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The Role of Ethnicity in Regional Head Elections in Indonesia: Does It Matter?

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ethnicity in the regional head election in Tebo Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia in 2017. In this regional head election, there was competition between the two dominant ethnicities in this district. First, the ethnic Jambi who are indigenous people in Tebo Regency. Second, the ethnic Javanese who are immigrants to Tebo Regency through the transmigration program during the New Order era. While in Indonesian local politics, the factor of ethnicity plays a significant role in the process of regional head election, the case is getting more complicated for a region with roughly balanced ethnic composition. By applying a qualitative research method, this paper reveals that ethnic combination of candidates is not enough, but the position represented by the ethnicity seems to be a contributing factor in provoking inter-ethnic competition, especially when there was a rising view in society that the role of the regent is more significant than the position of vice-regent.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Regional Head Election, Indonesian Local Politics, Inter-Ethnic Competition.

Introduction

Ethnocentrism and conflicts between ethnic groups are common in countries with multi-ethnic societies. Several experts, including Geertz (1973), Horowitz (1985), and Varshney (1985), explain these ethnic sentiments and conflicts in countries such as Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Balkan peninsula (2002). According to Juergensmeyer (1993) and Huntington (1993), the phenomenon of ethnocentrism was unavoidable after the Cold War, as was the emergence of ethnicity-based countries, such as those in Eastern Europe.

As a multi-ethnic nation, Indonesia cannot be separated from this phenomenon of ethnocentrism. During the Suharto administration, cases of ethnic conflict were low due to strict security and violence policies. However, after the fall of Suharto in 1998, along with the implementation of decentralization, several regions experienced inter-ethnic conflict. Bertrand (2004) and van Klinken (2007), for example, described ethnic conflict and communal violence in Maluku and North Maluku in their respective studies. Additionally, Marzali and Alqadri (in Bamualim et.al. 2002) described an inter-ethnic conflict in Sambas and Sampit, West Kalimantan. While ethnic conflicts in Indonesia are now largely resolved, ethnic conflicts remain dormant and have potential to resurface if not appropriately managed.

Trends of ethnocentrism emerges along with ethnic conflicts during the implementation of

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decentralization and regional autonomy policies. Therefore, in Indonesian local politics, the factor of ethnicity cannot be ignored, as it has played a significant role in the process of regional head election. Djohan, Badjuri, and Suyanto (in Haris 2002) explain the phenomenon of ethnocentrism in the implementation of regional autonomy, such as the requirement that a “native son” become the regional head in his territory. Along with the direct election of regional leaders (governors, district heads, and mayors) since 2005, ethnocentrism unavoidably increases. Côté and Mitchell (2014), Sjaf (2014), Buchari (2014), Aspinall (2011), Subianto (in Erb and Sulistiyanto 2009), and Romli (2019) demonstrated the rise of ethnicity in local politics.

In this regard, this study seeks to explore the role of ethnicity in regional head election by taking the 2017 election in Tebo District, Jambi Province-Indonesia as a case study. We argue that in a region with roughly balanced ethnic composition of two ethnicities, in which one of them is considered as immigrants, it can be inferred that ethnic combination of candidates is not enough, but the position represented by the ethnicity seems to be a contributing factor in provoking inter-ethnic competition.

This article used ethnicity and ethnic groups as a conceptual framework. Smith (1995) has defined ethnicity and ethnic groups. An ethnicity is a unit of the population that emphasizes the typological uniformity of society universally with similarity with a mythical background regarding similarities of ancestry and history, cultural similarities, historical links living in the same area, and a sense of solidarity with their leaders (Smith, 1995, 57). In contrast, an ethnic group is a group of people who identifies with one another through a shared heritage that includes a shared language, culture (often including a shared religion), and ancestral tradition (which is linked to a history of endogamy). Ethnic identity is further defined as a recognition of the group’s distinctiveness by others (Smith, 1995, 36).

Geertz’s (1963) considers ethnicity as a component of primordial ties. Primordial attachment, as he sees it, is a feeling born from being “assumed to exist” in social life. Primordial attachment is most commonly formed through direct and family relationships, but it can also be formed through membership in a specific religious environment, language and dialect, and social customs. Primordial ties are a person’s attachment to his group based on given values. This attachment comes from blood relations and similarities in race, ethnicity, language, religion, and customs. Primordial ties can be traced back to prehistoric times (Geertz, 1963, 109-110).

