Social Capital, Incumbent Performance, and the Declining Salience of Identity Politics: Evidence from the 2024 East Belitung Regional Election

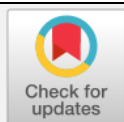**Ranto *** iD

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the declining salience of identity politics in local electoral competition by analyzing the victory of an ethnic Chinese candidate in the 2024 East Belitung regional election. Drawing on a quantitative survey of 400 respondents, the research examines how ethnic identity, social capital, and incumbent performance interact to shape voter behavior in a multi-ethnic, predominantly Muslim society. Contrary to dominant explanations that emphasize ethnic identity as the primary determinant of electoral outcomes, the findings demonstrate that strong social capital, reflected in high levels of interethnic trust and tolerance, combined with negative evaluations of incumbent performance significantly weakened the role of ethnic sentiment in voting decisions. The study shows that voters were more inclined to prioritize governance performance, inclusiveness, and perceived responsiveness over shared ethnic or religious identity. By integrating perspectives from political representation, voting behavior, and social capital theory, this research argues that robust social trust and poor incumbent performance can function as critical mechanisms that reduce the mobilizing power of identity politics in local democracy. The East Belitung case provides empirical evidence that minority candidates can successfully overcome primordial barriers when institutional performance and social cohesion outweigh identity-based appeals.

1. Introduction

East Belitung and the ethnic Chinese communities are two elements that are almost inseparable in everyday socio-political life. In the context of local politics, the success of Basuki Tjahja Purnama, widely known as Ahok, marked a historic moment in Indonesia as he became the first ethnic Chinese politician to win a local political contest through the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) mechanism in East Belitung Regency (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Belitung Timur, 2023). Following Ahok's election, subsequent Pilkada contests in the region, popularly known as Bumi Laskar Pelangi, also resulted in the victories of other ethnic Chinese politicians, including Basuri Tjahja Purnama and Kamarudin Muten (Afa), indicating a recurring electoral pattern in local politics (Akbar, 2018; Ananta et al., 2004).

If observed, since the Pilkada took place in 2005-2024, 5 elections have been held, and Chinese politicians have won more often than Malay politicians, namely 3 times, compared to Malay politicians, who have only won 2 times. What is more, the victory of Chinese politicians is in the barn, and the Malay voter base is Muslim, with a total of 95.78% (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Belitung Timur, 2023).

The phenomenon of ethnic Chinese participation in post-reform Indonesian politics has attracted growing scholarly attention. A range of empirical studies demonstrates that the mobilization of ethnic-based identity has played a decisive role in determining electoral success in local political contests in Indonesia (Lingkaran Survei Indonesia, 2008; Mietzner, 2019; Saragih, 2018; Setara Institute, 2017; Susanti, 2021).

This study examined the complexity of the relationships among identity, social capital, and government performance in local democracy, which are often ignored or treated separately. Referring to the experience of the success of ethnic Chinese politicians in winning political competitions through the mechanism of Pilkada in East Belitung, this study is expected to provide another perspective beyond the explanation of the success of Chinese politicians in winning political positions in the local executive arena (Regent/Mayor) which tends to be seen through the analytical framework of winning strategies-from personal branding, building cross-ethnic coalitions, and utilizing social capital and capital (Akbar, 2018; Saragih, 2018; Susanti, 2021). Therefore, within the framework of analyzing political representation as a whole, this study not only explains the successes and failures of Chinese politicians in the Pilkada but also strengthens the argument for true political representation, which requires substantial and symbolic work abilities in a society with diverse ethnic backgrounds in the context of local democracy.

1.2. Ethnic Chinese Political Participation in the Post-Suharto Era

Some familiar names, such as Ahok, Rudianto Tjen, Krismiyati (Kristina Lim), Charles Honoris, Eva Kusuma Sundari, Budiman Sudjatmiko, Maruar Sirait, Djan Faridz, and Jefrie Geovanie, attest to the presence of ethnic Chinese politicians at the national level to date. In fact, the figure of Hary Tanoesoedibjo, who has founded the Perindo Party and serves as its Chairman, further emphasizes that ethnic Chinese politicians in Indonesia are truly ready to appear on the national political stage.

The same phenomenon also occurs in the regions. In Bangka Belitung, for example, ethnic Chinese politicians are quite dominant, as evidenced by their greater success in competing for political positions than Malay politicians. For the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR), the Bangka Belitung Electoral District has 3 seats; 2 are occupied by Chinese politicians, namely Rudianto Tjen and Bambang Pati Jaya. In a smaller context, ethnic Chinese female politician Me Hoa was also able to create a new record for successfully serving as

Chairperson of the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (DPRD) of Central Bangka Regency in the 2019-2024 period, from among female politicians. In Belitung Regency, Vina Cristyn Ferani also secured a political position as Chairperson of the Belitung DPRD for the 2024-2029 leadership period.

Likewise, the positions of Regent and Vice Regent in the Bangka Belitung region have shown the success of ethnic Chinese politicians in occupying the most prestigious strategic political positions at the regional level. The election of Ahok as Regent of East Belitung (2005 election), Basuri Tjahja Purnama (2010 election in East Belitung), Markus as Vice Regent of West Bangka (2015 election), Isyak Meirobi as Vice Regent of Belitung (2020 election), Markus as Regent of West Bangka (2024 election), and Afa as Regent of East Belitung (2024 election) further confirms that the existence of Chinese politicians is very competitive.

