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Indonesia's 2018 Regional Elections

Tanjung Pinang's Mayoral Election: The Role of Majelis Taklim

By Adri Wanto and Dedi Dinarto

Synopsis

Religious discussion groups (Majelis Taklim) play a pivotal role in the upcoming mayoral election in Tanjung Pinang, capital of the Riau Islands province. The influence of Majelis Taklim can boost the electoral chances of the mayor and vice-mayor candidates. The increasing role of Majelis Taklim in local politics, however, might complicate the diversity and multiculturalism of the Riau Islands.

Commentary

TANJUNG PINANG'S MAYORAL election - the only local election in the Riau Islands province south of Singapore - will take place this week on 27 June 2018 together with the simultaneous regional elections in 171 other regions of Indonesia. Two pairs of candidates are competing to be mayor and vice-mayor of the provincial capital.

Tanjung Pinang is a multi-ethnic city. According to the 2010 Indonesian Population census, Malays (30.7 percent of the population) and Javanese (28 percent) constitute the majority groups, followed by Chinese (13.5 percent), Minangkabau (9.5 percent), Batak (6.6 percent), and other ethnic groups. The city is also part of the Singapore, Johor, and Riau Islands (SIJORI) Growth Triangle. Hence, it increasingly attracts foreign direct investments from Malaysia and Singapore, along with those from other countries.

The Contenders

The first pair of candidates are Lis Darmansyah and Maya Suryanti, the incumbent mayor of Tanjung Pinang and the daughter of former mayor Suryatati A. Manan. Lis

and Maya are endorsed by six political parties, namely the Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDI-P), Hanura, Democrat Party, National Mandate Party (PAN), Indonesian Justice and Unity Party (PKPI), and United Development Party (PPP). Together they control two-thirds of the total regional parliamentary seats.

The second pair of candidates are Syahrul and Rahma. While Syahrul holds the position of the incumbent vice-mayor, Rahma is a politician who recently resigned from the PDI-P. Syahrul and Rahma gained political endorsement from Gerindra, Golkar, and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and thus far the moral support from National Awakening Party (PKB), Nasdem Party, and Star Crescent Party (PBB). Together they control one-third of the total parliamentary seats in the province.

The large numbers of parliamentary support, however, does not necessarily mean an absolute victory for the first pair of candidates. Rather, enjoying the support of *the Majelis Taklim* (Quran study groups) at the grass-root level is imperative to determine the winner in the Tanjung Pinang mayoral election.

Politics of *Majelis Taklim*

The political dynamics in Tanjung Pinang is significantly associated with the role of *Majelis Taklim*, a group that performs *pengajian* (religious discussions) in more than 200 mosques spread across Tanjung Pinang. *Majelis Taklim* has served as the most effective organisation to influence grassroots society in Tanjung Pinang, especially the women (*Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim* groups, who are more active and influential in social activities compared to the men's gatherings.

Historically speaking, the success story of former mayor Suryatati A. Manan, a woman who led Tanjung Pinang for 17 years (1996-2013), was based on her ability to control and maintain the *Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim* groups as her primary political base. However, Suryatati's political strategy of controlling *Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim* was not adopted by her daughter Maya Suryanti, who ran as a mayor candidate for the 2012 Tanjung Pinang mayoral election.

Paired with Tengku Dahlan, they lost the election to Lis Darmansyah and Syahrul. The historical trajectory illustrates that the role of Muslim women cannot be undermined in Tanjung Pinang's politics.

Islam as Political Narrative

The utilisation of Islam as a grand political narrative complicates the upcoming Tanjung Pinang mayoral election. Although Lis and Maya gained political endorsement from political parties with majority seats in the regional parliament and is perceived to be more moderate and pluralist, Syahrul and Rahma have been using their Islamic card to gain political support from the Muslim community.

On the one hand, besides his political credentials, Syahrul is primarily considered a religious figure in Tanjung Pinang. In January 2018, Syahrul invited the Vice-Secretary General of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) Ustadz Tengku Zulkarnain to deliver a sermon in Tanjung Pinang. During his talk, Ustadz Zulkarnain railed against

the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) group advocating their eradication.

Pointing out that support of pro-LGBT political parties was offensive to Islam, Ustadz Zulkarnain advocated that Syahrul establish the first rehabilitation centre for LGBT groups in Tanjung Pinang as a pilot project, if he wins the election.

On the other hand, Rahma has been following the footsteps of Suryatati A. Manan by creating personal networks with *Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim* since the beginning of her political carrier. Golkar elites, seeing the close relationship between Rahma and the Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim persuaded her to leave the PDI-P and run instead as a vice-mayor candidate supported by Golkar and its allies.

Given the circumstances, the Lis-Maya pair will encounter challenges to win the political battle in the Tanjung Pinang mayoral race. With Rahma as a vice-mayor candidate who has major support from the *Ibu-Ibu Majelis Taklim* and Syahrul as a mayor candidate who is considered as a religious figure in Tanjungpinang, the Lis-Maya pair have to work hard on the ground to convince the majority of Muslim voters to support them. During the recent Ramadan period, both pairs of candidates initiated a 'mosque safari' to extend their popularity and influence over the *Majelis Taklim* network in Tanjung Pinang.

Political 'Greening' of the Riau Islands

Islam frequently features in Indonesian national, regional, and local elections to advance the political objectives of political elites, especially using *Majelis Taklim* networks. It is obvious that each pair of candidates for the Tanjung Pinang mayoral election have touted their Islamic credentials, and all have portrayed themselves as pro-Islam figures to gain support.

These political manoeuvres provide an entry point for Islamism - leading to the political 'greening' of the Riau Islands. However, the crystallisation of Islam and politics in Tanjung Pinang could be a gamechanger with the potential to complicate the Riau Islands' rich history of diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism.

Adri Wanto is an Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Dedi Dinarto is a Research Associate with the Indonesia Programme. This is part of a series on Indonesia's simultaneous regional elections.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg