

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS-YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 27 March 2017

Decentralization and Chinese Indonesian Politics: The Case of Singkawang, West Kalimantan

*Hui Yew-Foong**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Tjhai Chui Mie became the first Chinese woman to be elected mayor of an Indonesian city after winning comfortably with 42.6% of the votes in Singkawang, West Kalimantan.
- In this election, as with previous mayoral elections in Singkawang, candidates employ pairing strategies that capitalize on the ethno-religious composition of the voters. The Tjhai-Irwan winning pair managed to attract primarily Chinese votes and secondarily Dayak and Malay votes.
- The success of the Tjhai-Irwan team depended on their subtle navigation of ethno-religious politics, support from the Singkawang Chinese elite in Jakarta, and their ability to fend off smear campaigns that reveal deep-seated divisions in Indonesia.
- At the same time, the election reveals that alliances and issues that are pertinent on the national political stage may have limited currency in regional politics.
- The challenge of ethnic Chinese in Indonesian politics is to contribute to good governance while remaining sensitive to ethno-religious sentiments.

**Hui Yew-Foong is Senior Fellow at ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, and Associate Professor at Hong Kong Shue Yan University.*

INTRODUCTION

While all eyes were on Jakarta for the simultaneous election of regional leaders (pilkada) held on 15 February 2017, the municipality of Singkawang elected the first Chinese woman to be mayor of a city in Indonesia. Tjhai Chui Mie and running mate Irwan won comfortably with 42.6% of the votes, while the other three pairs of contenders trailed at 26.78%, 17.13% and 13.5% respectively.¹

Admittedly, Tjhai's campaign had a higher chance of success compared to ethnic Chinese candidates contesting in other parts of Indonesia, since Singkawang is the Indonesian city with the highest proportion of Chinese, at 36.52%, in its population (Arifin et al. 2014). However, when we examine the campaign and voting patterns in detail, Tjhai's victory was not a certainty. Besides a complex web of ethnic politics that involves Singkawang Chinese in Jakarta as well, the smear campaigns demonstrate the deep-seated divisions that continue to characterize Indonesian society. While these developments show the extent to which national trends sway local politics, the way in which local politics defy Jakarta or Java-centric patterns is reflective of the political diversity that the *Reformasi* (Reform Movement) and *otonomi daerah* (regional autonomy) have brought about since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998.

At the same time, the case of Singkawang shows us one way in which the role of the Chinese in Indonesian politics is evolving.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLITICS A LA SINGKAWANG

The expectation among political actors, whether fully substantiated or not, with the implementation of direct election for regional leaders, is that voters vote in ethno-religious blocs. That is, voters will support candidates of their own ethno-religious groups primarily,² and other factors come into play only when there is more than one candidate of the same ethno-religious group, or when an ethno-religious group is not represented by any candidate. Following this political logic, candidates for regional leadership elections tend to employ one of two strategies in how they are paired up. The first is the inclusive-pairing strategy, where each of the pair represents a different ethno-religious constituency, such that together, they are able to draw votes from as wide a spectrum of voters as possible. This is the more common, popular and "safer" strategy employed at all levels of elections, as it ensures broader representation across ethno-religious boundaries.

¹ "Tjhai Chui Mie, Singkawang's first female mayor", <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/02/18/tjhai-chui-mie-singkawang-first-female-mayor.html>, accessed 13 March 2017.

² Aspinall (2011, p. 298) suggests that while ethnicity may not be an important factor in voting at the national level, it plays a significant role in voting for local executive positions, especially in areas where indigenous populations had been underrepresented.

The second strategy is the exclusive-pairing strategy, where the pair represents the same ethno-religious bloc. This is the riskier strategy, but it has been shown to work especially where the exclusive pair represents a large ethno-religious constituency that does not need alliances across ethno-religious lines, or where the other pairs, though mixed, are appealing to the same constituencies and therefore splitting the votes.

The perception by political candidates and parties that ethno-religious affiliations influence voting behavior to a large extent implies that Chinese candidates will usually be fielded only where a substantial proportion of the electorate is Chinese. Such politics by demography means that West Kalimantan, where the Chinese stand at 8.17% of the provincial population (Ananta et al. 2015, p. 108),³ and are also considered one of the three ethnic pillars of the province (together with the Dayaks and Malays) due to their long history of settlement (Hui 2011, p. 280), is likely to see Chinese candidates vying for regional leadership positions. In fact, West Kalimantan, in 2007, was the first province to have elected a Chinese deputy governor, before Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was elected deputy governor of Jakarta in 2012.