The illustration above shows that the increasing participation of ethnic Chinese politicians in electoral competition indicates a widening space for individual political participation in Indonesia. The success of ethnic Chinese politicians in occupying political positions at various levels can be explained through theoretical approaches in political science, particularly theories of political representation and institutional analysis, which emphasize that the structure of local democratic institutions enables candidates from minority groups to compete effectively as long as they can comply with formal rules, secure access to political vehicles such as parties, and manage public perceptions through issue-based campaigns oriented toward public interests (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Pitkin, 1967).

1.3. Political Representation in Local Democracy

In modern democratic theory, political representation cannot be understood as a singular concept; rather, it must be approached through multiple dimensions. Representation is commonly distinguished into descriptive and substantive forms, which together capture both symbolic presence and actual political action on behalf of those represented. Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which political actors mirror social identities such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. In contrast, substantive representation emphasizes the capacity of representatives to articulate and advance the public interest through concrete political actions and policy outcomes (Pitkin, 1967).

Political representation can be further classified into four distinct types, commonly referred to as Pitkin's typology. The first is formalistic representation, which emphasizes the legal and procedural aspects through which political actors acquire legitimacy to hold public office. The second is descriptive representation, which concerns the extent to which representatives share and reflect social identity characteristics, such as religion, ethnicity, gender, or social class, present within the broader structure of society (Pitkin, 1967).

Third, symbolic representation. Symbolic representation emphasizes society's perception and acceptance of symbols or candidates for representation, such as women's affirmation policies in parliament. Fourth, substantive representation. Substantive representation focuses on political action and public policy, and on the ability to capture and carry out the public interest's aspirations to fight for common interests.

In the context of this research, the incumbent candidate, Burhanudin, failing to secure his position as regent for the next period indicates his inability to defend the aspirations and interests of the people in East Belitung during his tenure. In fact, if we follow the logic of descriptive and symbolic representation, Burhanudin is more likely to win the political competition in the 2024 Pilkada yesterday. In fact, Burhanudin's chances of gaining majority support from voters in East Belitung were only 34.11% (23,301 votes) of the total number of

voters who exercised their political rights in the 2024 Pilkada. As seen in the next section, the assessment of the people of East Belitung regarding the Regent Burhanudin's performance is only 25.8%. The majority of people who are dissatisfied or less satisfied with Regent's performance is 63.75%. This means that Burhanudin is considered by the public not to represent, at all, his presence in a substantive way in the issues developing in East Belitung.

In contrast, the success of Afa-who was elected as regent in East Belitung by gaining majority support of 65.86% or 44,949 votes, cannot be separated from the political support of the majority of voters who provided political support that not only voted based on ethnic background but also considered the capacity and performance of politicians available as options.

1.4. Ethnicity Sentiment and Voting Behavior in Indonesia

To examine issues such as ethnic sentiment in Pilkada elections, it is necessary to employ a well-established, widely accepted framework for analyzing voting behavior. One of the core perspectives within this framework is the sociological approach, which explains voting behavior as being shaped by social and demographic characteristics, including shared ethnic identity, religion, culture, occupation, gender, and membership in particular social groups. From this perspective, voters tend to support candidates who share similar social identities, as such similarities foster a sense of affinity and representation. In this sense, voters from the Malay community are more likely to support Malay candidates, while voters from the Chinese community tend to favor candidates of ethnic Chinese background (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

A second major perspective within voting behavior analysis is the psychological approach, which emphasizes the role of party identification in shaping political support. From this perspective, voters who develop a strong psychological attachment to a political party, both in terms of ideological affinity and alignment with its programs, are more likely to consistently support that party in electoral contests (Campbell et al., 1960).

A third perspective in voting behavior analysis is the rational choice approach, which conceptualizes voters as rational actors who make political decisions based on calculations of personal costs and benefits. From this viewpoint, electoral support is shaped by voters' assessments of whether a candidate or political party is likely to deliver material or policy benefits that align with their interests. Consequently, voters are more inclined to support candidates who propose programs such as subsidies or other distributive policies that promise direct and tangible benefits to the electorate (Downs, 1957).

In the context of Indonesian politics, these three approaches have substantially shaped scholarly analyses of voting behavior. The sociological approach has been widely used to explain voters' decision-making processes by emphasizing the role of social identities and group affiliations, as demonstrated in numerous empirical studies of Indonesian elections (Ananta et al., 2004; Gaffar, 1992; King, 2001). Research adopting the psychological approach highlights the importance of party identification in influencing voters' political choices, showing that partisan attachment continues to play a role in shaping electoral behavior in Indonesia (Gaffar, 1992; Liddle & Mujani, 2007). In addition, the rational choice approach has been applied through political economy perspectives, emphasizing how voters' evaluations of material interests and policy benefits influence their electoral decisions (Liddle & Mujani, 2007).

