

FORECAST

# RI's economy to grow at healthy pace: ADB

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THE JAKARTA POST / JAKARTA

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) predicts that Indonesia's economy will stagnate this year, along with many other developing Asia countries, mainly due to the ongoing trade war between the United States and China that could hamper investment and manufacturing.

ADB said Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP) would grow by 5.2 percent this year, slightly higher than the 5.17 percent last year and 5.07 percent in 2017. The bank's projection is below the government's target of 5.4 percent.

Winfried Wicklein, ADB's country director for Indonesia, added that Indonesia's GDP growth was expected to continue at a "healthy pace" buoyed by solid macroeconomic management and strong domestic demand. ADB estimates that the country's economy will expand by 5.3 percent next year.

"To further boost sustainable and inclusive growth, continued focus on strengthening competitiveness, developing human capital and enhancing resilience will be required," Wicklein said.

Massive infrastructure projects in the transportation and

energy sectors would continue to drive up private investment, which would enable the economy to grow at a faster pace. Moreover, improvements in the business climate through streamlining business licenses and tax administration would also have a positive impact on investor sentiment.

Meanwhile, household spending, the main economic growth contributor, would remain strong, as the government ramps up its social assistance programs and expand employment in the formal sector.

ADB in its recently released "Asian Development Outlook 2019" report revealed that Indonesia needed to harness technologies to accelerate growth in the manufacturing sector in order to achieve GDP growth of between 5.5 and 6.3 percent from 2020 to 2024.

Yet, applying technology in the manufacturing sector might not be an easy task.

"More than 99 percent of manufacturing firms are micro and small enterprises [MSEs]. They suffer from a low productivity rate and have little capability to expand and adopt emerging technologies," the report stated.

Those MSEs that dominate the

manufacturing sector make little use of digital technologies such as cloud computing, big data, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and so on, which is integral to helping manufacturing industries grow.

Although the government is fervently focusing on Making Indonesia 4.0, implementation was lacking. Thus, ADB recommends that Indonesia should develop a policy road map to help MSEs flourish by adopting new technologies.

Indonesia is not the only country that will experience softening economic growth in the near future. Growth in developing Asia countries is expected to decelerate to 5.7 percent this year and 5.6 percent next year, according to ADB.

In China, growth is projected to moderate to 6.3 percent this year and 6.1 percent next year as the economy matures. Growth in advanced economies such as the United States, eurozone and Japan, could also turn out slower than expected due to the uncertainty over fiscal and monetary policies in the US and a possible disorderly Brexit.

Although a rapid hike in the US policy rate is less likely, financial volatility remains and could affect financial conditions in other

countries.

In Indonesia, risks to its economic outlook would largely come from external factors including the escalation of the trade war, volatility in the financial market, as well as possible drought induced by El Niño.

In January, the International Monetary Fund downgraded global growth projection on its updated edition of the World Economic Outlook, expecting the global economy to expand by 3.5 percent this year and 3.6 percent next year. These were slightly lower than the IMF's projections in October last year of 3.7 percent in 2019 and 2020.

The IMF said its downgraded projection was partly because of the ongoing trade tensions between the US and China. Furthermore, weakened momentum in several advanced and emerging economies in the second half of last year also contributed to the outlook.

The World Bank, meanwhile, forecasted that the global economy would expand by 2.9 percent this, which was 0.1 percent lower than its previous outlook, also due to the rising risks of trade tensions and financial market pressures in several emerging markets.

# Weak control big problem in mining sector

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THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

A landslide at an illegal gold mine in North Sulawesi in February that killed at least eight people has revealed a big problem in the mining sector: a lack of supervision.

The Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry, which is in charge of mining, said the officials who were responsible for supervising the site could not carry out their duties because of a lack of funds.

Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Ignasius Jonan said a prevailing law was also a particular factor in preventing the officials from doing their jobs optimally.