The formation of fundamental bonds is made possible by loyalty, which will give rise to fundamental sentiments in the form of mutual solidarity. This fundamental togetherness will eventually give rise to fanaticism and integration within groups. There is a merging of primordial loyalty and political loyalty due to the frequent use of primordial loyalty for political purposes. As a consequence of the effects of this ideological relationship, there will be a shift in political allegiance toward unyielding and unwavering loyalty. As a result, through the merger, it exerts influence over political issues by relying on primordialism to further political or power interests (Rauf 2001).

Primordialism-influenced political concerns can lead to conflict and division. Lijphard (1968) contended that power-sharing through accommodation politics is necessary to avert divisions in this context. He proposed the concept of “consociational democracy.” Whereas consociational democracy is characterized by the capacity to accommodate diverse subcultural interests and demands, to transcend intellect and collaborate with rival subcultural elites, a commitment to maintaining the system and enhancing its cohesion and stability, and an awareness of the dangers of political fragmentation (Lustick, 1997, 90).

In the context of Indonesia as a new democratic country that is transitioning from authoritarianism, procedural democracy which is currently being practiced through various direct elections at the national and regional levels, both executive and legislative which have been carried out from 1999 to 2019 actually shows the birth of narrow identity politics.

Literature Review

Ethnicity in the political context refers to cultural, genealogical, and linguistic identity, which is often used as a tool for political mobilization (Geertz, 1963; Horowitz, 1985). In many multiethnic countries such as Indonesia, ethnicity becomes one of the key factors in shaping political alliances and electoral choices (Liddle & Mujani, 2007). In various regions, candidates for regional leadership have strategically employed identity politics by mobilizing co-ethnic affiliations as a means to secure electoral support. Several studies showed that ethnicity had influenced the election. Van Klinken (2007) and Chua (2008) demonstrate that local elites often exploit ethnic identity as a means of consolidating power at the local level. This is evident in regional elections, where candidates prominently highlight cultural identity, local languages, and even traditional symbols as integral components of their campaigns. Aspinall (2011) illustrates the significant influence of ethnic politics on the dynamics of regional elections and mobilization of ethnic symbols and appeals in political contests. Ethnicity still counts in arenas such as local elections, but what prevails is a soft form of ethnic politics, with few of the deep disputes about ethnohistory or cultural policy that occur in more ethnicized polities. Nasution (2014) explain the role of ethnicity in influencing the dynamics of direct election in 2010 in Medan, Indonesia. The research reveals that ethnic identity—historically constructed during the colonial era—continues to significantly influence political participation in the region. Voter preferences were largely driven by perceived ethnic affiliation, with many believing that a mayor from their own ethnic group would yield greater communal benefits. The electoral process, particularly during the first and second rounds, reflected inter-ethnic rather than inter-religious competition. This ethnicization of electoral politics poses serious challenges to the consolidation of democratic practices and the success of decentralization in Medan and, by extension, Indonesia.

A study by La Ode (2012) examined the rise of ethnic Chinese in local politics in West Kalimantan, where they were members of councils and regional leaders, which was not possible during the Suharto era because they were banned from participating in politics. According to Tanasaldy (2015), the growing political activism of the Chinese of West Kalimantan a decade after the Reform, especially in the local leader election, has made ethnic politics in this election becoming more complex with Chinese participation, especially by ethnic/religious mobilization.

As a pluralistic society, Indonesia possesses a high conflict potential. At the outset of the 1999 reform, for instance, there were interethnic confrontations in several regions. In the Sambas and Sampit districts of West Kalimantan, ethnic strife occurred between Dayaks and Madurese. In addition, the conflict in Maluku was the most severe religious and ethnic strife. This battle involves the religious communities of nearly every Indonesian (van Klinken 2007). In North Maluku, particularly between the Kao and Makian tribes, strife developed due to Maluku's escalating violence (Yanuarti et. al. 2004).