In the context of field research in East Belitung, these three approaches are also evident in examining the dynamics of East Belitung people's voting behavior in the 2024 elections. Support for Afa among non-Muslim voters shows the operation of sociological variables (see Charts 2 and 3). Likewise, Burhanudin, who received support from Muslim voters, confirms the

same phenomenon (see Charts 2 and 3). Support for candidates obtained from voters due to consideration of nomination by certain political parties also confirms the operation of the psychological approach, although the influence is very small, as seen in the 2024 Pilkada in East Belitung (see **Chart 5**). Finally, the evaluation of incumbent candidates' performance by voters who are not satisfied with Burhanudi's performance as regent is reflected in very limited support. The low evaluation of the regent's performance was one of the reasons Burhanudin failed to retain his position as regent for a second term (see Charts 5 and 6).

Recent empirical studies indicate that ethnic Chinese politicians have secured electoral victories in local elections by strategically mobilizing identity resources while simultaneously building cross-ethnic coalitions. Evidence from Singkawang shows that the effective use of identity capital combined with strong social networks contributed significantly to electoral success in Pilkada contests (Susanti, 2021). Similar findings from West Kalimantan demonstrate that ethnic-based identity mobilization played a decisive role in shaping electoral outcomes involving Chinese politicians (Hui, 2017). In Tanjungbalai, electoral success was also achieved by a politician of Chinese descent in the 2016 Pilkada; however, this case was mediated by religious conversion, as the candidate had embraced Islam and thereby became part of the religious majority, reducing potential identity-based resistance (Saragih, 2018).

In contrast, studies of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election highlight the vulnerability of ethnic Chinese candidates amid intense identity mobilization. Research shows that Ahok's electoral defeat was driven by the structured and systematic activation of religious and ethnic identity politics (Setara Institute, 2017). Observers of that election also noted that Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's double minority status, as both an ethnic Chinese and a Christian, made him a target of campaigns that leveraged both ethnic and religious sentiments, often beyond substantive policy issues, reinforcing the salience of identity markers in highly polarized political contexts.

Empirical research conducted by the Lingkaran Survei Indonesia found that ethnic factors exerted a strong influence on electoral outcomes in gubernatorial elections in West Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, and Bangka Belitung. However, the same study also indicates that, compared to other regions, the salience of ethnic considerations in Bangka Belitung was relatively weaker, although ethnicity continued to shape voter behavior to a certain extent in the 2007 Pilkada (Lingkaran Survei Indonesia, 2008).

More broadly, identity politics is deeply embedded in the social structures of plural societies, which are often segmented along primordial lines. This tendency has intensified in the post-1998 reform era, as the expansion of electoral democracy created wider opportunities for the mobilization of ethnic and other identity-based appeals in local political contestation (Mietzner, 2019).

This pattern confirms that a series of paradoxes characterizes the political participation of ethnic Chinese politicians in Indonesia. On the one hand, ethnic identity has been deliberately downplayed or avoided in highly polarized contexts such as Jakarta, where identity-based mobilization proved politically costly (Setara Institute, 2017). On the other hand, ethnic identity has been strategically emphasized as a source of electoral advantage in local elections, particularly in contexts such as Singkawang, where mobilizing Chinese identity has contributed to electoral success (Hui, 2017; Susanti, 2021).

This paradoxical pattern can be explained by differences in ethnic composition across electoral contexts. In regions with a relatively dominant Chinese voter base, such as Singkawang, the explicit use of ethnic identity tends to be more advantageous and functions as an effective winning strategy. Conversely, in regions where Chinese voters do not constitute a

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dominant demographic group, overt appeals to ethnic identity are more likely to be avoided, as they offer limited electoral benefits and may even generate political backlash.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design with descriptive-analytical techniques to examine the complex relationship among identity, social capital, and incumbent performance within the context of local democracy. The analysis focuses on the 2024 East Belitung regional election, particularly the electoral victory of Kamarudin Muten (Afa), as an empirical case through which these dynamics can be observed.

Primary data were collected through a structured survey administered directly to respondents. The sampling process used a multi-stage random sampling technique, enabling the selection of respondents proportionally across sub-districts in East Belitung Regency. In total, 400 respondents were successfully interviewed, providing a representative sample of the local electorate. Field data collection was conducted over five days, from 12 to 16 November 2024.

The demographic profile of respondents was designed to reflect the population characteristics of East Belitung Regency as reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics (*Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS*). As shown in **Table 1**, the sample distribution closely mirrors official population data in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, and geographical distribution across sub-districts.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Residents and Respondents in East Belitung

Category	BPS (%)	Sample (%)
Gender*		
Male	51.46	51.40
Female	48.54	48.60
Residence		
Rural	100.00	100.00
Urban	–	–
Ethnicity		
Malay	71.89	79.80
Chinese	11.54	8.30
Others	16.57	11.90
Religion		
Islam	95.78	93.80
Buddhism	2.24	2.30
Confucian	0.14	2.80
Protestant	1.31	1.00
Catholic	0.90	0.30
Distribution of Voters by Sub-district*		
Dendang	8.67	8.66
Simpang Pesak	6.64	6.64
Gantung	22.32	22.31
Simpang Renggiang	5.91	5.91
Manggar	30.81	30.81

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Category	BPS (%)	Sample (%)
Damar	10.40	10.40
Kelapa Kampit	15.25	15.24
Total	**100.00**	**100.00**

Notes:

*Gender distribution is based on population data excluding the permanent voter list (DPT).
**Sub-district distribution is based on BPS, Belitung Timur Dalam Angka 2023* (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Belitung Timur, 2023).