"The inspectorates in charge of mining activities are agencies of the central government, but their operational costs are the responsibility of the provincial administrations. This has hampered their jobs," Jonan said at a hearing with lawmakers recently.

The minister was referring to an article in Regional Administration Law No. 23/2014, which also trans-

Lack of funds hampers supervision works at mining sites: Jonan

Local regulations make ministry's inspectors uncertain

ferred the authority to issue mining permits from the regency to provincial administrations in a basic contradiction to the mining law.

Jonan said he believed the regulation had put the ministry's inspectors, of which there are about 1,000 across Indonesia, in uncertainty as they have to wait for the operational funds from the provinces.

"In order to allow them to work, we should provide it [the operational funds], but we don't have the legal basis. This makes me confused too," he said.

Kardaya Warnika, a lawmaker from the opposition Gerindra Party, said he believed the situation was actually an internal matter for the government, which meant it could be solved without having to revise the Regional Ad-

ministration Law  
"I think it's just a matter of a lack of coordination between the central government and the provincial administrations. If you don't have enough of the budget allocated, then just ask for more during a Cabinet meeting, don't come to us," he said.

Economists say they also believe some of the prevailing regulations and policies in the oil and gas sector have actually hampered day-to-day activities, such as determining the costs of upstream projects.

The Institute for Development of Economics and Finance (INDEF) recently organized a discussion entitled "Finding the Solution to Revitalize Indonesia's Oil and Gas Sector".

One of the speakers, INDEF director Berly Martawardaya, criticized the governance of the oil and gas business being in the hands of three entities, namely the energy ministry, the Upstream Oil and Gas Regulatory Task Force (SKK-Migas) and state-owned energy holding company Pertamina.

"The problem with having

three entities [to manage the country's oil and gas sector] is that we're not capable yet to effectively coordinate with one another," he said.

Berly said the prevailing regulation, which put SKKMigas in the frontlines on cost calculations along with the private oil and gas contractors, also posed a big challenge for SKKMigas because the agency did not think and act like an oil and gas company.

"How could you know whether the cost of a project is the best amount you can get, when you're not one of the industry players. Hence, I suggest the authority should be given to Pertamina as the company knows the market situation," he said.

SKKMigas has been working intensively with private oil and gas contractors on the costs of investments in each block, especially for the blocks that still use the cost recovery scheme, such as the United States-based Chevron's gas megaproject, the Indonesia Deepwater Development (IDD), in onshore Kalimantan.

Berly said he also believed the

lack of current market knowledge by SKKMigas has been affecting the progress of oil and gas project developments, like the onshore Liquefied Natural Gas project in Masela Block that has yet to go on stream more than two decades after the signing of the first contract in 1998.

"If we want to use three entities to govern the sector, just like what we have been using, it is better to use concession schemes, not PSCs [production sharing contracts]," he said.

According to Berly, concessions are basically a type of oil and gas contract that would impose bigger royalties or taxes rather than profit sharing like the PSC scheme.

Tjatur Sapto Edy, a lawmaker from the opposition National Mandate Party (PAN), said the critique from INDEF is to become one of the main topics in the oil and gas bill involving the formation of a special business entity for the sector (BUK Migas).

"BUK Migas is expected to own the business rights [in the oil and gas sector], so they could become

the sole institution in the country to do business with the industry," he said.

The idea is not new as it was actually the country's old way of governing the oil and gas sector. It was what was in place before the issuance of the prevailing Law No. 22/2001 on oil and gas.

Tjatur said in the current draft of the oil and gas bill, the BUK Migas would work under the State-Owned Enterprises Ministry, instead of under the direct command of the president, as floated during debates.

Tjatur, a member of House Commission VII overseeing energy, said the bill would also accommodate the production-sharing contract scheme, allow the participation of a local administration in a block and maintain the role of the Downstream Oil and Gas Regulatory Agency (BPH Migas).

"We hoped we could finish the oil and gas bill after the presidential election [on April 17]. Currently, we are only awaiting the President's letter [to start the deliberations over the bill with the government]," he said.

