

Pilkada and Identity Politics in Multicultural Cities: An Analysis of the 2024 Singkawang's Local Politics Contestation

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ABSTRACT

The local election (Pilkada) in Indonesia is increasingly revealing the influence of identity politics, especially in multicultural cities such as Singkawang. Known for its ethnic and religious diversity, comprising Chinese, Malay, Dayak, and other groups, Singkawang provides a unique arena where political competition is shaped not only by candidate competence and party platforms but also by mobilisation along identity lines. In the 2024 Pilkada, the city's tolerant image contrasts with persistent contestations over representation and resource distribution, making identity both a tool of solidarity and a source of potential division. Examining Singkawang local politics thus offers valuable insights into how identity politics function in diverse urban settings and what this means to the trajectory of Indonesia's democratic consolidation. This political milestone reflects the effective use of political identity strategies by parties in an inclusive civic culture. The present article employs qualitative explanatory methods. The data sources comprise in-depth interviews with a range of informants, as well as a literature study that involved exploring relevant data from various online sources, including books, journals, websites, and news portals. This study aims to explore the dynamics of local politics in Singkawang ahead of the 2024 Pilkada by examining the emergence of prospective mayoral candidates and local political issues. This study examines how political identity, particularly ethnic and religious affiliations, remains a decisive factor in shaping voter behavior and candidate strategies, reflecting both the city's multicultural strength and its underlying political vulnerabilities. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader development of Indonesian political perspectives.

Keywords: Local Politics; 2024 Regional Election; Singkawang; Political Communication; Representation; Electoral Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Elections are a fundamental pillar of democracy, serving not only as a mechanism for legitimising power through citizens' political participation but also as a barometer of state-society relations in times of socio-political change (Mietzner, 2018). In post-reform Indonesia, elections, both national and local, have become the primary instruments to affirm popular sovereignty, ensure elite circulation, and enhance government accountability. Contemporary scholars emphasize that competitive and participatory local elections are critical to democratic consolidation, as they reveal how political strategies, interest articulation, and grassroots mobilization shape governance outcomes (Aspinall et al., 2016).

The upcoming simultaneous regional elections represent a strategic momentum following the presidential and legislative contests, determining the emergence of new political forces at the local level. More than mere electoral procedures, these elections reflect dynamics of power contestation and social representation, making them a main arena for studying how democratic practices evolve across Indonesia's diverse regions. Within this context, Singkawang—a multicultural city in West Kalimantan dominated by Chinese, Dayak, and Malay ethnic groups—offers a particularly compelling case. Often celebrated as a symbol of tolerance and pluralism, Singkawang's political landscape reflects broader challenges and opportunities of multicultural democracy. The election of Tjai Chui Mei, a Chinese woman, as a mayor in 2017 marked a significant milestone for political inclusivity, while also underscoring the role of identity-based narratives and strategic coalition-building in local politics (Sukma & Handayani, 2020).

However, existing studies on Pilkada in multicultural regions largely focus on descriptive analyses of identity politics, often focusing on ethnic or religious mobilization as an electoral strategy (Mujani et al., 2019; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019) with limited attention to how political communication strategies, party positioning, and voter perception interact to shape electoral

outcomes in a rapidly evolving democratic context. While these studies provide valuable insights into how identity shapes political behaviour, they tend to overlook the growing complexity of local elections in the digital era, where identity narratives intersect with campaign strategies, party coalitions, and voter engagement through both traditional and online media (Suryadinata, 2018; Tapsell, 2017). Furthermore, research has rarely examined how these dynamics unfold in cities widely regarded as symbols of tolerance, such as Singkawang, where multiculturalism is often assumed to mitigate identity-based polarization (Wahyuni & Sihombing, 2022). This gap highlights the need for studies that move beyond static interpretations of identity, political communication, and strategic framing in shaping electoral outcomes.

The urgency of this research stems from the heightened salience of identity politics in Indonesia's democratic trajectory, which, if unchecked, risks deepening societal polarization. Understanding how political actors craft strategies and how voters respond in a city that embodies tolerance is crucial for strengthening inclusive governance. Ultimately, this study not only enriches the state of the art in Indonesian political science but also provides actionable knowledge for policymakers, parties, and civil society in safeguarding democratic consolidation within multicultural settings.