This study operationalizes social capital through indicators of social tolerance and interethnic trust, including perceptions of mutual trust in daily social relations and attitudes toward ethnic diversity as non-threatening or non-detrimental. Ethnicity-based sentiment is measured by respondents' consideration of candidates' ethnic backgrounds, their willingness to support candidates from different ethnic groups, and their acceptance of leadership by non-Muslim candidates. Incumbent performance is assessed through respondents' evaluations of the incumbent regent's performance, reflecting retrospective voting considerations commonly used in studies of electoral behavior.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1. History of Pilkada in East Belitung

To provide an analytical foundation for understanding the political dynamics of the 2024 East Belitung regional election, it is necessary first to examine the historical trajectory of *Pilkada* implementation in the region. A longitudinal overview of previous elections reveals important patterns related to candidate competition, ethnic background, dynastic politics, and incumbent performance. **Table 2** summarizes the number of candidate pairs and election winners across *Pilkada* cycles in East Belitung.

Table 2. Number of Candidate Pairs in the East Belitung Regional Elections

Election Year	Candidate Pairs	Winning Candidate Pair
2005	1. Basuki Tjahja Purnama (Ahok) – Khairul Efendi 2. Abdul Hadi Adjin – M. Arsyad Hasan 3. Abdul Fatah – M. Azrul Azwar 4. Sansirwan – Ali Ansara 5. Faisal Yusuf Madani – Hasfiniwyodi	Basuki Tjahja Purnama (Ahok) – Khairul Efendi
2010	1. Basuri Tjahja Purnama – Zarkani 2. Usmandi Andeska – Yusti Erlina 3. Abdul Haji Adjir – Sayono 4. Haryoso – Ruswandi 5. Leo Fernando – Nurul Huda	Basuri Tjahja Purnama – Zarkani
2015	1. Yuslih Ihza Mahendra – Burhanudin 2. Basuri Tjahja Purnama – Fezzi Uktolseja 3. Usmandie A. Andeska – Musdiyana	Yuslih Ihza Mahendra – Burhanudin
2020	1. Burhanudin – Khairil Anwar	Burhanudin – Khairil Anwar

Election Year	Candidate Pairs	Winning Candidate Pair
	2. Yuri Kemal Fadlullah – Nurdiansyah	
2024	1. Kamarudin Muten (Afa) – Khairil Anwar 2. Burhanudin – Ali Reza Mahendra	Kamarudin Muten (Afa) – Khairil Anwar

Source: Processed from various sources

An examination of Table 2 indicates that *Pilkada* in East Belitung has historically been characterized by relatively competitive electoral dynamics, particularly during the early years following regional expansion in 2003. This competitiveness can be understood through four interrelated dimensions.

3.1.1. The number of competing candidate pairs

The initial *Pilkada* held in 2005 attracted significant political interest, with five candidate pairs contesting the regent and deputy regent positions. This level of competition reflected the opening of political opportunity structures following decentralization and the introduction of direct local elections. The 2005 election ultimately resulted in the victory of Basuki Tjahja Purnama (Ahok) and Khairul Efendi, marking a historic milestone as Ahok became the first ethnic Chinese politician elected as regent in Indonesia through a direct electoral process.

A similar level of competition persisted in the 2010 *Pilkada*, which also featured five candidate pairs. The election resulted in the victory of Basuri Tjahja Purnama, Ahok's younger brother, indicating continuity in electoral support for ethnic Chinese leadership in East Belitung. This outcome reinforced the perception that ethnic background alone did not constitute a decisive electoral barrier within the local political context.

In contrast, subsequent elections demonstrated a declining number of candidates. Only three candidate pairs contested the 2015 Pilkada, while the 2020 and 2024 elections each featured only two pairs. This downward trend suggests a gradual narrowing of political competition, potentially reflecting increased electoral costs, strategic calculations by political elites, and declining incentives for new challengers to enter the race.

3.1.2. Second, the ethnic background of competing politicians

East Belitung represents a unique case in Indonesian local politics due to the recurring electoral contestation between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malay politicians. Except for the 2020 *Pilkada*, every election cycle since 2005 has involved ethnic Chinese candidates competing for the regent position. This pattern distinguishes East Belitung from other districts in the Bangka Belitung Islands Province, where ethnic Chinese political participation has tended to be more sporadic and less sustained over time.

In neighboring regions such as West Bangka, Pangkalpinang, and Belitung, ethnic Chinese politicians have indeed emerged in specific electoral moments. However, their participation has not displayed the same level of consistency as observed in East Belitung. This suggests that local political configurations, rather than provincial-level dynamics alone, play a crucial role in shaping patterns of ethnic political participation.

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3.1.3. Pilkada under the shadow of dynastic politics

Another salient feature of East Belitung's electoral history is the presence of dynastic political practices. Within the ethnic Chinese community, political lineage has been consolidated through family-based succession, as reflected in the election of Basuri Tjahja Purnama following the earlier political prominence of Basuki Tjahja Purnama (Ahok). Similarly, within the Malay community, dynastic influence is evident in the political trajectory of the Yusril Ihza Mahendra family, including the election of Yuslih Ihza Mahendra and the subsequent candidacies of family members in later electoral cycles, illustrating the persistence of dynastic strategies in local electoral competition (Mietzner, 2019).