## COMMODITY

## Indonesia slashes rubber exports to stabilize price

Rachmadea Aisyah

THE JAKARTA POST/ JAKARTA

Indonesia has committed itself to slashing the export volume of natural rubber, along with Malaysia and Thailand as members of the International Tripartite Rubber Council (ITRC), in an attempt to stabilize the global rubber price.

Over a period of four months that started on Monday, Indonesia is to slash rubber exports by 98,160 tons. Malaysia started on the same date and plans to cut 15,600 tons, whereas Thailand, the world's largest rubber producer, will cut 126,240 tons of rubber exports starting May 20.

Trade Ministry trade assessment and development agency head Kasan Muhri said the move was part of the ITRC's sixth Agreed Export Tonnage Scheme (AETS), which in total would cut rubber exports by 240,000 tons this year.

"We will keep on monitoring rubber prices to ensure a remunerative profit for rubber farmers," Kasan told journalists recently. "Meanwhile, exporters from the Indonesian Rubber Association [Gapkindo] will help oversee the export cuts."

ITRC member countries represent 66 percent of the world's rubber production, which amounted to 13.96 million tons in 2018, up 4.6 percent from the year before, according to the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries (ANRPC).

Thailand, the world's largest producer, was estimated to have produced 4.82 million tons of rubber, followed by Indonesia, the world's second-largest producer, at 3.77 million tons and Malaysia at 600,000 tons last year.

The global rubber price is currently holding steady at around US\$1.4 per kilogram after it fell to below \$1.2 in late 2018.

With the latest AETS, the rubber price is expected to exceed \$1.5 per kilogram and reach as

high as \$2, Kasan said.

"We believe this export cut will not translate into lower export value as the lower export volume will likely be compensated by a higher rubber price. [...] Exporters at Gapkindo have calculated the cut into their export proportion [so they would not lose profit]," Kasan added.

The Coordinating Economic Ministry's deputy for international economic cooperation Rizal Affandi Lukman said the rubber from the export cut would be used for domestic consumption, such as for constructing rubberized roads and making retread tires.

"We believe domestic demand will be high enough to absorb the rubber from the export cut," Rizal said.

He added Malaysia and Thailand also had their own means to boost domestic rubber consumption to support the AETS.

Malaysia, for example, has allocated 100 million ringgit for a similar rubberized road program, while Thailand's One Village One Kilometer rubberized road scheme would allow its road construction projects to absorb 270,000 tons of rubber per year.

The export cut and its diversion toward domestic use, he said, would serve as short and medium term efforts to revitalize Indonesia's aging rubber industry.

As for the long-term effort, the government had committed to starting a nationwide rubber replanting program, which will cover some 3.6 million hectares of rubber cultivation area.

This year, the government aims to replant 5,000 to 6,000 ha of rubber plantations. The figure, said Rizal, would gradually go up to 50,000 ha annually.

"We plan to replant 60 percent of the existing cultivation area and allocate the other 40 percent for other crops," he said. "This has to be a massive effort since our rubber trees are getting low and their productivity is decreasing."

# Govt buys time to act on IS returnees

Dian Septiari and Kharishar Kahfi

THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

Indonesia has still not decided what to do with citizens who are suspected of having defected to join the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria but are now eager to return, following the group's demise and the growing urgency to take back these so-called returnees.

Kurdish-led forces over the weekend conquered the last stronghold of the IS in Baghouz, eastern Syria, ending the group's dream of establishing a caliphate and leaving thousands of jihadists and their families to live out of the Al-Hol camp for displaced persons in the country's north.

The Kurdish side has since asked countries to take back the tens of thousands of detained foreigners who are overcrowding local facilities.

According to the World Health Organization, some 67,000 internally displaced people reside in the camp, exceeding the facility's original capacity of 10,000 people.

Some of these people hail from Indonesia.