This study aims to analyze the political dynamics leading up to the 2024 elections in Singkawang City, focusing on the political communication strategies employed by local actors, the positions of political parties, and the public's perceptions of candidates and campaign issues. By using a qualitative approach and a political communication framework, this study aims to make theoretical and empirical contributions to the understanding of local democracy and political representation in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the socio-political reality in Singkawang City ahead of

the 2024 regional elections. This approach enables researchers to explore participants' perspectives directly, without prior construction by the researcher, thereby allowing interpretations of social reality to be based on empirical data gathered in the field (Creswell, 2009; Ruslan, 2016).

Data were collected through two main methods: a literature review and a field study. The literature review analyzed previous research findings, including journal articles, research reports, and relevant policy documents. Meanwhile, the field study was conducted through interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted both in person and via online platforms, involving key informants such as local political party officials, election organizers, community leaders, and academics familiar with the local political context. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the narratives and strategies used by political actors in shaping public perceptions. Observations were used to directly observe political activities in the field, including campaign activities, party meetings, and interactions between political actors and the community (Birowo, 2004).

This research was conducted in Singkawang City, West Kalimantan, a region selected for its strong multicultural character and its reputation as one of Indonesia's most tolerant cities, making it a significant context for examining the role of identity politics in local electoral dynamics. The empirical focus of this study is on how ethnic and religious identities – primarily among the Chinese, Malay, and Dayak communities – are constructed and mobilized by political actors and perceived by voters in the lead-up to the 2024 local elections. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with representatives of political parties, candidates' campaign teams, community leaders, and voters, complemented by direct observation of political activities and analysis of campaign content, including social media narratives. Data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's (2008) interactive model, which consists of three key stages: data reduction, information from multiple sources was filtered to focus on identity-based

strategies and their influence on voter perceptions. The processed data were then organized into thematic narratives, and verification was conducted through source triangulation to ensure the consistency and validity of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A Discourse on the Dynamics of the Singkawang City Elections

Singkawang city, a highly multicultural municipality in West Kalimantan, held simultaneous regional elections in November 2024. The political trajectory of this election reflects both the consolidation of democratic practices at the local level and the enduring salience of identity politics in shaping voter behaviour and elite strategies. Previously, Singkawang was governed by Mayor Tjai Chui Mei (TCM) from Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) and Deputy Mayor Irwan, a local bureaucrat, whose term ended in 2022 and was succeeded by Acting Mayor Sumastro. TCM's leadership tenure is politically significant: as a woman of Chinese ethnicity, her electoral success in 2017 symbolized inclusivity and pluralism in a city often celebrated as a model of tolerance.

Ahead of the 2024 Pilkada, TCM emerges as a dominant figure due to her incumbency advantage and strong grassroots support. Early political discourse predicted an uncontested election or a "kotak kosong" (empty ballot) scenario, as her electability was considered unassailable (Kayong, 2024). However, this narrative shifted dramatically following the Constitutional Court's ruling on 20 August 2024, which revised the nomination threshold. This decision disrupted initial coalition alignments and incentivized political parties to field their own candidates rather than consolidating behind TCM. The result was a competitive three-way race: TCM Muhammadin, backed by a broad coalition (PDIP, PAN, Demokrat, Nasdem, Gerindra, Hanura); Andi Sarif – Yusnita, supported by Golkar, PPP, PSI, Perindo, Partai Buruh, Gelora, and Partai Ummat; and Abdul Muthalib – Irwan, endorsed by PKB and PKS.

The fragmentation of coalitions indicates that local elites view the election not merely as a formality but as an opportunity to renegotiate power distribution and capture strategic constituencies. While programmatic visions and governance agendas are a part of campaign rhetoric, identity politics remain a critical determinant of political perception. In Singkawang, ethnicity and religion continue to inform candidate positioning and voter expectations, despite the city's pluralist narrative. TCM's candidacy leverages her proven leadership and minority representation, resonating with Chinese voters and progressive segments. Meanwhile, rival candidates strategically appeal to Malay and Dayak constituencies, framing narratives around religious affinity, local cultural authenticity, and promises of equitable development. These identity-based appeals are further amplified through political communication strategies, both offline and online, shaping public perception in ways that intertwine cultural symbolism with policy discourse.

