the local and national levels. Apart from that, the government also needs to focus efforts on creating quality jobs, which will reduce the unemployment rate and have a positive impact on the level of social welfare.

By prioritizing economic empowerment and job creation, this policy can provide long-term solutions to overcome the root problems of poverty. This approach also has a positive impact in increasing the economic independence of the community, so that they not only receive assistance passively, but can

also actively contribute to the country's economic development. Poverty reduction policy reform that leads to economic empowerment will be a strategic step to achieve sustainable development and reduce poverty levels more effectively. Top of Form

Pork Barrel Politics Through Social Assistance to Increase Electability

The community's economy has not fully recovered after the crisis due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing a more worrying context, especially in the political realm. This condition further strengthens the involvement of money politics under the guise of social assistance, and is prone to abuse among vulnerable communities. Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning Elections, which is the basis for the 2019 Election, has provisions that only apply during the campaign period, so it cannot effectively address manipulation or abuse in the previous period.

This problem is increasingly complex with the DPR's decision to shorten the 2024 election campaign period to only 75 days. This condition creates a significant empty space starting from the determination of election participants until the start of the campaign period. This empty space, known as the socialization period, becomes a gap that prospective candidates exploit to maneuver without fear of being punished. This situation allows for unmeasurable political activity and can increase the risk of politicization in the distribution of social assistance, making existing rules and regulations inadequate to overcome complex challenges in the pre-campaign stage.

A number of election activists and budget transparency advocates have criticized the surge in social protection budgets through social assistance (bansos) programs that occurred ahead of the 2024 elections. This criticism focused on the alleged implementation of pork barrel political practices during the electoral period, with the aim of winning voters' votes and support. —Critics argue that a significant increase in social assistance funding allocations approaching a political year could reflect an opportunistic political strategy, where the government may exploit social protection programs for electoral interests. In the practice of pork barrel politics, funds or projects are selectively directed to areas or programs that are considered to have a positive political impact, in the hope of winning voter support (Amggoro, 2019).

Pork barrel politics is a strategy in which prospective leaders, especially incumbents who are already in power, give money or goods to the public with the aim of not only attracting voters but also gaining vote support. This practice often occurs in the context of general elections, where incumbent

candidates try to exploit state power and resources to gain electoral advantages (Kurniawan, 2015).

Basically, pork barrel politics reflects the practice of patronage or nepotism, where the provision of aid or benefits is selective and aimed at groups or regions that are considered to have a significant political impact. By giving money or goods directly to the public, potential leaders hope to build a positive image in the eyes of voters and gain greater support in the election process. Although this practice can be considered an effective strategy to increase electability, it often also raises controversy regarding ethics and integrity in democracy. Criticism of pork barrel politics involves concerns about the abuse of power and public resources for personal political gain. In many cases, this is the focus of supervision and law enforcement to ensure fairness and sustainability in the democratic process (Pratama, 2017).

Pork barrel politics is carried out using state resources through populist programs that are deliberately implemented during the electoral period with the aim of winning votes and voter support. The actor who implements the social assistance program is of course the incumbent. The target groups for this program can be supporting voters or even voters who lean towards the opposition. Providing assistance can be done before the election or close to the election period. In pork barrel politics there is an exchange of goods and services. Official actors allocate budget resources through various assistance programs. Meanwhile, people who felt helped returned the incumbent's "kindness" by re-electing him. The incumbent gets an electoral advantage; community receives assistance (Firmadi & Purwaningsih, 2016)

Approaching the 2024 political year, there is a trend of increasing allocation of social assistance funds (bansos) in the government's social protection policies. Based on data from the Ministry of Finance, the total social protection budget in the 2014-2024 APBN reached IDR 3,664.4 trillion. In the 2024 APBN, President Joko Widodo set a budget allocation for social protection of IDR 496.8 trillion, so the amount that the government will spend on this post is estimated to reach IDR 4,161.2 trillion by 2024. The 2024 budget location is higher than in 2023 which was IDR 433 trillion (Kementerian Keuangan, 2024). In fact, compared to during the pandemic, the 2024 social protection budget allocation remains the highest. In 2021 the social protection budget is limited to IDR 468.2 trillion and in 2022 it will decrease to IDR 460.6 trillion. Without the urgency like during the pandemic, it seems that the distribution of social assistance ahead of the 2024 elections could be said to be in short supply.

Social assistance is a policy that is prone to politicization because the process of determining budget allocations is subjective and can be used for the interests of the ruling elite, especially ahead of a general election year. Populist social assistance programs tend to be tools that are often misused, especially because of the lack of clarity in setting specific performance targets. The political narrative built by the incumbent candidate through a pro-people social assistance budget can create a good image in the eyes of the public, increase the incumbent's electability, both when running for re-election and when supporting a particular political party or candidate pair.

Politicians who are at the peak of power are motivated to maintain their position and tend to make various efforts, including manipulating budget allocations, to increase their electability in the future. This strategy involves adjusting budget allocations, especially in the context of social assistance programs that have a direct impact on society. Thus, the social assistance budget policy is not only an instrument of social protection but also a significant political tool in the dynamics of national elections and politics.

President Joko Widodo's explanation regarding the distribution of social assistance (bansos) emphasized that the main aim of the program was not for political purposes, but as a response to the impact of the El Nino climate phenomenon which resulted in disruption of rice supplies at the global level. According to records from Bisnis, Jokowi continues to be active in going directly to the field, diligently going out of town, and personally managing the distribution of social assistance to the community. However, whatever the reasons expressed by the government regarding the provision of social assistance, it will still be interpreted differently by the community.