In a recent report by freelance journalist Afshin Ismaeli that ran in several news outlets, dozens of former IS sympathizers — including women and children — said they wanted to return to their "homeland" Indonesia.

While no official tallies have been published, the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict places the number of Indonesians who joined the IS in Iraq and Syria at 574 as of September 2017.

Jakarta is aware of these people, but their protection by the government depends on whether they will be verified as citizens, said Lalu Muhammad Iqbal, the Foreign Ministry's director for citizen protection.

"We are also considering other aspects such as security," Iqbal told *The Jakarta Post* on Tuesday, adding that a vetting process was still underway.

One of the biggest security considerations that have emerged recently is the perception that women are just as prone to radicalization as men, following bomb blasts in Sibolga, North Sumatra, last month and church bombings in Surabaya, East Java last year. Both incidents involved radicalized women.

"There is a security concern that if they go home, we can be certain that women are no more dangerous than men. This is the challenge we face if we choose to repatriate them," said Robi Sugara, a researcher at the Indonesian Muslim Crisis Center.

Last month, the wife of a suspected terrorist detonated a bomb at their residence in Sibolga, killing herself and her 2-year-old son. The police have arrested at least two women in connection to the blast, which has been linked to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah

(JAD), an outlawed homegrown pro-IS terrorist group.

In May last year, a family of suicide bombers who police believe is also affiliated with JAD attacked three churches in Surabaya, East Java. The mother of the family and her two daughters detonated a bomb at one of the churches. National Police chief Gen. Tito Karnavian said the family was among IS-affiliated Indonesians deported by the Turkish government last year. The IS claimed responsibility for the incident.

This is not the first time the government has had to deal with the dilemma of repatriating IS sympathizers. In 2017, the Foreign Ministry assisted in the repatriation of 18 returnees after eight months of verifying their identities.

"It will take some time for the government to come to a decision," Iqbal said.

An official at the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) declined to elaborate on the decision-making process, saying only that the agency was waiting for the results of an inter-ministerial meeting.

Previously, the BNPT required that all returnees from Syria join its deradicalization program, in which they are "reeducated" at the Bambu Apus detention facility in East Jakarta before they are returned to their family homes.

Authorities have also said that the returnees are expected to put a further strain on the overcrowded Indonesian penitentiary system, even as the police have been building a maximum-security facility for terror convicts in Cikeas, West Java.

Observers have urged for extra caution in the ongoing deliberations, especially after a number of other countries renounced the citizenship status of IS sympathizers and recruiters.

House of Representatives Speaker Bambang Soesatyo called on government agencies to fulfill the necessary procedures that allow these people to return to Indonesia, noting that they likely left for Syria illegally.

A researcher with the Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM), Wahyudi Djafar, urged the government and law enforcers not to prosecute all of the returnees.

"There should be an assessment to determine their level of engagement with the terrorist organization and whether an individual should be prosecuted legally or just assigned to a deradicalization program," he said.

"I'm optimistic that the relevant institutions can carry out an assessment, just like they did in 2017" (tjs)

## Relevant provisions

**Article 12B(1) of 2018 Antiterrorism Law:** Law enforcers have the authority to press charges against people who participate in military and/or paramilitary training abroad with the intent of engaging in acts of terror punishable by up to 15 years in prison

**Article 12B(4 & 5) of 2018 Antiterrorism Law:** Law enforcers can slap terror convicts with an additional charge that bars them from owning passports for up to five years after completing a primary sentence.

**Article 23A of 2016 Citizenship Law:** An Indonesian citizen will lose citizenship status if they willfully obtain another citizenship.

**Article 23F of 2016 Citizenship Law:** An Indonesian citizen will lose citizenship status if they willfully pledge allegiance to a foreign country or any part thereof.

Returnees to be vetted for citizenship first

Radicalized women, overcrowded jails cause for concern

# Candidates step up efforts to woo voters in Java, Bali

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THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

The two most densely populated islands of Java and Bali have always been in the crosshairs of presidential campaign strategies. However, both islands are currently witnessing a political tug-of-war in voter preferences.