In May 1998, there was also ethnic strife between the indigenous ethnicity and the Chinese ethnicity. During this event, an angry crowd demolished many Chinese-owned shops and enterprises. The most significant unrest happened in Jakarta, Medan, and Surabaya. Hundreds of Chinese women were raped, sexually assaulted, cruelly abused, and ultimately murdered. During the unrest, many Chinese Indonesians fled the country. Conflicts with ethnic Chinese

dated back to the late nineteenth century. This resulted from negative public sentiment of the Chinese, including attitudes that solely supported their group, uncertain nationalism, and neither Islamic nor capitalist beliefs (Rochadi, 2021).

The majority of studies on identity politics and ethnicity in regional elections in Indonesia focus on areas that have historically experienced high ethnic-based conflict or polarization such as West Kalimantan (Pontianak, Sambas), North Sumatra, Papua, and Maluku. Studies in Tebo Regency have been limited, thus this research expands the geographical scope of the literature on ethnic politics in Indonesia, particularly in the central region of Sumatra. Unlike region with a history of horizontal conflict, Tebo remains relatively peaceful despite its ethnic diversity. The novelty of this study is its focus on ethnicity in local elections within a stable, multiethnic context that has not experienced open ethnic conflict. This allows for an analysis of how identity politics operates symbolically, culturally, and through social networks without escalating into violence, contrasting with mobilization patterns in conflict-prone regions.

Methods

This study seeks to explain the role of ethnicity in the 2017 regional head election in Tebo District (henceforth Tebo), Jambi Province-Indonesia. Ethnic politics in Tebo's regional head election involved competition between indigenous ethnicities, namely the Jambi ethnicity, and "migrant" ethnicities, namely the Javanese who transmigrated into Tebo and became permanent residents. This study illustrates the significance of ethnicity in regional head elections based on primary sources obtained through interviews, literature reviews, and descriptive analysis techniques.

This research approach is qualitative by taking a case study. With a case study, the researcher wants to gain a detailed understanding of one event in a certain period of time, namely the election of the regional head in Tebo Regency in 2017. The data collection method was carried out through in-depth interviews and literature study. In-depth interviews were conducted with ethnic figures from Jambi-Malay ethnicity and Javanese ethnicity. Interviews were also conducted with members of the winning team from both candidates and local political observers as well as community leaders who played a role in the 2017 regional head election in Tebo Regency.

The selection of informants was done deliberately with the consideration that the person knows and understands the issues in this research, and was the actor or supporter of the candidates in the regional head election in Tebo Regency in 2017. The questions posed to the resource persons were unstructured, but in-depth interviews. Researchers tried to explore the role of ethnicity in the election of the regional head. The literature study is carried out through books, documents and news in the mass media, both online and in print.

In-depth interviews were carried out during February and August 2022. We conducted in-depth interviews with informants, which were conducted face to face, as many as 14 people. The researcher prepared interview guidelines, but the questions we asked were unstructured. We developed further questions based on informants' answers to obtain completed data. The number of respondents consisted of five clusters. In the first cluster, we interviewed 2 candidates for deputy regent from each pair of candidates. For the second cluster, 2 informants came from political parties, namely the Golkar Party which nominated the Sukandar-Syahlan pair, and the National Awakening Party (PKB) which nominated the Hamdi-Harmain pair. Next, for the third cluster, there were 4 informants from the Campaign Team, we interviewed 2 people for each

candidate pair. Subsequently, in the fourth cluster, 2 informants came from Javanese ethnicity and 2 people from Malay ethnicity. Finally, as the last cluster, there were 2 informants from academics or regional election observers.

Apart from primary data from interviews, we also took secondary data from the Tebo Regency Central Statistics Agency and the Regional General Election Commission and reports in local mass media. The data we took is related to the number of ethnic groups and regional election results in Tebo Regency. Meanwhile, to analyze the results of this research, we used literature studies, either in the form of books or articles published in various journals.

Results and Discussion

Indonesian society is pluralistic. According to Furnivall (1967), a plural society consists of two or more parts that coexist inside a single governmental unit but do not influence one another. Based on the 2000 Population Census, the number of ethnicities in Indonesia is around 1000 sub-ethnicities (Suyadinata, Arifin, and Ananta, 2003, 6-7). Of that number, there are 15 ethnic groups with more than 1 million people, namely Javanese (83,865,724), Sundanese (30,978,404), Malay (6,946,040), Madurese (6,771,727), Batak (6,076,440), Minangkabau (5,475,145), Betawi (5,041,688), Bugis (5,010,421), Banten (4,113,162), Banjar (3,496,273), Bali (3,027,525), Sasak (2,611,059), Makassar (1,982,187), Cirebon (1,890,102), and Chinese (1,738,936).