There is pork barrel politics, especially through short-term assistance programs that have a direct impact on voters' lives, including the distribution of social assistance, direct cash assistance, grants and infrastructure programs. This practice is often timed so that it is carried out close to voting day in general elections. These programs are then identified and advertised as individual initiatives of politicians or election candidates with the main aim of increasing their electability.

The practice of pork barrel politics poses a risk to electoral democracy in Indonesia. Short-term aid programs implemented with political goals can undermine the principles of justice and healthy competition in democratic parties. The implementation of these programs also creates hope among the community, especially those from the lower middle class who may have minimal

literacy or lack future orientation regarding better development. The goals of pork barrel politics tend to be tactical, with a focus on attracting as much support as possible from certain segments of society. People are faced with the hope of benefiting from short-term assistance, which in turn can influence their decisions in general elections.

Preventing and eradicating pork barrel politics that has existed for a long time in Indonesia requires serious efforts from various parties, including the government, supervisory institutions and the community. Several steps can be taken to overcome this problem. First, stricter rules and regulations regarding the allocation of public funds and increased transparency in the budget process. The government needs to strengthen control and monitoring of the use of public funds, especially those related to social assistance programs. This could include establishing an independent oversight mechanism as well as increasing the role of institutions such as the Supreme Audit Agency (BPK) in carrying out routine audits of the management of public funds.

Besides Therefore, increasing transparency in the budget process can be realized through the publication of information that is easily accessible to the public regarding the allocation, objectives and impact of social assistance programs. This information can be conveyed openly through online portals, public meetings, or other means of communication. Strengthening transparency rules and practices can provide the public with a better understanding of the use of public funds, so that they can be more critical and participatory in monitoring the implementation of these programs. Thus, these steps are expected to provide stronger barriers to the practice of pork barrel politics and increase overall accountability in the management of public funds.

The second crucial step to overcome pork barrel politics is the establishment of independent supervisory and auditor institutions that have a critical role in monitoring the use of public funds and ensuring accountability in their management. These institutions must be designed with the principles of independence, transparency and professionalism to be able to carry out effective supervisory functions. In this context, the Financial Audit Agency (BPK) or similar institutions could be strengthened and given a stronger mandate to carry out regular audits of all social assistance programs and policies involving public funds.

Apart from that, the importance of close collaboration and coordination between supervisory institutions and independent auditors with government agencies and parliament. Synergistic cooperation can accelerate the identification of

potential misuse of public funds and provide timely recommendations for improvement. The active involvement of this supervisory agency can also provide a better understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of each social assistance program. In this framework, the provision of adequate resources and full support from the government and parliament for independent supervisory institutions and auditors is key. By having these institutions operate transparently and free from political pressure, the public can have more trust and confidence that public funds are used according to purposes that are truly beneficial to the welfare of society.

The third step which is no less important in efforts to overcome pork barrel politics is to increase political education and public literacy. Good political education can help people understand their rights, be informed, and be critical of unethical political practices, including pork barrel politics. Political education must include an understanding of the budget process and allocation of public funds so that the public can recognize the potential for misuse of funds for political purposes.

Apart from that, increasing public literacy regarding political information and news is a strategic step. People who have good political literacy can more intelligently filter information, understand the political context, and assess public policies. Educational and information resources must be easily accessible to the public through various media, including social media, to provide a better understanding of the practice of pork barrel politics and its negative impact on democracy. Increasing political education and public literacy not only creates citizens who are more politically aware but also provides a strong foundation to resist political manipulation in any form.

The fourth essential step in overcoming pork barrel politics is to strengthen the role of the media and journalists as social controls for society. The media has a crucial role in providing information to the public, monitoring government policies, and exposing potential misuse of public funds. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the role of the media as an agent of social control that can dismantle the practice of pork barrel politics and provide enlightenment to the public.

Journalists who are independent, ethical and have integrity have a strategic role in detecting and investigating pork barrel political practices. They must work without political pressure and have the freedom to convey accurate and balanced information to the public. Empowering journalists through training, legal protection and improving working conditions will help them carry out their duties as guardians of truth and social control.

CONCLUSION

Social assistance in Indonesia has a clear legal basis, especially through Law No. 39 of 2012, which confirms the government's commitment to improving the welfare of the poor. However, there is a serious issue regarding the politicization of social assistance, where these programs can be manipulated in the run-up to general elections to gain electoral support. Welfare programs, such as the Family Hope Program (PKH), fall prey to political manipulation, with social assistance directed towards certain groups to gain electoral support. This has a serious impact on transparency, accountability and integrity in the implementation of social welfare programs. Solutions to the politicization of social assistance include regulatory reform, stricter implementation of the "graduation" concept, and a policy focus on economic empowerment and the creation of quality jobs. Thus, these measures are crucial to ensure that social assistance remains consistent with its fundamental objectives, namely improving the welfare of people in need, and to maintain the integrity of electoral democracy.

In facing the increasing challenges of pork barrel politics ahead of the 2024 General Election, preventive and corrective steps are urgently needed to maintain the integrity of Indonesian democracy. There is a need to increase strict regulations regarding the allocation of public funds, budget transparency, as well as independent monitoring mechanisms by institutions such as the Supreme Audit Agency (BPK). Political education and public literacy are also key, with a focus on understanding unethical political practices. In addition, strengthening the role of the media and journalists as social controls is very important to reveal and prevent misuse of public funds. With these steps, it is hoped that the public will be smarter, more critical and actively involved in protecting democracy from the threat of pork barrel politics which can undermine the principles of justice and fair competition in the election process. Top of Form

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