These cases demonstrate that dynastic politics has functioned as an important, though not always decisive, feature of electoral competition in East Belitung. While family ties have facilitated political entry, they have not guaranteed electoral success, underscoring the conditional nature of dynastic advantage in local democracy.

3.1.4. The vulnerability of incumbent candidates

East Belitung has also proven to be relatively inhospitable to incumbent candidates seeking re-election. The defeat of Basuri Tjahja Purnama in the 2015 *Pilkada* signaled early on that incumbency did not ensure electoral continuity. Similar patterns emerged in subsequent elections. Yuslih Ihza Mahendra was not nominated for a second term in 2020 due to declining electability, while Burhanudin failed to retain his position in the 2024 *Pilkada*.

These repeated incumbent defeats suggest that voter evaluations of performance play a critical role in shaping electoral outcomes. Incumbent status, rather than functioning as an advantage, has often become a liability when public dissatisfaction with governance performance intensifies.

This historical overview highlights the dynamic rise and fall of ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese politicians in East Belitung. Electoral outcomes in the region cannot be explained solely by ethnic background, dynastic affiliation, or incumbency. Instead, they point to a more complex interaction between identity relations, social capital, and evaluations of government performance. This interaction provides an essential context for understanding the broader analytical focus of this study on how social capital and incumbent performance shape the declining salience of identity politics in the 2024 East Belitung regional election.

3.2. A Portrait of Political Competition in the 2024 East Belitung Regional Election

The 2024 East Belitung regional election represents a critical moment in local political competition, reflecting the ongoing contestation between Malay and ethnic Chinese political leadership. Historically, this election marks the first instance in which only two candidate pairs contested the regent and deputy regent positions. The two competing pairs, Burhanudin–Ali Reza Mahendra and Kamarudin Muten (Afa)–Khairil Anwar, symbolically represented the two largest ethnic communities in East Belitung, namely the Malays and the Chinese. This configuration distinguishes the 2024 election from the previous 2020 *Pilkada*, which also involved only two candidate pairs but was contested exclusively by politicians from the Malay ethnic group.

The official vote recapitulation released by the East Belitung Regency General Election Commission (*KPU*) confirmed a decisive victory for Afa–Khairil Anwar. The pair secured 65.86% of the total votes (44,949), while the incumbent pair, Burhanudin–Ali Reza Mahendra,

obtained only 34.11% (23,301). Notably, the likelihood of Afa's victory had already become apparent approximately two weeks prior to election day, which was held on 27 November 2024.

Chart 1. Candidate Electability in the 2024 East Belitung Regional Election
Source: Primary data

As illustrated in **Chart 1**, Afa–Khairil Anwar recorded a favorability rate of 55.8%, creating a substantial gap with the incumbent candidate, whose favorability stood at only 23.5%. Meanwhile, undecided voters accounted for 20.8% of respondents. With a limited time frame remaining before election day, these figures indicate that the incumbent candidate faced significant structural disadvantages in retaining political office, despite forming a ticket with a member of the Yusril Ihza Mahendra family.

An examination of voter support based on religious affiliation further reveals distinctive patterns. Support for Afa–Khairil Anwar was relatively evenly distributed across religious groups, whereas the incumbent pair received minimal support from non-Muslim respondents.
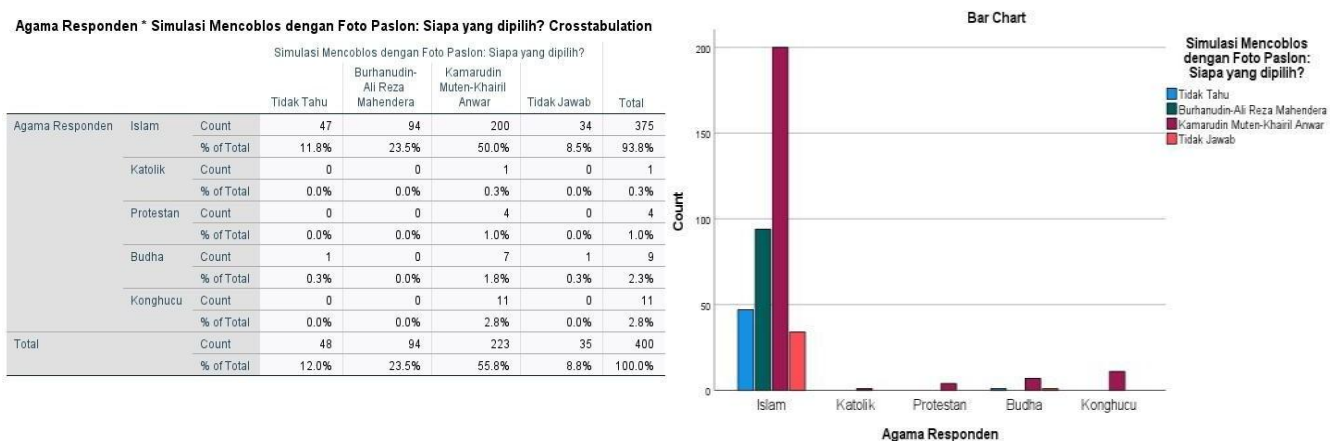
Chart 2. Support for Candidates Based on Respondents' Religion in the 2024 East Belitung Regional Election
Source: Primary data

Chart 2 demonstrates that Muslim respondents predominantly supported Afa–Khairil Anwar (50%), compared to only 23.5% support for Burhanudin–Ali Reza Mahendra. Among non-Muslim respondents, support for Afa was also evident, including Catholic (0.3%), Protestant (1.0%), Buddhist (1.8%), and Confucian (2.8%) voters. In contrast, the incumbent candidate failed to attract measurable support from non-Muslim respondents.