Since direct elections were implemented in 2005, cities like Singkawang and Pontianak, which have substantial proportions of Chinese, have seen Chinese candidates competing in mayoral elections.⁴ Between 2005 and 2013, six Chinese candidates contested the mayor or deputy mayor position in Singkawang, while another six participated in elections for the same positions in Pontianak (Tanasaldy 2015, p. 454). However, Chinese candidates have been more successful by far in Singkawang, where the Chinese constitute the largest proportion of the municipal population.

Table 1 - Ethnic population of Singkawang according to the 2000 and 2010 Censuses (%)

Ethnicity	2000 Census	2010 Census
Chinese	41.7	36.52
Malay	10.8	32.65
Javanese	27.4	9.35
Madurese	5.3	7.06
Bugis	1.3	1.42
Dayak	7.5	8.75
Others	6.0	4.25

Source: Census 2000 data is from Badan Pusat Statistik, cited in Tanasaldy (2015, p. 458). Census 2010 data is extracted from Arifin et al. (2014).

³ This is the highest in Indonesia, alongside Bangka Belitung, which also has 8.17% Chinese as part of the provincial population. Incidentally, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was bupati (District Head) of East Belitung (2005-2006) before rising to national prominence later as deputy governor and then governor of Jakarta.

⁴ Chinese in Pontianak constitute the second largest ethnic group at 18.83% of the population, after the Malays at 34.6% (Arifin et al. 2014).

In the first direct election for mayor of Singkawang in 2007, Hasan Karman (Bong Sauw Fan), a Singkawang Chinese who had relocated to Jakarta, became its first Chinese mayor when he won with 41.8% of the votes. Karman had employed the conventional inclusive-pairing strategy, partnering as his running mate Edy Yacoub, a Malay and official of an Islamic party, the United Development Party (PPP). The runner-up pair was the Malay incumbent mayor Awang Ischak and his Dayak deputy Raymundus Sailan, who garnered 35.6% of the votes.⁵ Although this can also be seen as an inclusive-pairing strategy, some of the Malay-Muslim votes had ostensibly been diverted to three other Malay mayoral candidates (Tanasaldy 2015, p. 459).

In the 2012 Singkawang pilkada, Awang Ischak turned the tables on Hasan Karman by being the only Malay-Muslim mayoral candidate, while Karman had to vie with two other Chinese mayoral candidates for votes from the Chinese constituency. Employing a subtle mix of inclusive-pairing and exclusive-pairing strategies by partnering the only Madurese candidate in the mayoral race, the Awang Ischak-Abdul Muthalib pair not only drew on ethnic Malay and Madurese votes, but being the only exclusively Muslim pair, also managed to concentrate the Muslim votes and won with 45.4% of the votes. Hasan Karman came in a close second with 42.3% of the votes, losing by less than 3,000 votes.⁶

THE 2017 CANDIDATES AND ELECTION RESULTS

The Singkawang pilkada held on 15 February 2017 saw four pairs of contenders. The issues they took up revolved around development that would benefit a broad cross-section of Singkawang's residents.⁷ Embedded in their rhetoric was also a commitment to ethnic harmony, in response to the history of ethnic violence in the province that involved Dayaks, Malays and Madurese.⁸

For the first time, two Chinese women were contesting the mayoral election. The winning candidate, Tjhai Chui Mie, was a known political figure, having been Speaker of the Singkawang People's Representative Assembly (DPRD, 2009-2014) and member of the DPRD for 2014-2019 until she resigned in 2016 to seek election as mayor.⁹ Her running mate, Irwan, is a Malay and career civil servant who has a military family background. The

⁵ "Hasan Karman - Edy R Yacoub Pemenang Pemilu Kota Singkawang", <http://kalbarkpu.blogspot.hk/2007/11/hasan-karman-edy-r-yacoub-pemenang.html>, accessed 13 March 2017.

⁶ "Pasangan Awang- Abdul Pemenang Pilkada Singkawang", <http://www.antarakalbar.com/berita/306533/pasangan-awang-abdul-pemenang-pilkada-singkawang>, accessed 13 March 2017.

