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Pop musicians amass political power as Indonesian democracy takes on new lease of life

Emma Baulch

On 5 July, 2014, 100,000 Indonesians thronged to the Bung Karno stadium in central Jakarta to attend a concert in support of Presidential hopeful, Jokowi. It was the eve of the quiet period at the end of the campaign and four days before the ballot. The event - dubbed the 'Two-fingered salute', in an allusion to Jokowi's number of the ballot - was a cathartic one for supporters of the humble hopeful, whose preferred on-the-job attire is an open-necked checkered shirt. In the nail-biting months leading up to the concert, they had seen Jokowi's lead of around 25 points over main rival, Prabowo Subianto, drop away dramatically. By July, strong-man Subianto was within several polling points of Jokowi. But commentators say that in the week leading up to the concert, Prabowo made crucial errors of judgment that put Jokowi more comfortably in the lead. And the sheer numbers of people that attended the concert, the number of artists who put their hand up to perform there free of charge, as well as the exuberant mood to be found there, offered the first taste that Jokowi's fate as an electoral victor may indeed be sealed in the end.

Much has been said of the Jokowi campaign team's wondrous ability to draw no less than a hundred thousand audience members who packed the venue to full capacity, and two hundred celebrities, ranging from movie makers to movie stars to pop performers, and to the concert. (One of those celebrities, the renowned film maker Mira Lesmana, said the artists had thrown their support behind Jokowi in the belief his administration was likely to [support development of the arts](#). With Jokowi's transition team currently behind closed doors planning policy and nailing down ministerial positions, whether the artists' hope is realized remains to be seen).

Less has been said, though, about what the concert suggests of pop performers' new roles in political life. Most academic commentators on the concert, and indeed the campaign in general, presume pop celebrities as mere tools in a much larger design by political elites who occupy true loci of power, outside of popular culture: pop celebrities can warm up crowds in readiness for rousing speeches by candidates, their performances can make rallies more spectacular and enhance media coverage of them, and they can possibly even deliver pop fans as sympathetic voters to electoral candidates, but they do not hold the reins of political power in and of themselves. Yet, a closer look at the concert, in particular the histories of some of the key artists that

performed there, highlights the very inaccuracy of these presumptions, and points to how, in reality, formally recognized political elites very much share the seat of power with pop performers.

In an [interview](#), Indonesian cultural and political analyst Ariel Heryanto notes an important point of difference between the movement in support of Jokowi and past pro-democracy movement, which have been rather macho and plagued with violence. The movement for change that coalesced around Jokowi's campaign, however, foregrounded a greater role for soft power, such as that held by pop music celebrities and their fans.

Indeed, two months out of the ballot, members of Indonesia's renowned and widely loved blues/rock band Slank, which has been producing chart-toppers for near on a quarter century, announced they would be campaigning in support of Jokowi, and led a large coalition of pop artists, dubbed the ['Coalition for the Harmony Revolution'](#), in a series of televisual performances of the rambling reggae tune penned especially to accompany the campaign: 'Salam Dua Jari... Jangan Lupa Pilih Jokowi!' (Two-fingered Salute... Vote for Jokowi!).

The emergence of this choir on the political stage was remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, it cemented the link between the artists and the considerable spirit of voluntarism emerging around the Jokowi campaign, making a break with the norm of the past decade by which artists have seen electoral rallies as an opportunity to generate income for themselves. All the artists who threw their support behind Jokowi did so voluntarily.

Second, the song they sung was far from a rousing anthem. It presented, rather, as a quiet plea and gentle reminder, rather brilliantly amplifying Jokowi's trade-mark laid back personal style, in contrast to rival Prabowo's ['chauvinistic nationalism, superficial pomp, and brutal machismo'](#). Perfectly pitched in this way, the song enhanced the sensuous and affective dimensions of the campaign, and it did so while drawing people back from violence, through its steady reggae beat. The song was emotional, but not explosive, and it resounded cheerfully around the globe when members of the Indonesian diaspora gathered to vote in cities across the world (much of the diasporic vote went in Jokowi's favour). When interviewed by A(ustralian)BC's Del Irani on the day of the ballot, Indonesian voters in Melbourne jammed their grinning faces into the camera frame, and spontaneously burst into the song: 'Salam Dua Jari... Jangan Lupa Pilih Jokowi!'

The song was penned by veteran artist Oppie Andaresta (who was mentored by Slank in the early 1990s), but widely understood to be a Slank tune, despite the fact that Slank's drummer and master composer, Bimbim, repeatedly qualified in interviews that it was Oppie, not he, who had written the song. The misconception of 'Salam Dua Jari' as a Slank song can be understood, however, for the brand of placid populism to which it gave voice very much resembles Slank's own brand, or moral philosophy. Indeed, at several points throughout the campaign, it seemed, Jokowi was leaning on Slank's well-established image as straight up, simple, honest, unmediated, and, most importantly, utterly available to their fans. He made three much publicized visits to Slank's headquarters in Potlot (Pencil) Street, Jakarta, this year. One in [April](#), a week after the legislative elections, another in [May](#) to attend an event at which Slank announced they had officially thrown their support behind Jokowi. This visit was perhaps the most telling of Jokowi's reliance on Slank for getting his campaign message across, for it was at this ramshackle gathering, at which Jokowi appeared completely at ease, that the candidate qualified that Slank epitomized the so-called 'mental revolution' at the core of his campaign pitch, the meaning of which, according to some observers, remained rather elusive. 'Slank', (the candidate seemed to suggest, but refrained from clearly stating), 'embodies exactly the kind of thing I have in mind'. A third and no less significant visit was made [on the afternoon of polling day](#), well before the polls had closed, as if to reiterate his core campaign message to undecided voters who were yet to cast their crucial ballots.