On Bali, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) is engraved in the people's minds, having won the majority of local votes in the last two elections, including Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's victory in 2014 with at least 71 percent of the Balinese vote.

Recent polls by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Kompas and Charta Politika have also put Jokowi in the lead at 64 percent in Bali, East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara.

Political expert I Nyoman Subanda of Bali Education University explained that Jokowi's decision to disband the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) hardline group had greatly boosted his popularity among the island's predominantly Hindu population. This was because Balinese voters tended to seek figures that aimed to protect minority rights amid the emerging extremism, especially since the island is a Hindu enclave in the Muslim-majority nation.

Subanda said, however, that the Balinese people could relinquish their loyalty to the PDI-P if its local politicians became embroiled in corruption cases. He cited the 2013 graft case of former Buleleng regent Putu Bagiada, who was sentenced to two years for corruption.

With a population of nearly 4 million, Bali surprised the local election commission in the 2014 presidential election, when about 800,000 out of 3 million eligible voters abstained.

"It isn't easy to shift the political stance of Balinese voters. But

Balinese voters loyal to PDI-P but could switch sides if local politicians involved in corruption

Religion more important than in previous elections: Analyst

if they start feeling disappointed by corrupt PDI-P officials and seeing the potential in other national parties, they could change their minds," said Subanda. "Otherwise, they will [choose to] remain silent and not vote at all."

By the same token, Prabowo has witnessed a political shift among voters in Banten and West Java, the two provinces where he led in 2014 with an 18 percent margin.

Both the Charta Politika and CSIS polls in March indicated that Jokowi led in the province by a tight margin of 47 percent against Prabowo's 42 percent. The Kompas poll reported the same figures, but with Prabowo in the lead.

CSIS political analyst Arya Fernandes said the incumbent's choice of prominent cleric Ma'ruf

Amin as his running mate had "shielded" him from anti-Islam accusations, which had contributed to his 2014 loss in the region. His approach of campaigning at *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) to attract more support among Muslim voters had also helped win the support of West Java leaders and religious figures.

The faith-based campaign strategy is especially critical in West Java, which has a 98 percent Muslim majority among its 47 million inhabitants, and is largely considered among the country's most religiously conservative provinces.

Arya added that a recent, unpublished CSIS report revealed that the province's residents were "feeling closer than ever" to hardline groups like the Islam Defenders Front (FPI). While figures like architect-turned-politician West Java Governor Ridwan Kamil have been rising in popularity, he did not negate the possibility of using non-religious strategies to attract the province's voters.

"In brief, West Java requires a mixed religious and populist approach. Yet, it has become more important for candidates to play

the religion card in this year's election," Arya said.

Jokowi emerged triumphant in 2014 in Central Java and East Java at 66 percent and 53 percent, respectively. The latest polls suggest that Jokowi could win 70 percent of the vote in Central Java, and at least 49 percent in East Java compared to Prabowo's 23.1 percent.

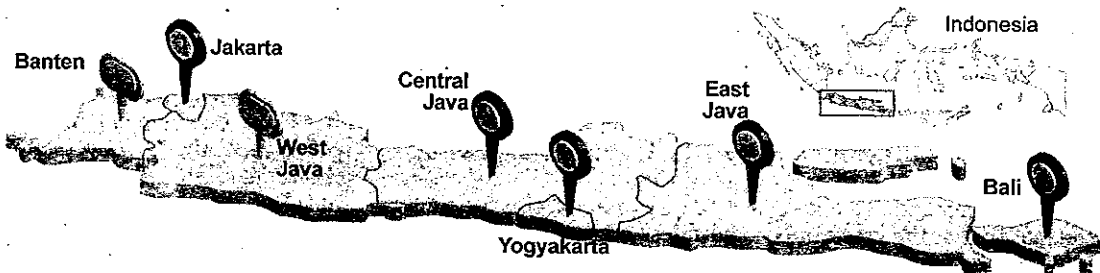
To lure swing voters, both candidates are targeting their rival's strongholds, with the Jokowi-Ma'ruf team starting its campaign trail in Banten.

