PERSPECTIVE

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Constructing Images: Campaign Consultancy in the Batu (East Java) Local Election

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The ability of political party machines to deliver votes is waning in Indonesia. Candidates at all levels are relying more on private political consultants.

- Consultants usually hold little or no allegiance to any political party. They are highly mobile and well sought-after for their work, particularly as they accumulate working experience under varied electoral settings.

- A team of consultants involved in the 2017 Batu local election revealed their detailed work in creating a specific image for their lesser-known candidates.

- Consultants focus on boosting voters' recognition of their candidates and enhancing their candidates' likeability. Policy positions are largely immaterial.

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INTRODUCTION

A far cry from the main stage of Jakarta, Batu is a constituency with less than 150,000 voters. However, its local election this year was the only one to take place in East Java Province, a province that serves as a crucial battleground for parties during elections due to its electoral size.[1] Although the Batu mayoral seat is far removed from the presidential seat, unlike Jakarta's gubernatorial position, East Java may well be an important determinant in the 2019 national elections. The upcoming East Java gubernatorial election is already widely discussed as an important chapter in the 2018 round of local elections (*pilkada*). For this reason, the Batu election is worth a closer look.

Throughout Indonesia, public image has been trending as an increasingly strong determinant of voter support. Batu is no exception. This article uses the case of Batu to investigate the service rendered by political consultants in campaign teams (*tim sukses*), a phenomenon that is on the rise in the country.[2] While consultants in Batu worked hard to project a certain image of candidates that improved their chances, their work was nevertheless still superficial and limited to helping these candidates understand voter sentiments and using that to improve the accountability and electability of these candidates.

BATU: CANDIDATES AND CONTEXT

Map: Indonesia (with enlarged location of Batu in East Java)

Source: modified from Google Maps

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[1] Of about 188 million voters in the 2014 elections, more than 100 million were in Java. West Java, with 33 million, was the province with the largest electorate, followed by East Java with more than 30 million.

[2] Candidates' *tim sukses* (campaign team, success team) typically consists of a variety of vote brokers, who could be party politicians, local figures, professional consultants, or volunteers.

Batu is a small city of 200,000 located about 100 km from Surabaya — the provincial capital of East Java.[3] Largely agricultural and tourism-driven, Batu used to be a regency of Malang before becoming a municipality in 2001. Its mayor for 2007-2017, Edi Rumpoko, is a popular figure in East Java among supporters of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan). Finding his replacement in the only local election being held this year in East Java encouraged many local figures to step forth to run for his seat. The table below summarises the profiles of these candidates.

Picture: Candidate pairs in Batu Election 2017

1	2	3	4
Rudi (apple farmer and environmentalist), Sujono (entrepreneur and artist)	Dewanti Rumpoko (incumbent's wife – ran in Malang's regency election 2015 but lost), Punjul Santoso (incumbent vice mayor of Batu)	Hairuddin/Gus Din (businessman working on farming and trade), Hendra Sonatha (entrepreneur, son of Golkar politician who ran for Batu mayorship and lost)	Abdul Majid (civil servant, runs a clinic for alternative healing), Kasmuri (high school teacher)
PAN (National Mandate Party), Partai Nasdem (National Democrat Party), and Partai Hanura (People's Conscience Party)	PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle), Partai Gerindra (Great Indonesian Movement Party), and Partai Golkar (Functional Group Party)	PKB (National Awakening Party) and Partai Demokrat (Democrat Party)	Independent

Source: www.kpu-kotabatu.go.id

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[3] Batu's budget in 2015 amounted to about 800 billion (SGD 85 million). The city sits at 800m above sea level, and is an ideal site for resorts and recreation. It is famous for its fruits and vegetables. Its population is primarily Javanese.

Each pair had their own campaign team (*tim sukses*),[4] but it is the one working for Pair 3 which warrants close study with regards to the role of political consultants. The other pairs employed mainly party officials or volunteers.