The emergence of three competitive tickets underscores two dynamics: the resilience of identity politics as a mobilization tool in Indonesia's multicultural cities, and second, the electorate's dual expectations – desiring leaders who embody communal representation while delivering governance performance. With 172,118 eligible voters, the 2024 Singkawang Poilkada is not just a contest of political programs but a test of whether inclusive democracy can withstand the centrifugal forces of identity-driven polarization in a region long regarded as a benchmark for tolerance.

An Examination of Development Issues in Singkawang City

Singkawang City, widely recognized as a prominent cultural tourism destination in West Kalimantan, leverages its unique multicultural identity – shaped primarily by the Chinese, Malay, and Dayak communities – as a cornerstone of its attractiveness. Tourism is a major economic driver, as evidenced by the steady growth in visitor numbers, from 377,898 in 2016 to 456,679 in 2017, representing an increase of 20,84%. Despite this potential, infrastructure development in Singkawang remains inadequate. Roads

connecting the city to the provincial capital, Pontianak, are limited to inter-district routes, with a travel time of up to four to five hours. Making accessibility for domestic and international tourists cumbersome. Although the construction of Singkawang Airport was launched in 2018 and inaugurated in 2024 by President Joko Widodo, its operationalization faces delays due to challenges in land acquisition, funding, and airline slot allocations.

These infrastructural deficiencies are not merely technical or economic issues – they are deeply intertwined with political narratives and identity-based mobilization leading up to the 2024 local elections. For voters in Singkawang, particularly those from the Chinese and Dayak communities, infrastructure development symbolizes recognition of their cultural and economic aspirations. The airport project, widely associated with efforts to position Singkawang as the “next Yogyakarta”, is politicized as a tangible indicator of leadership capability and responsiveness to local identity. Candidates in the 2024 Pilkada strategically frame infrastructure projects in their campaigns, presenting them as tools to protect and promote Singkawang’s cultural heritage while promising economic prosperity through tourism.

At the same time, identity politics shapes public perceptions of development priorities. The majority Chinese electorate, who historically emphasize trade and tourism, tends to evaluate candidates based on their ability to ensure accessibility and cultural preservation. Conversely, Dayak and Malay voters often interpret infrastructure development through the lens of inclusivity and resource distribution, fearing marginalization in land acquisition processes or inequitable economic benefits. These divergent expectations create a complex political arena where development discourse intersects with ethnic identity, shaping voting behaviour and candidate positioning.

Thus, infrastructure development in Singkawang is more than a governance challenge; it is a political instrument embedded within broader

narratives of identity. The ability of mayoral candidates to frame these projects as inclusive and culturally sensitive, while addressing logistical constraints, will significantly influence electoral outcomes. Ultimately, in a multicultural city like Singkawang, development policy functions both as a material necessity and as a symbolic marker of ethnic recognition and political legitimacy.

Political Issues of Gen Z and Millennials in Singkawang City

The participation of millennials and Generation Z in Singkawang's 2024 regional election is a critical determinant of the city's political landscape. These two generations collectively make up more than half of the registered voter base—62 % in West Kalimantan —creating an electoral demographic that candidates and political parties cannot overlook. However, their engagement does not occur in a vacuum; the interplay between identity politics, political perception, and the cultural context of Singkawang shapes it. Singkawang's socio-political environment is deeply rooted in its multicultural composition, primarily comprising Chinese, Malay and Dayak communities. Historically, political contestation in Singkawang has reflected these ethnic divisions, with candidates frequently utilizing identity-based narratives to consolidate voter support. This reality persists into the 2024 election cycle, where identity politics remains a powerful tool for mobilization. For millennials and Gen Z, however, the response to such tactics is nuanced.

While older generations may strongly align their political choices with ethnic affiliations, younger voters exhibit a more pragmatic orientation, prioritizing issues such as infrastructure development, employment opportunities, and digital governance. Yet, identity politics still permeates their political perception. For instance, cultural festivals like Cap Go Meh and Gawai Dayak, which symbolize the city's pluralism, are often co-opted as campaign platforms, framing candidates as defenders of cultural heritage. For many young voters, the ability of a candidate to respect and promote

multiculturalism becomes a significant component of their political judgement.