The history of ethnic Javanese in Tebo is inextricably linked to the transmigration program launched during the New Order era (President Suharto's reign). The transmigration program was implemented to spread out the Indonesian population, which was primarily centered on the island of Java, to other locations beyond Java where the population was relatively minor or sparse. In addition, transmigration aims to produce rice to achieve food self-sufficiency. The government transported Javanese and Balinese to transmigration destination areas, including Lampung, South Sumatra, Jambi, West Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua (Legiani, Lestari, and Haryono 2018).

Rimbo Bujang District, Bungo Tebo Regency, was the location for the transmigration program in Jambi. This area was subsequently separated into Bungo Tebo Regency and Tebo Regency. The Tebo Regency absorbed Rimbo Bujang. December 9, 1975, marked the arrival of the first migrants to Rimbo Bujang. There were 2,057 people or 500 homes displaced, and they were relocated to Unit I, which later became the Pioneer Village. They are from Central Java (474 people) and East Java (26 people). At that time, the requirements for transmigration were a married couple, regardless of whether they had children (Lindayanti and Zubir 2017).

In 1977, Rimbo Bujang also had transmigrants from the Wonogiri, Central Java, a community devastated by the Gajah Mungkur Reservoir project. Around 60,000 Wonogiri residents relocated to West Sumatra and Jambi at that time. The deployment of transmigrants in Rimbo Bujang lasted until 1981 and involved 8,156 families or 36,100 individuals. In 1981, there were 20 residential units/blocks in Rimbo (Undayanti and Zubir 2017). Rimbo Bujang was separated into three sub-districts in 2003, following the establishment of Tebo as a district and the division of Bungo Tebo Regency, namely Rimbo Ulu, Rimbo Ilir, and Rimbo Bujang itself.

Rimbo Bujang, where most inhabitants are Javanese, is frequently equated as a piece of Java within the island of Sumatra. In daily life, the locals speak a mixture of *ngoko Javanese* and Jambi Malay. Javanese *krama inggil* (fine Javanese) is exclusively spoken at traditional ceremonies such as weddings and congrats. Javanese Campursari songs may always be heard

among the kiosks serving various Javanese cuisine, from noodles to *tongseng*. Javanese arts such as shadow puppets, *karawitan*, and lumping horses are periodically performed, notably on transmigration day, commemorating the Javanese's arrival in Rimbo Bujang for the first time on December 9, 1975.

According to the 2010 Census of Population, the total population of Tebo Regency is 222,225. Most of the population consists of Jambi people (109,345 or 49.20%) and Javanese people (94,528 or 42.53%). Other ethnicities such as Minangkabau (3.08%), Sundanese (0.99%), Banjar Malay (0.51%), and others account for approximately 3.4%. In terms of ethnic composition, the number of Javanese ethnic groups is nearly equal to that of the indigenous ethnicity, the Jambi ethnic group (Tebo Central Statistics Agency 2011). Javanese ethnicity is generally centered in three subdistricts: Rimbo Ulu, Rimbo Ilir, and Rimbo Bujang.

In its development, the existence of the Javanese ethnic group in Tebo was classified as "immigrants," whose presence was or compelled to be tolerated because it was a policy that the central government could not deny. They come to dwell on land that did not belong to their ancestors, despite the legality of their property and the land they cultivate or manage. They are not, in other words, "illegal immigrants." The newcomers are not regarded as members of the Jambi ethnic group, which claims to be indigenous to Tebo, who had resided there for centuries.