These findings highlight an important empirical insight: although Afa is not a Muslim, he received stronger electoral support from Muslim voters than the incumbent candidate, who is Muslim. At this stage, the results primarily illustrate patterns of electability rather than fully explaining the underlying causes of voter preferences. Nevertheless, the data provide a crucial empirical entry point for examining the broader dynamics shaping Afa's electoral success in East Belitung.

3.2.1. Fading Ethnic Sentiment in the 2024 Regional Election

A further question concerns the extent to which ethnic sentiment influenced voter behavior in the 2024 *Pilkada*, particularly given the symbolic contestation between Malay and ethnic Chinese candidates. The empirical findings indicate that ethnicity-based identity politics has become increasingly less salient in shaping electoral choices among voters in East Belitung.
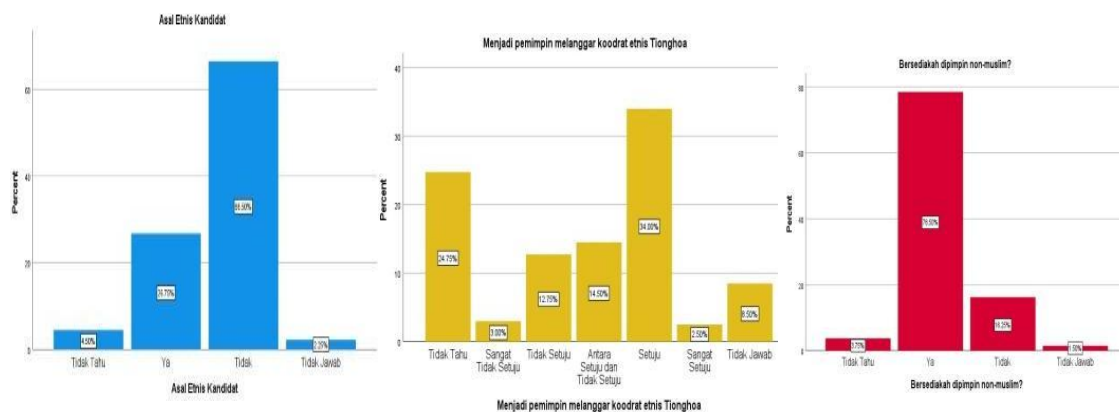
Chart 3. Ethnic Sentiment in the 2024 East Belitung Regional Election
Source: Primary data.

The data presented in **Chart 3** suggest a declining appeal of ethnic-based considerations in leadership selection. Three key observations can be drawn. First, the ethnic background of candidates is no longer a primary concern for most voters. A majority of respondents (66.50%) stated that they did not question candidates' ethnic origins, while only 26.75% continued to view ethnicity as a relevant consideration. The remaining 6.75% chose not to express an opinion.

Second, attitudes toward the acceptance of ethnic Chinese politicians as regional leaders appear increasingly normalized. A total of 36.50% of respondents agreed with the Chinese leadership, while 14.50% held a neutral position between agreement and disagreement. Although 15.75% disagreed, a relatively large proportion (33.25%) opted not to disclose their views, indicating residual sensitivity surrounding ethnic discourse.

Third, with respect to religious identity, an overwhelming majority of respondents (78.50%) expressed willingness to be governed by a non-Muslim leader. Only 16.25% explicitly rejected such leadership, while 5.25% declined to respond.

These findings demonstrate that ethnic and religious sentiments, while not absent, have diminished in their capacity to shape electoral preferences in East Belitung. This erosion of identity-based considerations provides a critical empirical foundation for understanding the

interaction between social capital, incumbent performance, and the declining salience of identity politics in the 2024 regional election.