Despite their numerical dominance, the political literacy of young voters in Singkawang remains uneven. First-time voters often lack a deep understanding of electoral processes, making them susceptible to both identity-based appeals and transactional politics, including money politics. This dual vulnerability creates a paradox: while younger generations are critical and tech-savvy, they are also vulnerable to being co-opted by populist or clientelistic strategies disguised in digital campaigns. Furthermore, political apathy, driven by disillusionment with government outcomes, continues to threaten participation levels. Suppose millennials and Gen Z perceive candidates as perpetuating the same elite-driven, identity-centric politics without addressing tangible concerns, such as job creation and infrastructure. In that case, they may disengage from the electoral process altogether.

Zulkarnaen notes that good political education can increase millennials' participation and awareness in elections, which is crucial for the sustainability of democracy (Zulkarnaen et al., 2020). Additionally, Utari (2023) emphasizes that the political participation of millennial voters influences the electability of candidates, making strategies to increase their participation essential. On the other hand, Generation Z, born after 2000, has also begun to show interest in politics, although they are still in the early stages of involvement. Research indicates that Generation Z is more likely to utilize social media as a means to access political information and engage in discussions (Azis et al., 2020). This creates an opportunity for political parties to reach young voters through innovative digital campaigns. Fitriyah et al. note that young voters have the potential to increase the legitimacy of election results, and their participation is crucial for creating a democratic government (Azis et al., 2020).

Reza, a young man from Generation Z, said, "I think our generation has a unique role in this election. As a generation that grew up with rapid information technology, we have great potential to contribute, such as

spreading information about candidates or providing election education. But all of this is so that Singkawang can have leaders who are willing to listen to our aspirations.”

Millennials and Generation Z are the decisive demographic in the 2024 elections. According to KPU data, voters categorized as Millennials and Generation Z account for 55% of the total number of registered voters (KPU) (ANTARA, 2021; Muhammad, 2023). Meanwhile, KPU data for West Kalimantan shows that voters categorized as Gen Z and Millennials reach 62%. This number will certainly determine the final results of the regional elections and the social and political dynamics during the election process, especially in Singkawang City.

The candidates for regional head of Singkawang City who want to win the contest cannot ignore the fact that millennials and Generation Z dominate the permanent voter list. Candidates must be able to attract the attention of potential voters who are critical and active on social media. Candidates in the Singkawang regional elections who can accommodate the aspirations of young people and provide them with a medium to express themselves will be able to win the votes of the millennial and Generation Z generations.

However, the fact that the majority of voters are Gen Z and millennials does not mean that there are no challenges. One of the main problems is the low level of political literacy among first-time voters. Hidayaturrahman explains that many young voters lack an understanding of their role and responsibilities in the political process, which could lead to political apathy (Heys, 2024; Suhenda, 2023). Therefore, effective political education is crucial to enhance awareness and understanding of the importance of participating in elections. Additionally, the influence of political money poses a challenge for first-time voters, who may become trapped in pragmatic voting behavior. This phenomenon can lead to unfairness in the electoral process and reduce public trust in the democratic system (Rosanto & Sofiani, 2022). Therefore, it is

important to develop strategies to address these issues and encourage active and ethical participation from the younger generation.

Ethnic and Identity Politics in Singkawang City

The concept of identity politics in Singkawang City is a multifaceted phenomenon that exerts a significant influence on the region's social and political dynamics. In a multicultural society comprising various ethnic and religious groups, identity politics often serves as a tool for political mobilization and support gathering in general elections, including regional elections (Pilkada).

A salient facet of identity politics pertains to the manner in which ethnic and religious identifications can influence individuals' political preferences. In the city of Singkawang, which is characterized by a substantial population of Chinese ethnic groups and Muslim communities, the realm of identity politics frequently mirrors the complex interplay of ethnic and religious affiliations. Research indicates that, in the context of elections, religious and ethnic identities can be decisive factors in voter preferences, with voters tending to support candidates perceived as representing their identities (Muhtadi, 2018; Yunita, 2023). This finding aligns with the research indicating that in heterogeneous societies, identity factors such as ethnicity and religion become primary elements that significantly influence an individual's allegiance to a leader (Putra, 2019).