However, University of Indonesia political expert Sri Budi Eko Wardhani said the majority of voters had already made up their minds, as the campaign period would soon end.

He continued that presidential contenders could therefore only cement the voters' choices, including on Java and Bali — unless Prabowo overcame the current gap of 11-20 percentage points between him and Jokowi, according to the latest polls.

"Right now, the surveys are just showing the people's preferences. The [campaigns] should focus on turning these preferences into real votes," she said.

## Java & Bali



2014		2019	
Number of voters	: 115.5 million	Number of voters	: 113.8 million
Polling stations	: 321,850	Polling stations	: 470,047
Voter turnout	: 74 percent		
Winners:			
	Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in all seven provinces		
		Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla won in five provinces	
		Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa won in two provinces	



Source: KPU

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## ELECTION LOGISTICS

# Ballots not well distributed as election nears

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THE JAKARTA POST/SEMARANG/  
BALIKPAPAN/JAKARTA

The general election is less than two weeks away, but election materials in several regions are yet to be prepared, forcing election organizers into a race against time.

In Central Java, for instance, six regencies have not yet prepared the necessary election materials, including ballot papers. The regencies were Pati, Klaten, Sukoharjo, Grobongan, Sragen and Wonogiri, Central Java General Elections Commission (KPU) head Yulianto Sudrajat said on Tuesday.

A team had traveled to Jakarta to collect the necessary materials, Yulianto said.

The committee has promised that all necessary preparations will be completed a week before the polls opens.

"It is important that before April 10 [everything is ready], because that's when we [distribute] the ballot boxes," Central Java KPU technical division coordinator Ikhwanudin said on Thursday

as quoted by *kompas.com*.

Ikhwanudin said work had been done to ensure the necessary election materials for the six aforementioned regencies were prepared. However, damaged materials were also found during the distribution process.

"After the distribution process is complete, we will make another order to the supplier if necessary," he added.

Previously, the Central Java Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) said 3.3 million ballots had yet to be distributed.

The agency's supervisory division head, Anik Shoilihatun, previously directed the Central Java KPU to distribute all necessary materials by March 30 at the latest.

To ensure the election runs smoothly in the province, Central Java Police chief Insp. Gen. Condro said nearly 22,000 police officers would provide security to handle any possible conflicts among voters.

In addition, the Central Java KPU has recruited 115,000 people to assist voters during the election.

Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo previously urged

the commission and Bawaslu to inform the public about the new election rules following a Constitutional Court ruling on the matter last month.

"Now, voters can correct their details within seven days of the election. People who do not own an electronic identity card can also vote using a letter from their local population and civil registration agency," Ganjar said.

In Mamuju, West Sulawesi, the local KPU found that at least 2,000 of the 856,912 ballots distributed were either damaged or blurry, forcing the KPU to request immediate replacements.

Mamuju KPU head Hamdan Dangkang said the number of ballots that needed to be replaced could increase as his office was still inspecting the remaining ballots.

"During our two-day sorting and folding process, we discovered that more than 2,000 ballots were damaged or blurry," Hamdan said as reported by *kompas.com*.

The damaged ballots would be counted and then burned to avoid misuse, he added.

In East Kalimantan, the election committee has teamed up with the Indonesian Military

(TNI) to use a helicopter to transport election materials from Ujoh Bilang, Mahakam Ulu regency, to Long Apari and Long Pahangai subdistricts.

"The distribution was made possible with the assistance of Mulawarman Regional Military Command VI" East Kalimantan KPU head Rudiansyah, said on Wednesday, adding that the cooperation followed a coordination meeting with relevant stakeholders at the East Kalimantan governor's office last month.

A total of 162 ballot boxes needed to be distributed to remote areas, he said, adding that the committee had been given a green light by the council to use the provincial budget to cover the distribution costs, which included fuel for the helicopters.