The attention Jokowi paid to Slank throughout the campaign suggest that Slank's story rather prefigured his emergence on the Indonesian political scene, and the widespread support for the particular brand of populism he represented. Viewing the relationship in this way, as one in which developments in popular culture prepare the ground for momentous political change, helps to make the reasons for the expanded role of soft power in the Indonesian pro-democracy movement and political life in general much clearer. It is true that Indonesian political life has never been completely devoid of soft power elements. Pop musicians have been involved in elections, sham elections and other political spectacles since as far back as the mid-1960s. But there are many new dimensions to pop musicians' contemporary political roles. Firstly, there is an increasing tendency among them to strike poses as civic leaders in general contexts beyond electoral campaigns, secondly, to develop elaborated moral philosophies that inform their identities as civic leaders, and thirdly, to pay more attention than ever to managing their fans by opening new and innovative lines of communication with them. These new ways of producing pop considerably blur the line dividing a-political leisure activities

from more serious political concerns, causing soft power to play new and expanded roles in electoral campaigns. As it happens, these new ways of producing pop were pioneered by Slank, the Djokowi campaign's most prominent supporter.

Slank burst onto the Indonesian pop scene in the early 1990s, with the enormous success of their songs 'Memang' (It's True) (1991) and 'Mawar Merah' (Red Rose) (1992), both of which rendered, for the first time ever, rock (in this case a Stones-inspired jangly blues/rock) into a decidedly rock and roll version of the national lingua franca – Jakarta slang. By employing Jakarta slang terms of address in rock songs that derided flashy shows of material wealth, Slank localized the genre, kicking off a cultural turn that became mainstream around the turn of the century, entailing the widespread embracing of rock and roll bands as a source of national pride.

In 1994, upon breaking with their record label and going independent, Slank maintained their success as an independent but commercially successful outfit by attracting avidly loyal bands of followers in ever greater numbers to the moral philosophy they were beginning to espouse. At this point, Slank started to become more than just about singing rock in Jakarta slang. It also came to be about coveting an unkempt dress style that stressed the value of the simple things in life, such as true love and friendship, and about rejecting material wealth as a sign of self-worth. These values offered politically disenfranchised fans a recipe by which to live, by which to relate to peers, and enabled them to see and realize new possibilities for their life trajectories.

Slowly Slank added other values to their simple philosophy meant to define the ideal national character, such as peace, love, unity and respect. In 1998, the year the Suharto regime fell, Slank organized their fans into an official fan group, with numerous branches across the archipelago, and centralized at the Slank headquarters in Jakarta. By the turn of the century, Slank was communicating directly with their fans by way of a dedicated [Slank newspaper](#), aimed to raise fans political awareness and intellectual caliber. As the democratic reform agenda wore on in the first decade of the twenty first century, and Indonesia became plagued with endless high profile corruption cases, Slank adopted an increasingly activist stance, calling on their fans to mobilise, and running political campaigns and public actions in urban centres aimed at denouncing corruption among the political elite.

Not all pop music celebrities have followed the same political trajectory as Slank, but it is increasingly common for pop musicians to adopt identities as civic leaders and run political campaigns around various high profile issues, although there is not space here

to turn to other examples. It is also increasingly commonplace for pop performers to pay ever greater attention to communicating with their fans, just as it is more commonplace for pop music consumers to allow their identities as fans to take a position of primacy in their lives. The new and intensified relationship between pop performers and pop consumers has, of course, important economic consequences. It allows pop performers to sell more merchandise, an increasingly important source of profit for pop music acts in an age of file sharing. But it also has political consequences. With the rapid and enthusiastic uptake of mobile media in the country, pop music consumers are being addressed by their idols around the clock and across various fields of social life. Pop fandom is less likely to be an occasional identification, and more likely to be enduring and life-changing for greater numbers of people. And when pop idols behave as civic leaders with activist agenda, fans are more available than ever for political mobilization.

The Slank fan group is a case in point. At the Two Finger Salute concert, Slank fans amassed at the [forefront of the stage](#), where they held the trademark towering banners that typically stake Slankers' presence at concerts. In the public imagination, these tall banners are a most potent sign of Slankers' renowned fervent fandom. Slankers are widely considered the most loyal of the many fan groups with which the Indonesian mediascape is now honeycombed. As one seasoned Indonesianist political analyst related to me, Slank fan groups were actively targeted by campaigners eager to mobilise votes for candidates in the legislative elections. That the campaigners did so, suggested the analyst, probably just reflects their opportunistic strategies rather than any particular regard for Slank. But in my view, that they did so is still significant, and it causes me to wonder, under what conditions do pop fan groups such as the Slankers come within the purview of campaigners? The answer, I suspect, is one in which pop music consumers are no longer regarded as inconsequential fluff atop the substance of society, but are considered instead as playing a legitimate role in modern political life.

Image 1: Jokowi addresses the concert-goers. Credit: kaskus.co.id

Image 2: Oppie Andaresta and Slank frontman Kaka duet on 'Salam Dua Jari' Credit: solopos.com

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The article springs from a project being undertaken by the author and Jerry Watkins (Jerry.Watkins@canberra.edu.au) to map the Indonesian digital cultural economy by examining how people use mobile phones. Pop music fans constitute a case study within the project, which is funded by the Australia Research Council.