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All Politics is Local: Retired Officers in Regional Elections

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SYNOPSIS

An increasing number of retired army and police senior officers had chosen to become political candidates during the 2020 Indonesian regional elections. Nonetheless, it is the local political context and networks that determine whether they win or lose.

COMMENTARY

ONE OF the main trends in Indonesian politics in the past few years is a resurgence in the number of retired military and police officers running as candidates for local governments upon retirement from their uniformed positions.

The influence of both security institutions in the civilian realm has increased since President Joko Widodo (known popularly as Jokowi) assumed office in 2014. Jokowi deployed the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) frequently to assist his administration in various duties. Having won another mandate in 2019, Jokowi delegated more duties to the TNI, including [mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic](#) that had affected Indonesia the past year.

More Officers Going Into Politics

Meanwhile, the National Police (POLRI) had been entrusted by the president [to handle internal security challenges](#) faced by the administration, such as counter-terrorism and mass protests sponsored by hard-line Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which [has renamed itself](#) as the Islamic Brotherhood Front (FPI). (The Jokowi administration [formally prohibited FPI](#) on 30 December 2020).

A growing number of retired TNI and POLRI officers had also delved into national politics, and in greater capacities, competing as candidates for regional executive

elections. According to a new study by RSIS' Indonesia Programme, 55 retired former TNI and POLRI officers [ran as regional candidates](#) in local elections held between 2015 and 2020. A total of 21 former officers sought office during the last round of regional elections held in December 2020.

However, as highlighted in the following case studies of retired police officers running in the mayoral elections in Surabaya and gubernatorial elections in North Kalimantan province, getting elected as regional government officials in Indonesia is not a straightforward affair even among candidates who were formerly senior POLRI or TNI officers.

So how did the former officers perform as candidates for regional politics?

The Surabaya Mayoral Election

[Out of four police generals](#) who participated in the 2020 regional elections, only one (Zainal Arifin Paliwang of North Kalimantan) won. In our case studies of Surabaya and North Kalimantan province, factors that account for electoral success at the local level were often at odds with national level perceptions.

Retired Inspector General (two star) Machfud Arifin, although a native of Surabaya and a decorated police chief who served in three provinces, lost the mayoral election to Ery Cahyadi, who was formerly the head of the city's Budget Planning Bureau. While Machfud managed to obtain support [from eight political parties](#) represented in the city's legislative council, Ery won the support of the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDI-P) – the largest political party in the council.

Ery was also endorsed by Tri Rismaharini, the city's popular outgoing mayor. His running mate and now deputy mayor is Armuji, a veteran PDI-P politician who was the speaker of Surabaya's legislative council for 17 years.

Ery's mayoral campaign is also helped by the informal alliance between the PDI-P and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesian's largest Islamic organisation. Both organisations command a sizable support from the city's population, with approximately 60 percent of the city's Muslims affiliating themselves with NU. Ery's wife is the daughter of a cleric who runs the Tegalsari *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) – the largest NU-affiliated *pesantren* in the city.

Machfud was not able to overcome the PDI-P/NU alliance which backed Ery and was able to turn out more voters at the polling booth on 9 December 2020. Ery managed to win the mayoral election, with a margin [of 57.5 percent versus 42.5 percent](#).

The North Kalimantan Gubernatorial Election

In North Kalimantan province, a different scenario elapsed. Retired Police Brigadier (one-star) General Zainal Arifin Paliwang, was elected as the province's new governor during the December 2020 election. [He won 45.5 percent of the vote](#), defeating the incumbent governor Irianto Lambrie, and incumbent deputy governor Udin Haggio in a three-way contest.

Zainal, an ethnic Bugis from Makassar, had a career trajectory that was almost similar to Machfud Arifin – having held positions as police chief and director in Sulawesi, Yogyakarta, West Java, West Nusa Tenggara, Bali and Riau before becoming deputy police chief of North Kalimantan province prior to his retirement.

Zainal had paired up with Yansen Tipa Padan, an ethnic Dayak and ex-regent of Malinau district. The Zainal-Yansen pair was supported by eight political parties including big-wig parties PDI-P and Gerindra.

The candidate pair tapped into the discontent of residents over the lacklustre development of the district since the province's inception in 2012. They promised greater infrastructural development including a connecting bridge to the provincial mainland. In addition, [Yansen's association](#) as a native-born Dayak and Zainal's affinity as ethnic Bugis amongst the majority South Sulawesi *pendatang* or migrants, played in their favour.

Local Politics Matter

Other retired police generals who became candidates during the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections (*Pilkada Serentak*) also suffered electoral losses.

Retired Inspector General (two star) Syafril Nursal, a native of Jambi and ex-police chief of Central Sulawesi province, lost to [Ratu Munawaroh – wife of the ex-governor of Jambi – in a three-way contest](#). Retired Inspector General (two star) Fakhrizal, a native of Bukittinggi and ex-police chief of West Sumatra province, courted controversy when he was accused of utilising his privileges as police chief for his own gubernatorial campaign. As a result, he came in [third in a four-way contest](#).

While a candidate's standing and background matter in any electoral contest, what stands out in the electoral failures of these retired ex-police chiefs is a lack of a keen sense of the context and habitus of local politics.

Knowledge of political dynamics, a dedication towards the cultivation of local elite networks, the ability to win support from prospective voters and even the strategic pairing of running mates are crucial factors for electoral success. Thus, the refrain "all politics is local" could not be more relevant than ever at the sub-national level in Indonesia.

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