3.3. Strong Social Capital in Daily Life

An important question arising from the high level of acceptance of a non-Muslim regent candidate in the 2024 East Belitung election concerns the broader configuration of social capital within local society. In multi-ethnic settings, social capital is commonly reflected through indicators such as interpersonal trust, social tolerance, and perceptions that ethnic differences do not generate harm in everyday interactions. These dimensions provide a useful lens for assessing the degree of political tolerance embedded in daily social life.
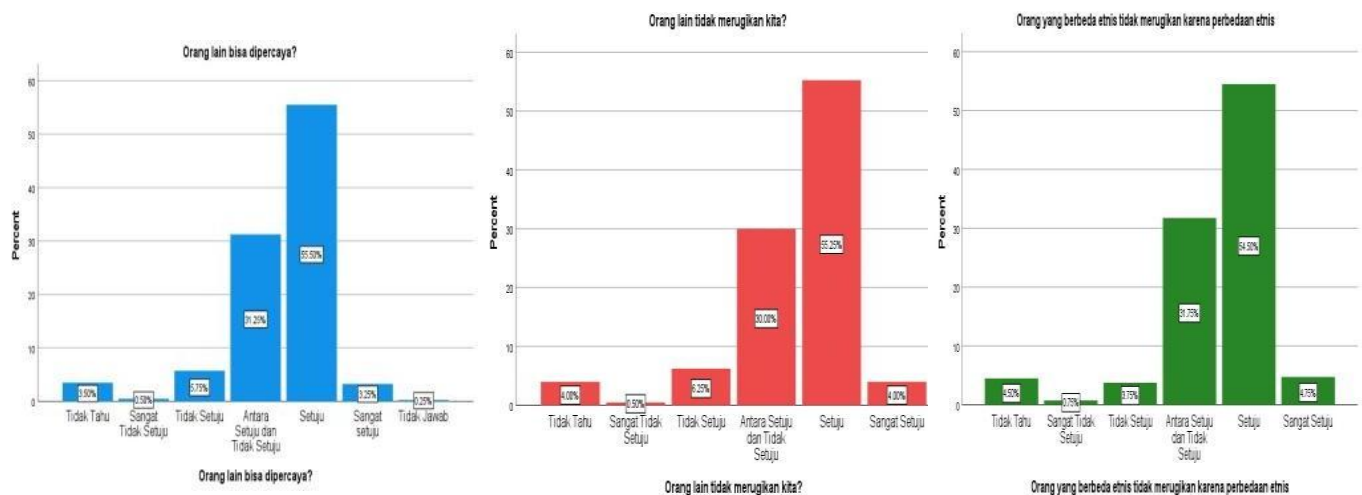
Chart 4. Social Capital in East Belitung
Source: Primary data

The findings presented in **Chart 4** indicate a relatively strong foundation of social capital in East Belitung. First, in response to the statement regarding whether people in daily social interactions can generally be trusted, a majority of respondents (58.79%) agreed. Only a small proportion (6.25%) disagreed, while 31.25% occupied a neutral position between agreement and disagreement. A minority of respondents (3.75%) chose not to provide an answer.

Second, respondents were asked whether the presence of others in their social environment is perceived as non-harmful. The results show that 59.25% of respondents agreed with this statement, suggesting a broadly inclusive social orientation. In contrast, only 6.75% expressed disagreement, while 30.00% remained undecided and 4.00% did not respond.

Third, when the question was framed more explicitly around ethnic difference, namely, whether the presence of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds is not detrimental, the pattern remained consistent. A clear majority of respondents (59.25%) agreed that ethnic diversity does not pose a social threat. Disagreement was limited to 4.50%, while 31.75% adopted a neutral stance and 4.50% declined to answer.

These findings demonstrate that everyday social relations in East Belitung are characterized by relatively high levels of mutual trust and tolerance across ethnic boundaries. Such conditions suggest the presence of robust social capital, which likely functions as an enabling environment for cross-ethnic political support. This strong foundation of social trust provides an important contextual explanation for the diminishing salience of ethnic identity in electoral decision-making observed in the 2024 regional election.

3.4. Evaluation of the Performance of Incumbent Candidates

An important factor explaining the electoral success of ethnic Chinese candidates such as Kamarudin Muten (Afa) in the 2024 East Belitung regional election lies in public evaluations of incumbent government performance. Assessing voter satisfaction with the regent's performance during the previous term is therefore crucial, as electoral choices in East Belitung are shaped by a combination of performance-based and attitudinal considerations rather than identity alone.
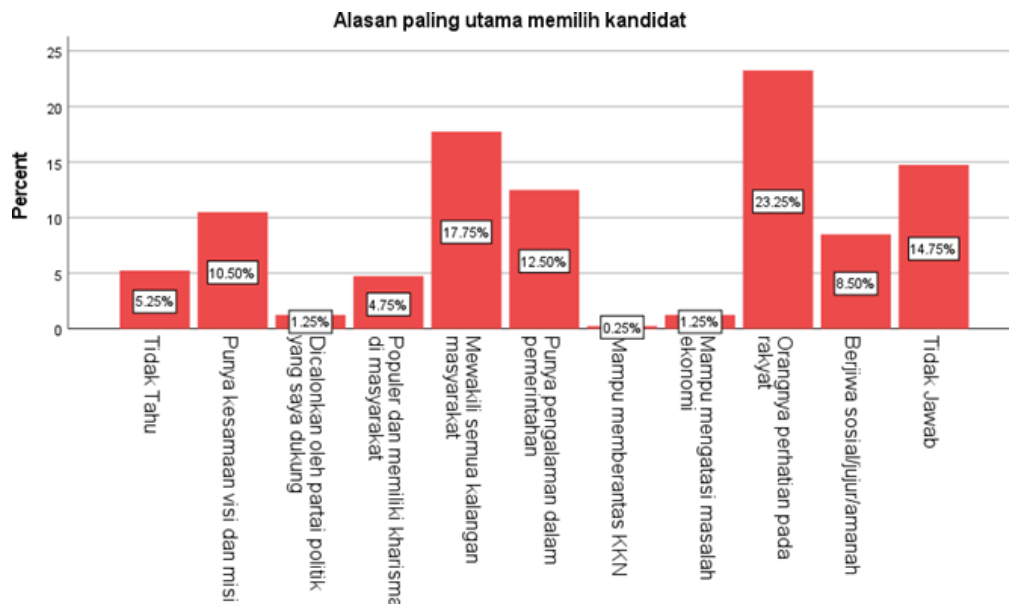
Chart 5. Reasons for Public Support of Candidates in the 2024 Election
Source: Primary data