⁷ "Empat Calon Walikota Pukau Pemilihan", <http://inspiratifkalbar.com/empat-calon-walikota-pukau-pemilih/>, accessed 22 March 2017.

⁸ For this history of ethnic violence, see Davidson (2008).

⁹ Besides her political positions, Tjhai Chui Mie has also gradually gained leadership positions within the Chinese community, in organizations such as the Taoist Council of Indonesia (Singkawang branch) and the Hakka Association of Indonesia (Singkawang branch).

pair had the strongest political party support going into the election, being backed by the Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle (PDI-P), National Democratic Party (Nasdem), People's Conscience Party (Hanura) and Democratic Party (PD), which together hold 46.67% of DPRD seats.

The other Chinese mayoral candidate, Tjhai Nyit Khim, also known as Malika, is the wife of incumbent mayor Awang Ischak. As a political newcomer with only 20% of the DPRD supporting her,¹⁰ she was seen by some as Awang's attempt to extend the tenure of the family's political clout, and by others as a weak contender fielded to divert some of the Chinese votes away from Tjhai Chui Mie and give Muslim candidates a better chance.¹¹ She had the support of the Chinese Customs and Culture Council (MABT)¹² and during the campaigns, there were arguments that her status as a Chinese Muslim and wife of a prominent Malay-Muslim leader would give her an advantage at maintaining harmony among the different ethno-religious groups. As it turned out, Tjhai Nyit Khim gained the least votes, at 13.5%.

Interestingly, there were no Malay mayoral candidates for this pilkada, although the deputy mayoral candidates were all Malay. The runner-up candidate who won 26.67% of the votes was the Madurese incumbent deputy mayor, Abdul Mutalib. His visibility as deputy mayor and support for him from the major Islamic parties would have given him the edge over Bugis independent candidate Andi Syarif, who came in third with 17.23% of the votes.¹³ These two candidates would have been appealing to their respective ethnic communities and the Muslim voting bloc for support.¹⁴

¹⁰ 20% DPRD support is the minimum required for nomination as a pilkada candidate by political parties.

¹¹ Such conspiracy theory rumours of dummy candidates are common for pilkada and has been circulating for every mayoral election in Singkawang since 2007.

¹² The MABT in Singkawang had enjoyed the patronage of Awang Ischak since his earlier term as mayor (2002-2007), which accounts for their support for Awang and his wife. However, the organization has also fragmented over the years and is now hardly seen as being representative of Chinese voters in Singkawang.

¹³ Abdul Mutalib had the support of the National Awakening Party (PKB), Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), National Mandate Party (PAN) and Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra).

¹⁴ The question of Malay representation is a complex one. As evident from Table 1, the indigenous Malay population in 2000 at 10.8%, is not large. However, this grew to 32.65% in 2010. Part of this growth may have come from Javanese identifying as Malays in the 2010 census, as seen from their decrease from 27.4% in 2000 to 9.35% in 2010. Such category shifting is not unexpected with respect to Malay ethnicity, and it is common to find Bugis identifying themselves as Malays, such as Andi Syarif who is a deputy chairman of the Malay Customs and Culture Council (MABM). In this case, since there are two Muslim mayoral candidates and four Malay deputy mayoral candidates, the MABM had refrained from pledging official support for any candidate. Thus, for the purpose of analysis, the more significant voting bloc would be the Muslim one rather than the Malay one.

Table 2 - Ethnic population and voting behavior by sub-district in Singkawang (2007, 2012 and 2017)

Ethnic and Muslim Population (2000 census) ¹⁵	Singkawang Sub-districts (%)					Total Singkawang (%)
	Central	West	East	North	South	
Chinese	24	65	23	19	58	42
Malay	18	8	6	14	4	11
Dayak	1	3	43	0	10	8
Muslim	74	30	26	81	30	49
Candidates and votes won in 2007 pilkada (%)						
Hasan Karman (Chinese)	24.9	62.0	33.9	20.1	55.0	41.8
Awang Ischak (Malay)	49.0	21.2	40.3	55.0	22.5	35.6
Other candidates	26.1	16.8	25.8	24.9	22.5	22.6
Candidates and votes won in 2012 pilkada (%)						
Hasan Karman (Chinese)	22.3	63.6	58.0	14.9	57.1	42.3
Awang Ischak (Malay)	66.0	26.5	23.1	72.8	30.0	45.4
Other candidates	11.8	9.8	18.9	12.3	12.9	12.3
Candidates and votes won in 2017 pilkada (%)						
Tjhai Nyit Khim alias Malika (Chinese-Muslim)	10.3	14.9	19.7	9.3	16.6	13.50
Tjhai Chui Mie (Chinese-Buddhist)	31.9	57.3	51.8	24.3	51.1	42.60
Abdul Mutalib (Madurese-Muslim)	33.9	16.6	12.3	47.3	19.3	26.67
Andi Syarif (Bugis-Muslim)	23.9	11.2	16.2	19.2	13.0	17.23