THE QUICK EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL CONSULTANCY

The trend of employing political consultants in Indonesia's elections began in 1999, when numerous new political parties and somewhat-rebranded incumbents had the freedom to introduce themselves to voters. Advertising agencies were employed to design advertisements for parties and since then, the role of these consultants have been evolving.[5] As the introduction of direct presidential (2004) and local elections (2005) shifted much of the power from party machineries to candidates and voters, polls and political consulting increasingly have had their work scope widened. The capacity of party machinery was limited in understanding voters and electorates, while voters have certain ideals that they want candidates to meet before they vote for them. These ideals have become more 'concrete', 'performance-based', and detached from party loyalty, and thus polls and polling agencies grew popular.[6] Surveys provide numbers and specific notions that politicians can study, customise and base their campaigns on. Recognising the importance of this data, parties have even embedded the employment of pollsters as part of their official policies in choosing electable candidates for elections.[7] Direct local elections, where the work scope is smaller and numbers/frequency higher (with about 530 regions and provinces holding separate elections), greatly proliferated the use of polls and consultants.[8] Consequently, these trends have somewhat institutionalised the service of these highly dynamic and mobile networks of consultants and pollsters.

Yet, much of the analysis of these trends have been centred on Jakarta, where the national mass media is based. While many studies note that political consultancies have been employed all over Indonesia,[9] not much is known about the specifics of their services. This

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[4] Various interviews conducted in February 2017 revealed that one pair could even have two *tim sukses* for each of the candidates. Rudi's team was called *Koncone Rudi* (Javanese for Rudi's friends), while Sujono's is called *Bolone Dewe* (Javanese for Own Allies).

[5] For detailed discussion on this, please see Wahyu Prasetiawan, "Image Construction in Politics: Political Advertisement in the 2009 Indonesian Election", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 27, No. 2, October 2012, pp. 310-327.

[6] Marcus Mietzner, "Political opinion polling in post-authoritarian Indonesia: Catalyst or obstacle to democratic consolidation?", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 165, no. 1. (2009), p. 96.

[7] Agus Trihartono, "Beyond Measuring the Voice of the People: The Evolving Role of Political Polling in Indonesia's Local Leader Elections", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 3 (1), 2014, pp. 151-182.

[8] For full discussion on this, please see Muhammad Qodari, "The Professionalisation of Politics: The Growing Role of Polling Organisations and Political Consultants", in Aspinall and Mietzner (eds.), *Problems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), pp. 122-140.

[9] See for example: Mietzner (2009), Qodari (2010), and Wahyu Prasetyawan, Image Construction in Politics : Political Advertisement in the 2009 Indonesian Election, Sojourn, Volume 2, Number 2, pp. 310-327, 2012.

article intends to fill this gap by focusing on Batu, where there was a discrepancy in popularity between the incumbents and their rivals. While some of the candidates already had a certain level of popularity, it was clear that the pair to beat was Dewanti-Punjul — who both already enjoyed greater exposure due to their positions as the mayor's wife and deputy mayor respectively.[10] As such, the campaign teams of the other pairs had to work hard. While Pair 1's *tim sukses* members were primarily party activists, and Pair 4 seemed to be doing much of the campaign work themselves, Pair 3's team employed greater professionalism in managing the campaign. The rest of this article focuses on strategies suggested for the candidates, as shared with the author by two political consultants.[11]

CREATING ELECTABILITY FOR UNKNOWNS

Essentially, the task of a success team to increase electability depends on two factors: whether the candidate's name is known by voters (recognisability), and whether he/she is likeable (likeability). The work is easier when he/she is well-known and likeable — and it gets harder working for an unknown. [12] Yet, determining whether one is either known or likeable can also be complicated. While parties and candidates widely used surveys to gauge popularity or electability, local knowledge — usually on socio-economic conditions of the electorate, neighbourhood business networks, local trends, etc. — is equally important to understand what voters want. As such, in *pilkada*, candidates want experienced campaign consultants who preferably have local knowledge in their *tim sukses.*

Two such consultants agreed to share the various methods they employed to make an unknown *paslon* (*pasangan calon*, candidate pair) gain electability. The first, Mr S, introduced himself as a *karyawan* (employee) without specifying who his employer was. The second, Mr M, claimed that he was an entrepreneur who got involved in politics merely for fun (*penggembira*). While their work was financially compensated, they stated that part of their motivation to work for the candidates was that they were strongly against the incumbent whom both claimed had used government money to engage in vote-buying.
To draw attention away from the incumbents, they believed in the importance of culture and image.