Regional Head Election in Tebo

Since 2005, regional head elections (governors, regents, and mayors) have been held directly. Initially, regional heads were elected by the Regional People's Representative Council. Implementing direct regional head elections will help democracy at the local level develop. In Tebo, direct regional head elections were held in 2006. There were four competing candidate pairs, namely A. Madjid Mu'az-Sukandar, who was nominated by the Golkar Party, the National Mandate Party (PAN), the National Work Concern Party (PKPB), the National Party Indonesia Marhaen (PNIM), and the United Nahdlatul Ummah Indonesia Party (PPNUI); Yopi Muthalib-Wartono T. Kusumo who were nominated by Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP); Makdami Firdaus-Yasir who were nominated by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB); and lastly, Mawardi-Tri Soewandono who were nominated by Democratic Party of Struggle (PDP) and Crescent Star Party (PBB). This direct regional election was marked by the emergence of candidates coming from immigrant residents, namely those of Javanese ethnicity. Thus, it was a starting point of a competition between the Jambi Malay ethnicity and the Javanese ethnicity in the local Tebo political arena. In 2006, A. Madjid Mu'az-Sukandar won the election (47.51%).

Subsequently, in the 2011 regional head elections, there were three pairs of candidates, namely Sukandar-Hamdi, who were nominated by the PKS, the Reform Star Party (PBR), PBB, National Democratic Party (PDK), Ulama National Awakening Party (PKNU), Indonesian National People's Fortress Party (PKNU), PNBKI, and PDP; Yopi Muthalib-Sri Sapto Eddy who are supported by PDIP, Democratic Party, PAN, Hanura Party, and Gerindra Party; and lastly, Ridham Priskap-Eko Putra who are supported by PKPB, the United Development Party (PPP), and PKB. In the 2011 election, the seeds of ethnocentric sentiment in the Tebo community began to emerge. The reason was that two pairs of candidates represented different ethnic combinations, which are the Sukandar-Hamdi pair (as the ethnic Javanese regent candidate and the Jambi ethnic deputy regent candidate) and the Yopi Muthalib-Sri Sapto Eddy pair (the Jambi ethnic regent candidate and the Javanese deputy regent candidate). The election was won by Sukandar-Hamdi.

There were just two candidates pairings in the 2017 regional head elections: Hamdi (incumbent/deputy regent) was coupled with Harmain, and Sukandar (incumbent/regent) was teamed with Syahlan.

No.	Name of Candidate Pair	Supporting Political Parties	Ethnic Origin	Election Vote	Percentage
1	Hamdi/Harmain	Democratic Party, PKB, and Nasdem Party	Malay ethnicity	73.263	44,61
2	Sukandar/Syahlan	Golkar Party, PDIP, PKS, PAN, and Hanura Party	Javanese and Malay ethnicity	90.963	90.963

Table 1. 2017 Regional Election Votes in Tebo Regency

Source: KPUD Kabupaten Tebo

The Democratic Party, PKB, and the Democratic National Party (Nasdem) backed the first pair. The Golkar Party, PDIP, PKS, PAN, and the Hanura Party favored the second pair. Meanwhile, the Golkar Party, PDIP, PKS, and PAN supported the third pair. Hamdi and Harmain are both of Malay origin, while Sukandar and Syahlan were the combination of Javanese and Malay ethnicity. Sukandar and Syahlan won the 2017 local elections with 55.39 percent of the vote.

The Roles of Ethnicity in Pilkada in Tebo

During the 2017 regional head elections, ethnocentric attitudes have returned and grown even more robust. This was because Sukandar, teamed with Syahlan (Javanese-Jambinese), faced Hamdi and Harmain (both were Jambinese). In other words, this contest pits a duo of Jambi descent against the sole Javanese contender. In the context of Sukandar's candidacy for regent, the position of vice-regent assumed significance in dividing ethnic Jambi votes. In the meantime, Sukandar's candidacy as the sole ethnic Javanese competing in the 2017 Tebo regional election may encourage Javanese voters to narrow their emphasis to a single candidate partner. This circumstance caused interethnic competitiveness in Tebo's regional head elections.

Noviardi made a case for the significance of a contender's ethnicity in Tebo's regional head elections. He said that identifying one's ethnic identity is crucial in political engagement during regional head elections. He continued saying:

"Ethnic issues have a part in motivating people to interpret ethnicity in various ways to encourage ethnic representation that demonstrates a connection to their culture. For ethnic groupings in a society whose members maintain ethnic, racial, and cultural ties as their primary family identity to develop as a source of support for regional head candidates" (Noviardi, 2022).