Other than using air transportation, the subdistricts can only be reached through water transportation via the Mahakam River.

"The helicopter is allowed to be used to distribute the ballots. I'm not only preparing the helicopter but the pilots as well," Mulawarman Regional Military Command VI commander Maj. Gen. Subiyanto said.

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J. Post

## Suspected vote-buying envelopes seized

**JAKARTA:** The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has revealed that its investigators found cash in thousands of envelopes confiscated from Golkar Party lawmaker Bowo Sidik Pangarso during an arrest related to an alleged corruption case.

The antigraft body have named Bowo a suspect in a case pertaining to shipping projects at the country's largest fertilizer company, PT Pupuk Indonesia Holding Company (PIHC).

Bowo, a member of House of Representatives Commission VII overseeing energy and mineral resources, allegedly accepted Rp 8 billion (US\$564,632) from a manager of transportation company PT Humpuss Transportasi Kimia, which provides sea transportation for PT Pupuk Indonesia Logistik, a subsidiary of PIHC.

The KPK suspects that Bowo intended to use the bribe money to finance his campaign in the 2019 legislative election, as it was reportedly going to be used to buy votes a few hours before polls opened on election day on April 17.

Cash in denominations of Rp 20,000 and Rp 50,000 was found inside thousands of envelopes. The graft busters seized dozens of boxes containing the envelopes upon arresting Bowo on March 27.

On Thursday, investigators had only gone through four boxes of envelopes. "We have opened 15,000 envelopes and discovered money totaling Rp 300 million," Febri said.

Aside from Bowo, the KPK also named two other suspects in the case, businesswoman Indung for her alleged role as middlewoman, as well as Humpuss Transportasi Kimia marketing manager Asty Winasty, who is suspected of bribing Bowo. — *JP*

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## Equal justice in Brunei

On April 3, Brunei sparked global controversy with the confirmation of reports that it had adopted a much stricter sharia code, including the punishing of gay sex, adultery and blasphemy by stoning to death and the amputation of hands or feet for theft. It was a public holiday in Brunei, as it marked the observance of the Ascension of Prophet Muhammad. Sultan Hassanal Bolkhiah had chosen this special day to tell his people that he wanted to “see Islamic teachings in this country grow stronger”.

The sultan intends to leave a strong legacy for his nation, which is striving to diversify its economy from heavy dependence on oil and gas revenues. In announcing the implementation of sharia, the sultan, also the nation’s prime minister, pointed out that Brunei was “a sovereign Islamic and fully independent country” and, “like all other independent countries, enforces its own rule of law”.

News agencies cited United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who said the UN “stands clearly against any form of cruel punishment” and believes the Brunei legislation clearly violates the principles “that human rights are to be upheld in relation to every person everywhere without any kind of discrimination”.

Tiny but oil- and gas-rich Brunei rarely attracts media attention; the absolute monarchy has been deeply reluctant to open the doors to any kind of publicity. Its population of around 400,000 enjoys practically free education, housing and health provision, along with other heavily subsidized facilities from the sultan. Brunei is active in ASEAN, but the 72-year-old sultan is not known for expressing his stance on any regional or international affairs. The nation is located on the island of Borneo, which is also shared by predominantly Muslim nations Indonesia and Malaysia.

Several years ago, however, the absolute monarch could not avoid unwanted media attention, following reports about the super opulent lifestyle of his brother Prince Jefri Bolkhiah and its serious impact on the state economy. The internal feud has apparently been settled amicably within the royal family.

We would like to raise a simple question, which often arises regarding sharia implementation. Why are the laws only strictly enforced against sex offenders, and those suspected of other petty crimes such as gambling? Knowing that corruption and stealing from state coffers are much more damaging crimes to society, why are sharia punishments rarely meted out to those guilty of corruption? According to the *Economist* magazine, among others, the law might also need to apply to Prince Jefri.