Boosting Recognisability: Introducing the Candidate

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[10] See for example "Dewanti-Punjul Unggul di Polling Radar Batu dan Survei UB: Pilkada Kota Batu 2017", *jawapos.com*, 22 January 2017, http://www.jawapos.com/read/2017/01/22/104088/dewanti-punjul-unggul-di-polling-radar-batu-dan-survei-ub accessed 12 May 2017; Hasil Survei Pilkada Batu: Survei LSI Denny JA: Dewanti-Punjul Unggul Jauh, *Malang Voice*, http://malangvoice.com/survei-lsi-denny-ja-dewanti-punjul-unggul-jauh/, accessed 12 May 2017.
[11] When asked about the size of the team, each pair answered that they have wide established networks going all the way down to the smallest community units – which would make the team number in the hundreds. The core of team is much smaller, typically consisting of less than 10 members. In this team, one member is rather well-known as a vote-buyer with strong local influence, networks, and deep pockets
[12] Qodari, *op cit.*

To achieve an impactful public introduction for the candidate, the team was convinced that they must "dare to be different" (*harus berani lain*). In the words of Mr S, their task was to transform *tidak kenal* (do/does not know), to *kenal* (know/familiar with), to *suka* (like), and eventually to *memilih* (vote (for)). Mr M explained that the team prepared a campaign schedule for the candidates based on the need, first of all, to improve their name recognition among voters. As such, the pair had to visit and work on each of Batu's 24 villages (which consisted of 60,000 households) within 2.5 months, and they deliberately scheduled the visits purely as impromptu ones (*murni blusukan*).[13] Such an approach meant that they did not come as invitees to a specific event, but instead made unannounced appearances at community gatherings. They would at times, however, organise events and invite locals to them.

As their candidates were relatively unknown, the first step for them was to meet as many voters as possible, and create a lasting impact with eye contact, steady handshakes, and taps on shoulders. To amplify the effects of their visits, they initially employed about 200-300 people to follow the candidates around wherever they went, in order to create a level of sensation and draw crowds. Such a tactic, although quite costly (it was implied that they compensated members of the entourage), minimised the risk of the visits not drawing any attention at all.[14]

"Manufacturing" Likeability

Besides such visits, the team paid special attention to creating the right image for the candidates. Their strategy was to reflect on the existing image of the candidates and think of how to tweak it according to the events that they were attending. Gus Din's image as a cleric and religious figure — although overall positive — still needed complementing through the highlighting of certain other elements of his personality.

Sharing an early experience working for a Muslim candidate in an election in Christian-majority Tomohon (North Sulawesi), Mr M explained that a Muslim candidate in such an electorate has to adopt specific strategies to appeal to the Christian-majority voters. This candidate was made to visit churches, and in such situations frequently used typically Christian greetings and phrases such as "Shalom" and "Praise the Lord (Puji Tuhan)". It is important to note here that Indonesians generally do not use religious-specific words associated with religions other than their own. The approach to garner support across religious boundaries for Muslims using this method was indeed unconventional, and possibly frowned upon by other Muslims. This choice of campaign strategy also demonstrated Mr M's attention to local demography in his effort to capture sympathy beyond religious boundaries and normal practices.

In Batu however, for Gus Din who hailed from PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, National Awakening Party), Mr M explains there was a certain image that the team needed to build. Typically, a candidate from this party evokes certain stereotypes such as being fond of

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[13] Dewanti, when running for Malang regency in late 2015, also chose the same tactic when visiting villages. Unlike in Batu, she was relatively unknown in Malang.

[14] This tactic is also commonly used in rallies and televised campaigns.

tahlilan. [15] But in order to broaden his appeal beyond the traditionalist, pious and conservative, the team tried to project an image that is more fashionable and hip. For different events, the team customised the appearance, complete set of outfit, choice of words, and even determined the angles for photos taken to document the events. Before visiting a particular village, the team would learn specific details about the community. Without specifying the village, Mr M explained that he asked the candidates to wear a *kopiah* (a headgear unique to Muslims in Southeast Asian countries). While wearing the headgear may project an image of devoutness, the team would at times suggest specific accessories to tone down a look that may be too pious — for instance by adding sunglasses. Such tactic was done to widen the candidates' appeal to attract the attention of young, less conservative Muslims.