The conflict between the two ethnic groups developed because Tebo's ethnic composition was roughly balanced between Jambinese and Javanese. At the time of the 2011 regional head election, the rise of ethnic sentiment in the Tebo community began. The reason for this was that there were two pairs of candidates representing distinct ethnic combinations, namely the

Sukandar-Hamdi pair (Sukandar as a candidate for regent was Javanese and Hamdi as a candidate for deputy regent was ethnic Jambi), as well as the Yopi Muthalib-Sri Sapto Eddy (Jambi ethnicity regent candidate and Javanese vice-regent candidate).

Two factors contributed to the emergence of ethnic sentiment preceding the 2011 Tebo regional head election. First, since the creation of Tebo in 1999, this was the first time a candidate for regent is of Javanese ethnicity, namely Sukandar. Secondly, there was a rising view in society that the role of the regent is more significant than the position of vice-regent, so the 2011 regional head election was perceived as a contest between ethnic Javanese (represented by Sukandar) and ethnic Jambi (represented by Yopi Muthalib).

During the 2017 regional head election, ethnocentrism grew stronger. Considering that Sukandar was the only Javanese candidate in this election, he was the sole candidate for the regional head. This may encourage ethnic Javanese to narrow their options to a single potential partner. In the meantime, the emergence of prospective ethnic Jambi partners highlighted the significance of the Jambi ethnic group in overthrowing the Javanese, who seized control of Tebo in 2011. In this regard, Bahri (2022) said,

“We have resided in Tebo for centuries, adhering to our Malay-Muslim heritage (Jambi ethnicity). Why is the situation suddenly reversed, as if Tebo had become a village in Java? Try playing around or walking to Rimbo Bujang. Everything is of Javanese origin. The wealthiest individuals in Tebo are likewise Javanese. Already in power, they wish to maintain it. We are not anti-Javanese. Yes, it is normal for the regent to be a Javanese and to give more attention to his class and the region in which he resides. Therefore, Malays must become regents so that they pay greater attention to Malays’ concerns”.

The Hamdi-Harmain pair, representing the Jambi ethnicity, were believed to be able to strengthen the existence of the Jambi ethnicity as natives, which are different from the Javanese who were migrants. This candidate pair during the campaign said: "*Orang Jawo masuk ke Jambi belum pake sepatu. Kinila pake sepatu kito pulo nak dipijaknyo. Contoh Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah (APBD) lari ke Rimbo Bujang, dak usah lagi pilih orang jawo tu, yang penting kito bersatu.*" (“The Javanese were shoeless when they entered Jambi. Now that we are wearing shoes, we also want to step on them. Example of local budget (APBD) which ran for the Rimbo Bujang District, so do not vote for the Javanese anymore, and our unity does matters”). This remark confirmed the existence of the Jambi ethnicity in comparison to the Javanese ethnicity. The tension marked by the cynicism from Jambinese who depicted the arrival of Javanese in Tebo in poverty (without shoes) but are now wealthy (wearing shoes) and powerful enough to give APBD funds to their residence in Rimbo Bujang. For this reason, they argued that the people of Jambi should not vote for a Javanese regent candidate.

The statement disparaging the Javanese was propagated among the Javanese and Jambi ethnic groups via social media messages (*WhatsApp*). The Hamdi-Harmain campaign utilized this statement as proof that ethnic Javanese aspire to govern Tebo by making their candidate the regional leader. As a result, the residents of Tebo, could not rule their territory because they were under Javanese control. Meanwhile, for the Javanese, this statement was an alarm that if Hamdi came to power, they would experience hardship or be uncomfortable when ruled by the Javanese. Therefore, maintaining Sukandar in the position of the regent was a must. For example, a statement like, “*Sedulure dewe (saudara sendiri), daripada wong dio, mending sedulure dewe* (instead of [voting] their people, it is better to [choose] our people).” This jargon then secretly built ethnic solidity among the Javanese, so that ethnic identity becomes stronger and more

prominent.

Aside from this, the Hamdi-Harmain camp asserted that they were the son of the region, while the Sukandar camp used this as a wedge issue to defeat opponents. Riyanto, the Sukandar Volunteer Team leader in the year 2022, stated, “When we developed this issue, people outside of Batanghari were terrified. Therefore, our opponent’s strength becomes our weakness. This is what we employ.” Regarding Hamdi’s performance as vice-regent, social media networks and door-to-door campaigns have generated a second controversy. For instance, as reported by Riyanto (2022), Hamdi avoided responsibility and frequently did not report to work.