Nevertheless, the application of identity politics has the potential to impede social harmony. In the context of regional elections, the employment of identity politics has the potential to intensify societal polarization, thereby contributing to the disruption of social stability. A study on regional elections in West Kalimantan demonstrates that intense identity politics has the potential to disrupt the harmony that has been established in a multicultural society (Syahrin et al., 2023). Therefore, it is imperative to cultivate an inclusive and dialogic approach in politics to avert potential conflicts arising from identity differences.

The head of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) of Singkawang City, H. Baharuddin, has asserted that community leaders play a pivotal role as role models in maintaining harmony between ethnic groups and religious communities in Singkawang City.

The role of community leaders in the 2024 regional elections is of significant importance, particularly in maintaining social balance and providing constructive guidance to residents. It is the community's moral responsibility to help one another understand the importance of choosing quality leaders while maintaining stability amid political differences.

A dialogic approach that prioritizes deliberation is essential in resolving issues, particularly those related to ethnicity and identity in Singkawang. Community and religious leaders play a vital role in promoting tolerance and diversity by embodying the concept of living in harmony.

H. Syamsuddin, a religious leader in Singkawang, has asserted that during electoral periods, issues of division based on ethnicity and religion are frequently exploited for electoral political interests. He underscored his role as a religious leader in Singkawang as one that entails guiding the community to avoid being drawn into short-term political interests that could damage interfaith harmony.

"I feel I have influence, but I choose to use this influence to guide the community in evaluating candidates from a moral and collective good perspective. Instead of mobilizing support for particular candidates, the focus is on cultivating public discernment and critical thinking skills to facilitate informed decision-making."

Political education has been identified as a means to mitigate the adverse effects of identity politics. By fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of harmony and tolerance, the community can more effectively navigate challenges related to identity. According to Yunita (2023), studies demonstrate that education on identity politics can help communities avoid entrapment within polarizing discourses. Furthermore, a cooperative strategy

can be employed to mitigate identity politics and foster a more harmonious societal environment (Hasanudin, 2023).

Conversely, identity politics can also be utilized to advocate for the interests of specific groups. In such contexts, political parties frequently employ identity symbols to appeal to voters. This phenomenon is exemplified in the context of general elections, wherein political parties tend to endorse candidates who share the same identity and background as the majority of voters in a given region (Intan, 2022; Mentari & Alunaza, 2022). However, it is imperative to implement this strategy with caution to prevent potential conflicts or tensions among diverse groups.

A thorough examination of the subject reveals that identity politics in Singkawang City indicates the intricate interplay between ethnic, religious, and political identities. While it can function as a catalyst for political mobilization, identity politics also harbors the capacity to engender conflict and polarization. Therefore, all stakeholders need to develop strategies that promote harmony and tolerance in the face of diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the dynamics of local politics in Singkawang City ahead of the 2024 elections, with a focus on the interplay between ethnic identity and pragmatic local issues. The findings demonstrate that while ethnic affiliation – particularly among Chinese, Malay, and Dayak communities – remains a critical determinant of political preference, practical concerns such as infrastructure development significantly shape voter behavior. These results suggest that political identity continues to play a significant role in determining voter behavior and campaign tactics, reflecting the city's fundamental political vulnerabilities as well as its ethnic strengths.

This study contributes to the discourse on identity politics by showing that in a multicultural local context, ethnic loyalty coexists with pragmatic considerations. It reinforces the argument that identity politics in Indonesia

plays an important role in the strategy of political elections. The research is limited by its localized focus on Singkawang city, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to other regions with different demographic or political compositions. Additionally, the study primarily relied on qualitative data from interviews and secondary sources, which may not fully capture the breadth of voter preferences across all population segments.

Future research should employ mixed methods and broader sampling to validate these findings and examine whether similar dynamics exist in other multicultural regions. Practically, policymakers and political actors should integrate inclusive identity representation with tangible development agendas to foster both social harmony and effective governance.

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