

E TO THE POLLS

Indonesia: Disabled still facing obstacles

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JAKARTA – The Braille templates were available, but some blind voters were uncomfortable that election officials were hovering behind them as they marked their ballot papers.

At other polling stations, wheelchair-bound voters were glad they could wheel them selves in on ramps, but the ballot boxes were placed too high for them to put their ballots in on their own.

Indonesian advocates for people with disabilities hope obstacles like these, based on their observation of Jakarta's 2012 gubernatorial elections, will be resolved in time for a string of local elections this year and national polls next year.

"The facilities are often there, and we appreciate that, but there is still a lack of awareness among officials that people with disabilities have the same rights to voting secrecy as all other citizens," a disability rights advocate, Ms Yurdiana, tells The Straits Times.

Civil society groups estimate that more than 10 per cent of some 170 million eligible voters have some form of disability or handicap, including those who cannot get about unaided. The voting age in Indonesia is 17 years.

But many who are disabled do not exercise their right to elect their leaders because polling stations can be hard to get to and the secrecy of their ballot is often not guaranteed.

As the country gears up for 15 gubernatorial elections and over 100 elections for regents and mayors this year, they are seeking to change this state of affairs.

Ms Yurdiana, a member of the Indonesia Disabled Peoples Association (PPCI) and adviser to Agenda – a Jakarta-based network of civil society groups that seeks to improve electoral access for disabled persons in Indonesia and the region – says training sessions for polling officials are being planned in the coming months, with help from the General Election Commission.

Commission member Hadar Gumay told disability rights activists at a recent meeting that regulations being drawn up for the 2014 elections will improve accessibility for disabled voters.

Under existing rules, officials on duty are supposed to inform such voters they can be accompanied by a friend or family member of their choice, or an official.

But often, says Ms Yurdiana, officials just go with them into the booth – and not always tactfully.

Campaigners believe significant change to kinks like these will come when a disabled MP is elected.

PPCI president Gufroni Sakaril told a recent conference that Indo-

nesia was on a par with Asean countries like the Philippines and Thailand in terms of voting rights for the disabled, but that those countries have had disabled MPs.

"We don't have representatives yet," he said, adding that in the past seven to eight years however, several persons with disabilities have started actively running for seats.

Some regions have started to go beyond regulations in helping the disabled vote.

In Depok, West Java, local chapters of the election commission and the Indonesian Association for the Blind held a briefing for blind voters on Dec 21 to explain procedures and encourage them to vote in next month's election for the prov-

ince's governor.

Ms Yurdiana, who is wheelchair-bound, gives an example of how greater political rights would have helped the disabled.

In Jakarta, she said, many road crossings have ramps but hardly anyone on wheelchair uses them as the incline is too steep, adding that this could have been avoided had the disabled been consulted.

She said: "At the end of the day, political rights are what will ensure we have a say in decisions that affect us."

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HAVING A VOICE

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