In addition, rumors spread among ethnic Javanese that Tebo would be the “second Sampit” if the candidate from the Jambi ethnic group won (Supriyono, 2022). This referred to ethnic rioting between the Dayak and Madurese tribes in Sampit, West Kalimantan, which resulted in the evacuation of Madurese from the region. Indeed, as rumors of Javanese ethnicity spreaded and ethnic resentment grew. As stated by Riyanto (2022), they would emphasize Javanese candidates when they appeared. He noted that when the Hamdi-Harmain couple brought up the subject of local sons, the strength of the Javanese ethnicity increased. As the news spread, many people from outside the Jambi ethnic community experienced fear.

The utilization of ethnic feelings in Tebo’s regional head elections was not done openly because it was a delicate issue that could bring division and violence between the Jambinese and Javanese tribes. Due to this, the campaign staff use ethnic sentiments privately and informally. The candidate pairs generally realized, as acknowledged by the campaign staff, that overtly campaigning on ethnic matters was a delicate affair. In addition to being able to elicit negative responses from opposing parties who heard about it directly or indirectly, it would also make the populace prone to anger. According to Supriyono (2022), it would be more effective if it was conducted via informal campaigns, small groups, or door-to-door, with the participation of local role models.

Riyanto (2022) likewise shared the same idea. According to the head of the Sukandar-Syahlan Volunteer Team, the informal campaign involved numerous Javanese community leaders in Tebo, including their religious leaders, to urge their group to vote for Javanese candidates. According to Kusumo (2022), ethnic feelings were more effective when conducted via informal initiatives. He stated that the task was not challenging. The next step, following mapping, was to select the appropriate or influential community leaders to carry out campaigns for community organizations both within and outside their surroundings. He continued, “The purpose of an open campaign is to demonstrate to the public that the candidate we are supporting enjoys widespread community support. Furthermore, a door-to-door effort including community leaders” (Kusumo, 2022).

Jambi-Javanese Ethnic Power Sharing

There appears to be a requirement for power sharing among ethnic groupings to win regional head elections. It will affect resistance and interethnic violence if it is not attained. Sukandar, who is of Javanese ethnicity, recognized the necessity to form a candidate couple with an indigenous ethnicity (Jambi ethnicity). In this light, the appearance of Sukandar and Syahlan, who represent the Javanese and Jambi ethnic groups, in Tebo is a type of power-sharing and a means of preserving local political stability.

Political leaders from the Jambi ethnic group and the Javanese ethnic group, both supporters of the Hamdi-Harmain (Jambi-Jambi) pair and the Sukandar-Syahlan pair, concur that a

combination pair of the two tribes is the ideal partner in regional head elections. Kusumo (2022) said,

“The combination is irreplaceable. If the candidate for regent is Javanese, then the vice-regent must be Batanghari. If both candidates are Javanese, the administration will be in disarray regardless of who wins. This is what we must keep an eye on. The political map of Tebo contains Javanese and non-Javanese regions. This is how the composition should be read. So that there is no disorder, disturbance, etc., because these Javanese are immigrants. It is not prudent for everyone to seek to become regent and deputy regent without understanding history. The government requires a secure environment. Let the development go nicely”.

Syahlan (2022) had an opinion similar to this when he stated that the deputy regent who became Sukandar’s running mate in the 2017 regional elections should be removed from office. He stated that the political power structure, composed of Java and Jambi as separate entities, was a fact that cannot be altered. As a result, there are a diverse pool of candidates running for regional head positions. Concerning this, Noviardi (2022) made the following statement:

“The potential strength of the Sukandar-Syahlan combination rests in their combined socio-anthropological approach, which is synergistic despite the presence of discordant voices for this running couple. This couple’s integrative and egalitarian approach captured the people’s hearts since they are both well-known characters in Javanese and indigenous society, with favorable social views that also represent the interests of the local and Javanese ethnic groups. Sukandar and Syahlan have a good chance of winning the Tebo Regional Head Election if they employ these strategies and techniques.”