The MoUs: When all else fails

Noticeably, the team made little effort beyond orchestrating first impressions and projecting an attractive image for their candidates. When asked about policies, the team was reluctant to elaborate the candidate's *visi misi* (literally vision and mission, referring to candidate's plan for specific programmes if elected) — saying that they are as stated in the media.[16] Initially reluctant to engage when pressed further about whether they have considered vote-buying, they became willing after some reassurance that the practice was no longer a taboo. The team explained that if needed, they would employ what they called a "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)." Commonly used as a term for official agreement, the team's use of the term referred to contracts between them and a specific community group. These contracts would usually come into use when sensing that the candidates have failed to attract the sympathy of certain groups (in the words of the consultants: *kalau hatinya tidak kena/*when we fail to win over their sympathy). The contract typically involves a promise on the part of the group to vote for the candidate, with the candidate agreeing to some

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[15] *Tahlilan* is a Muslim prayer session. Similar with *slametan* (a Javanese communal feast to mark special events such as birthdays, *hajj* trips, or deaths) and a pilgrimage to tombs of sacred people, *tahlilan* has been seen as a traditional Javanese ritual and has been the subject of various debates on whether it is Islamic or a form of heresy. It is increasingly put under scrutiny since there is now a move towards ridding Islam of local influences. See for example Ahmad Syarif Syechabubakr, "Campaigning on religious nationalism", *New Mandala*, 28 May 2014, http://www.newmandala.org/campaigning-on-religious-nationalism/ ; Jewel Topsfield, "Indonesian summit to promote 'renovated' Islam in challenge to global *jihadis*", The Sydney Morning Herald, 8 May 2016, http://www.libforall.org/lfa/media/2016/sydney-morning-herald_indonesian-summit-to-promote-renovated-islam_05-08-16.pdf, accessed 11 May 2017.
[16] Pair 1's programme was focused on developing tourism and improving human and natural resource, as well as honest governance that prioritises people's prosperity. Pair 2 wished to make Batu an agrarian icon city that prioritised on organic farming, as well as improve tourism by maintaining and restoring the available facilities. Pair 3 wanted Batu to be a blessed, harmonious, hard-working, and safe city. Pair 4 envisioned Batu as a city that was cultured, religious, beautiful, creative, clean, safe, harmonious, superior, and healthy. See "Pagi ini Warga Kota Batu Mulai Mencoblos Pemimpin Pilihannya", *detiknews*, 15 February 2017, https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-3422949/pagi-ini-warga-kota-batu-mulai-mencoblos-pemimpin-pilihannya, accessed 16 May 2017.

compensation for the vote. The compensation is usually something tangible,[17] and to ensure the group keep their promise, this compensation would be made only after the votes from the polling station were tallied.

Although illegal, the deployment of vote-buying methods is still widespread [18] — capitalising on the poor socio-economic conditions of most voters. This particular strategy also signals adisconnect between voters' aspiration for concrete long-term policies and candidates' programmes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: RESULTS AND LESSONS

The current work scope of political consultants has involved interpreting and reacting on what voters want in the candidates, and projecting these ideas in moulding their candidate's image. Although in the case of Batu, incumbency proved too strong to compete against and the candidate discussed here only managed third place,[19] the efforts of these consultants are still noteworthy. Indeed, their very employment is an indication of a growing professionalisation of campaign teams. Also, in the case of the candidate-pair discussed here, if poll numbers are any indication, the consultants have improved their electability.[20] This could be utilised for running in future elections.

The increasing employment of these consultants has somewhat replaced the weakening function of party machinery in elections. It also, to a certain extent, bridges voters' aspirations and the candidates. At the current stage, however, the effects of consultants' work remain superficial. Beyond moulding and customising appearances for certain groups of voters, the team managed little more. Striking vote-buying deals with various groups only met voters' temporary demands or needs. Meanwhile, discussion with the team reveals little — if any — effort to address specific programmatic policies that resembles a clear leadership vision. As such, the importance of personal charisma and appeal in Indonesia's local elections looks set to continue as the main point of attraction for voters — further perpetuating the employment of these consultants in the future.

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[17] Although compensation could be money, more commonly it is something specific that a particular community group needs. For instance, prayer equipment or copies of Al-Quran for prayer groups, and sports equipment for youth groups.

[18] See for example Zubaidah Nazeer, "Banned, but vote-buying still plagues Indonesia's election process", The Jakarta Post, 17 March 2014, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/03/17/banned-vote-buying-still-plagues-indonesias-election-process.html, accessed 30 May 2017.A random method of vote buying typically involves inserting a certain amount of money in envelopes with the name of a certain candidate without any extra effort to ensure that the person receiving would really vote for that candidate. For a detailed discussion on this, please see Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati, Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016).

[19] Dewanti-Punjul won with 35 percent votes, followed by Rudi-Sujono with 21 percent. Hairuddin-Angga obtained less than 18 percent of votes, and the independent candidates got 17 percent.

[20] Considering that the figures were 3.5 percent and 11.3 percent around November 2016 to January 2017, the final result of 18 percent in February 2017 is a noteworthy improvement.