Source: Population (2000 census) and votes (%) for 2007 and 2012 pilkada excerpted from Tanasaldy (2015, p. 459). Data for votes (%) for 2017 pilkada drawn from the General Election Commission website for Singkawang, https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/t2/kalimantan_barat/kota_singkawang, accessed 13 March 2017.

While Tjhai Chui Mie's performance in terms of overall percentage of votes garnered did not differ much from Hasan Karman, the leading Chinese mayoral candidate for 2007 and 2012, the geographical distribution of their votes differed significantly. For both the 2007 and 2012 pilkada, Hasan Karman seemed to have drawn his support mainly from the Chinese vote banks in the five sub-districts, except for East Singkawang where he gained significant support from the Dayaks as well. In the case of Tjhai Chui Mie in 2017, it appeared that Tjhai Nyit Khim, the other Chinese candidate, managed to attract a small proportion of the Chinese votes, especially in the major Chinese constituencies of West and South Singkawang. However, it also seemed that Tjhai Chui Mie managed to attract some

¹⁵ The same data is not available for the 2010 census, and the analysis is instead based on the assumption that the ethnic distribution in the respective sub-districts does not differ too substantially between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, at least where the Chinese vote is concerned.

Malay-Muslim votes in Central and North Singkawang (where she did slightly better in comparison to Hasan Karman) and significant portions of Dayak votes in East Singkawang. Thus, while Hasan Karman's election results suggests that he depended mainly on Chinese and Dayak voters in both 2007 and 2012, Tjhai Chui Mie appears to have a more multi-ethnic support base, consisting primarily of the Chinese constituency, and secondarily of the Dayak and Malay voters. Her inclusive-pairing strategy had worked well, especially with the splitting of the Malay and Muslim votes. The other Chinese candidate, however, did chip away part of her Chinese support base.

ETHNIC CHINESE POLITICS AND THE JAKARTA DIMENSION

Perhaps what is unique to the Singkawang pilkada since direct election was instituted is the influence of Singkawang Chinese in Jakarta. The critical role of leading members of this community that have become successful in Jakarta is clearly demonstrated in the making and unmaking of the political career of Hasan Karman, the former mayor of Singkawang. Hasan Karman was born in Singkawang, but had then gone on to study in Java and build his career in Jakarta. When the opportunity for a directly-elected mayor came up in 2007, Hasan Karman parachuted back into Singkawang as a candidate with the tacit support of leaders in the Greater Singkawang Region Community Association (Permasis) based in Jakarta. He went on to win the election. When the 2012 mayoral election came up, a faction of Permasis decided not to support Hasan Karman, and instead urged another Chinese candidate, Nusantio Setiadi, to contest the election. Whether or not Nusantio actually did divert Chinese votes away from Hasan Karman, that was widely believed to be the case. The fact remains that Hasan Karman did fail in his bid for re-election.

With this precedent in the background, it was no surprise that both Chinese candidates for the 2017 pilkada acknowledged the influence of the Singkawang Chinese elite in Jakarta, and admitted that they had spent part of their campaign time in Jakarta to seek the support of this elite.¹⁶ This elite is not only a source for campaign funding; more importantly, they remain influential among their business partners, subordinates and kinsmen in Singkawang, and their endorsement can help candidates tap into the Chinese vote bank there.

Thus, while decentralization fuels the ascendancy of regional political and economic elites (Lane 2014), the case of Singkawang shows that community-level and business ties between Jakarta and regional locales can continue to have an influence on regional politics.

¹⁶ Interviews with Tjhai Nyit Khim (8 February 2017) and Tjhai Chui Mie (11 February 2017). Based on the Campaign Donations Report of both candidates, Tjhai Chui Mie appears to be more successful in garnering the support of the Singkawang Chinese elite in Jakarta.

SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

As with national politics, smear campaigns are common in regional politics, especially with respect to frontrunners. At one of Tjhai-Irwan's rallies, much effort was put into disavowing two rumours that had been circulating concerning Tjhai Chui Mie and Irwan respectively. The accusation against Tjhai Chui Mie was that her parents were connected with the communists in the past,¹⁷ and she had to spend time during the rally to explain her parents' background and deny the allegation.¹⁸ In broad terms, the fact that this rumour could be potentially damaging and found willing ears in some quarters suggests that, firstly, the communists, who had been demonized during the Suharto regime, had not yet been socially rehabilitated in Indonesia and, secondly, that Chinese could still be easily associated with them.

The accusation against Irwan is related to a newer national development. He had served as the deputy head of the Communication Forum for the Children of Retired Soldiers and Policemen, abbreviated as FKPPI, and was accused of being a leader of the similarly abbreviated FPI or Defenders of Islam Front, the Muslim vigilante group that has been mobilizing Muslims against Purnama in Jakarta. To clear up this misunderstanding, Irwan had members of the FKPPI parade themselves in their quasi-military uniform at the rally to show that they were different from the FPI. Thus, while the FPI purports to be a mobilizing force for conservative Islam in Jakarta and beyond, their reception in Singkawang had not been popular and in fact, in this particular episode, association with them appears to be a political liability.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTING ON INDONESIA FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF SINGKAWANG

The impact of ethno-religious affiliations on voting behavior is difficult to determine conclusively, but politicians assume an important connection between the two and act accordingly, as evident in the pairing strategies of candidates. Moreover, to the extent that these strategies were able to win votes in relation to the ethno-religious demography, those standing for election, whether in regional pilkada or the presidency in 2019, cannot avoid contending with these conventional idioms of identification in preparing their campaign strategies.

Through the Singkawang pilkada, we also see that while national politics have some sway over regional politics, decentralization allows national trends to be inflected differently. One arena where this is evident is the alliance between political parties. In Singkawang, we see that the alliance between PDI-P, Nasdem and Hanura in the national parliament is replicated

¹⁷ The West Kalimantan branch of the Indonesian Communist Party was unique in that it consisted mainly of Chinese and was active in the province till the 1970s (Hui 2011, pp. 167-169).

¹⁸ This kind of accusation against Chinese candidates is not new, and it was one that was brought against the Chinese deputy governor of West Kalimantan, Christiandy Sanjaya, to disrupt his assumption of office (Tanasaldy 2015, p. 461).

in the support behind Tjhai-Irwan. However, the regional alliance also includes a party that is not in the national alliance, namely, PD, mainly brokered through the personal relationships of local leaders that represent these parties. This continues the trend whereby alliances and enmities between parties on the national stage are not replicated on the regional stage. Moreover, the negative reception of the FPI in Singkawang also demonstrates the limits of national-level movements in engaging regional political actors.

Finally, Chinese Indonesians in Indonesian politics face the challenge of showing that good governance transcends ethno-religious backgrounds while remaining sensitive to these conventional affiliations. This challenge is faced not only by the first Chinese woman to be elected mayor, but also by Purnama as he seeks a second term as governor of Indonesia's capital city, and even by President Joko Widodo in the 2019 presidential election.

References

Ananta, Aris, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, M. Sairi Hasbullah, Nur Budi Handayani and Agus Pramono. *Demography of Indonesia's Ethnicity*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015.

Arifin, Evi Nurvidya, Aris Ananta, Dwi Retno Wilujeng Wahyu Utami, Nur Budi Handayani, Agus Pramono and Ari Purbowati. "Statistics on Ethnicity in Indonesia's Districts: Based on 2010 Indonesia's Population Census". Unpublished manuscript and database, 2014.

Aspinall, Edward. "Democratization and Ethnic Politics in Indonesia: Nine Theses". *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11 (2011): 289-319.

Davidson, Jamie S. *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

Hui, Yew-Foong. *Strangers at Home: History and Subjectivity among the Chinese Communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Lane, Max R. *Decentralization and Its Discontents: An Essay on Class, Political Agency and National Perspective in Indonesian Politics*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

Tanasaldy, Taufiq. "A Decade after the Reform: Political Activism of the Chinese of West Kalimantan, Indonesia". *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 4 (2015): 446-479.

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, and Veena Nair</p>
---	--	--