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The Role of Islam and Political Dynamics Ahead of the 2024 Elections in South Sumatra

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SYNOPSIS

As Indonesia heads towards national elections, in urban South Sumatra, primordial sentiments will shape the overall election dynamic while Islam will have a significant bearing on voter sentiment.

COMMENTARY

Ethnic politics is the common feature in electoral political contestation in Indonesia's South Sumatra Province. In this province, mobilising support from ethnic groups is a common strategy applied by candidates competing in village head elections, regional elections (*pilkada*) and legislative elections. Given that the province is home to a Malay-Muslim population, the Islamic factor certainly remains influential in electoral dynamics. However, unlike in West Sumatra, the mobilisation of "Islamic" sentiments, symbols, and aspirations is not a widespread phenomenon.

Ethnic factors should matter in presidential elections. Yet, for every rule, there is an exception. In the 2014 presidential election, for example, the presidential team of Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa won only by a narrow margin (51.26%) even though the latter, paradoxically, hails from South Sumatra Province. This is because of Hatta Rajasa's family relationship with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the latter's dwindling popularity at the end of his second term as president.

However, there are differences in how local ethnic groups and immigrant ethnic groups, especially Javanese groups, make political choices in presidential elections.

In the 2019 presidential election, the team of Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”)–Ma'ruf Amin lost in all electoral districts in South Sumatra, except in Banyuasin Regency, the area where the Javanese mostly live. This raises the question: What are the chances of the three candidates in the 2024 presidential election in South Sumatra?

Ethnicity and Islam in General Elections

The influence of ethnicity in South Sumatra's elections has been amplified since the implementation of the 2005 direct local election (*pilkada*) and the 2009 open-list proportional representation election system. These changes have increased the role of individual candidates in designing campaign strategies to win the support of voters. Conversely, voters also tend to pay more attention to individual candidates than the political parties that endorse them.

Candidates running for governor, mayor and regent and candidates for the regional legislature compete for the support of ethnic and religious groups. Support from ethnic groups is important for candidates given the high degree of social solidarity among members of ethnic communities. In South Sumatran society, there is a slogan that refers to social solidarity among all ethnic groups, *wong kito galo* (we are all people), and another, *dulur kito* (our brothers), which describes a closer brotherly relationship among members of an ethnic group.

Ethnically, South Sumatra Province can be divided into two broad categories: local ethnic groups and immigrant ethnic groups. The local ethnic groups comprise dozens of ethnic groups (*suku*) and sub-ethnic groups. The three largest local *suku* are the Komering, Musi, and Basemah. The Javanese are the largest immigrant ethnic group, making up 27–38% of the total population. Each ethnic group is concentrated in certain areas. The Javanese, for example, are found in the districts of Ogan Komering Timur, Ogan Komering Utara Raya, Banyuasin, Lubuk Linggau, Musi Rawas, Muratara, and Ogan Komering Ilir.

The influence of ethnicity on local election dynamics can be observed through three gubernatorial elections in South Sumatra (2008–2018). In all three gubernatorial elections, all pairs of candidates came from the three major ethnic groups of Komering, Musi, and Basemah. In the 2008 gubernatorial election, for example, gubernatorial candidate Alex Noerdin from the *suku* Musi–Basemah competed with Syahrial Osman from the *suku* Komering. Each candidate obtained large votes in constituencies where his ethnic group was dominant.

Generally, ethnic groups in South Sumatra have their own ethnic associations, such as Fokku (Forum Kerukunan Keluarga Komering), Ikatan Keluarga Lekipali (Lekipali Family Association, Lekipali standing for a combination of the Lematang, Kikim, Pasemah and Lintang ethnic groups), Pujakesuma (Sons of Java Born in Sumatra), IKP (Ikatan Keluarga Palembang or Palembang Family Association), IKM (Ikatan Keluarga Minang or Minang Family Association), and Paguyuban Banten (Banten Association). Candidates usually visit these ethnic associations, asking for their votes. Sometimes, the leaders of the ethnic associations themselves join a candidate's campaign team (“success team”). A common phrase used by candidates to appeal to voters from the same ethnic background as themselves is *kalau ado wong kito dewek, nopo nak milih wong lain* (“if there are our own people, why choose others”).

The same pattern of campaign strategies was also applied by candidates to attract support from Islamic groups. The votes of Islam-oriented voters in this Muslim-majority province (97%) cannot be ignored. In the 1955 general election, the Islamic party Masjumi obtained a majority of votes (43.1%) in the province. According to a [survey](#), in 2018, voters who were inclined to vote for candidates with a pious image made up around 30% of the total voters in Palembang City, South Sumatra.

In general, the majority of Muslims in South Sumatra are affiliated with the two largest Islamic mass movements, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. In addition, there are new Islamic organisations such as FPI (Forum Persaudaraan Islam) and ad hoc Islamic organisations such as GNPf-Ulama (National Movement to Safeguard Fatwas–Ulama), Forum Umat Islam, PA 212, and Relawan Laskar Islam. However, according to our source, these organisations are in fact filled with the same people, are located in Palembang City, and do not have strong political influence in the community.

Islamic groups that have recently gained influence in elections in South Sumatra – especially in Palembang, the capital city of South Sumatra – are *majelis pengajian* or *majelis taqlims* (recitation groups). The followers of *majelis taqlim* generally obey the advice of the leader of the *majelis*, including the advice to vote for candidates promoted by the leader. Given the character of this segment of the electorate, it is not surprising that candidates seek the support of the leaders of the *majelis taqlim*. One of the most well-known *majelis taqlim* in Palembang City is Majelis Asattidz Pecinta Ummat Rasulullah (Maspuro), led by Habib Mahdi Syahab.

Fitrianti Agustinda (Finda) is an example of a politician who successfully utilised the support of the *majelis taqlim* network to win the position of deputy mayor of Palembang for two terms (2016–2018 and 2018–2023). Finda is a female politician from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). She also controls the network of *majelis taqlim* in Palembang City because of her position as chairperson of BKMT (Badan Kontak Majelis Taqlim), a coordinating body for *majelis taqlim*. With her position and the support of Maspuro leaders, she managed to win the Palembang mayoral election together with Harnojoyo.

Outlook for Presidential Candidates

Based on the observations of our local sources, it is a toss-up between Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto as to who has a greater chance of winning the presidential election in Palembang. Ganjar Pranowo is completely out of the picture. Additionally, it is estimated that the vote share of each presidential candidate will not differ much.



Indonesian presidential candidates Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto are likely to compete for votes from local ethnic groups in South Sumatra, with Anies as the potential favourite among Islamic voters, especially in Palembang City. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Anies and Prabowo are likely to compete for votes from local ethnic groups. Anies is expected to be dominant among Islamic voters, especially in Palembang City. In contrast, Prabowo's affiliation with President Jokowi will prevent him from gaining votes from the more observant Muslim voters. Jokowi has been unpopular among rubber plantation farmers – spread across several districts in South Sumatra – owing to his failure to fulfil his promise to stabilise rubber prices. Divided loyalties characterise the Javanese constituency, among whom Prabowo and Ganjar are expected to split the votes.

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