Consequently, according to Mazlan (2022), a party seeking to nominate a Jambi-ethnic regent in the upcoming local elections must find a Javanese representative. Without Java’s representatives, victory cannot be achieved. Therefore, the key to winning the regional head election in Tebo lies in the ability to exert ethnic control over the Javanese. What was unexpected, he continued, was “the conflict between the Javanese-Javanese (Rimbo-Rombo) and the Jambi-Jambi (Batanghari-Batanghari) ethnic groups. When this occurs, he explained,

“it means that we are lighting a fire in order to burn ourselves. Likewise, it is identical to compartmentalizing regions. There will be an ethical conflict if we do so. If someone is contemplating a political topic for the Jambi-Jambi ethnicity versus the Javanese-Javanese ethnicity, they must have ulterior reasons and objectives, as they have not considered Tebo’s future. If this occurs, even if my party nominates the candidate, I will not support them because I am aware of the risks ahead. It must be substantial. This has begun a conflict. Fatal if one holds such a view. If Tebo wants to continue existing, it must be a combination, who will be number one and two will depend on the current situation.”

Under these circumstances, the future of ethnic politics in Tebo will permanently be colored by cross-matching pairings of candidates. Therefore, if the ethnicity of the candidate for regent is of Javanese ethnicity, he must team up with a candidate of Jambi ethnicity for deputy regent and vice versa. This event also demonstrated the existence of cross-cutting power or power split between the Javanese and Jambi ethnic groups in order to preserve political stability in Tebo.

Nonetheless, this combination necessitates cooperation between the two ethnicities' political elites to win the regent/vice-regent election race. This is bolstered by the propensity to cross-match candidates, specifically Javanese and Jambinese or Jambinese and Javanese. Political elites from the Jambi and Javanese ethnic groups usually concur that a coalition partner from

both ethnic groups would be the perfect candidate for local elections. Whether it is Javanese-Jambinese or Jambinese-Javanese depends on the political climate and the parties that support the leading candidate.

Considering this fact, one might assume there has been socialization in Tebo's local politics. In addition, this demonstrates that the local elite of Tebo has been relatively effective in implementing their consociational democratic paradigm. Consequently, if there is overwhelming anxiety that ethnic politics would impede the growth of democracy and cause war, it is unreasonable for the elites of each ethnicity to collaborate and share power.

Conclusion

Ethnicity plays a significant role in local elections in Indonesia, including in Tebo, Jambi. Ethnic identity serves as a tool of mobilization, particularly when linked to social networks, local figures, and perceptions of cultural proximity. The election for regional head in Tebo was a period of ethnically nuanced leadership turnover. In this election, the competition strengthened the Jambinese and Javanese ethnic identities. The competition between the Javanese and Jambi ethnic groups over the regional head position demonstrates that ethnic identification has power and may be leveraged to garner votes. The growth of ethnic identity politics cannot be separated from the tendency of elite candidates to use ethnic factor to sway voter preferences. Consequently, each ethnic group (Jambi ethnicity and Javanese ethnicity) has commonalities in traits based on origin and ethnicity.

The polarization and configuration of candidates representing the Javanese and Jambi ethnicities have prompted voters to connect with their ethnic identity, making it preferable to vote for a candidate from the same ethnicity. In addition, this study demonstrates that ethnic unity grows stronger outside of its homeland. The strong Javanese ethnic sentiment in Tebo is proof of this.

The Javanese, contenders for the regional head, cooperated with the Jambi ethnic to minimize resistance and inter-ethnic conflict. In addition to the interethnic competition, the regional head election in Tebo also entailed collaboration and power distribution between the Javanese and Jambi ethnic groups. As a result of the establishment of power-sharing following the election of the regional head, cordial relations were maintained amongst ethnic groups in Tebo, particularly between the Jambi and Javanese ethnicities.

While in Indonesian local politics, the factor of ethnicity plays a significant role in the process of regional head election, the case is getting more complicated for a region with roughly balanced ethnic composition. All in all, the case of regional head election in Tebo Regency in 2017 shows that ethnic combination of candidates is not enough, but the position represented by the ethnicity seems to be a contributing factor in provoking inter-ethnic competition, especially when there was a rising view in society that the role of the regent is more significant than the position of vice-regent. Therefore, it is important for the elected leaders to commit to preserve and enhance cohesion and stability by first recognizing the dangers of political fragmentation and consequently, accommodating diverse subcultural interests.

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