The distribution of voters' reasons for supporting particular candidates reveals a clear prioritization of substantive performance-related criteria. The most frequently cited reason for electoral support was candidates' attentiveness to local community needs (23.25%), highlighting the importance of responsiveness in local leadership. This was followed by perceptions that candidates were capable of representing all social groups in East Belitung (17.25%), indicating expectations of inclusive governance.

Experience in government ranked third among the most important considerations (12.50%), while alignment between candidates' vision–mission statements and community aspirations accounted for 10.50% of voter preferences. Personal characteristics, such as social concern, honesty, and trustworthiness, were cited by 8.50% of respondents. In contrast, candidate popularity was mentioned by only 4.75% of voters. Economic problem-solving capacity and political party support each accounted for merely 1.25%, while commitment to eradicating corruption registered the lowest proportion (0.25%). Notably, 20.00% of respondents did not articulate specific reasons for their electoral choices, suggesting the presence of latent or undecided motivations among segments of the electorate.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that voters in East Belitung tend to emphasize performance, inclusiveness, and practical governance considerations over symbolic attributes or identity-based appeals.

Chart 6. Public Satisfaction with Incumbent Performance
Source: Primary data

Data on voter satisfaction indicate relatively low approval of the incumbent regent's performance. Only 25.8% of respondents expressed satisfaction with Burhanudin's performance during his five-year tenure. In contrast, a substantial majority (63.75%) reported dissatisfaction or low satisfaction, while 10.5% stated that they were unable to assess the incumbent's performance prior to the 2024 election.

This pattern suggests that the incumbent entered the electoral contest with a significant performance-related disadvantage.
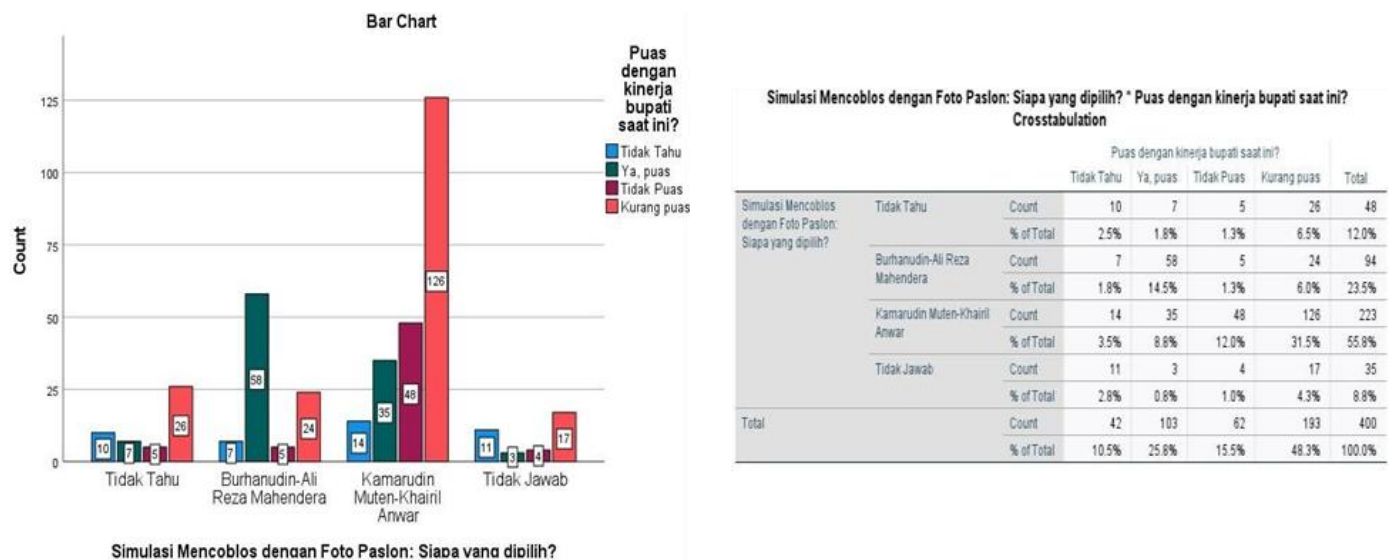
Chart 7. Crosstabulation of Regent Performance Satisfaction and Political Support
Source: Primary data

The relationship between performance evaluation and electoral support becomes more explicit in the ccrosstabulationanalysis. Overall support for the incumbent candidate, Burhanudin, reached only 23.5%. This support was largely drawn from respondents who expressed satisfaction with his performance (14.5%), while those who were dissatisfied or less

satisfied contributed only 7.3%, and respondents who withheld judgment accounted for a marginal 1.8%.

In contrast, the challenger candidate pair, Afa–Khairil Anwar, received 55.8% of total support. The bulk of this support came from voters who were dissatisfied with the incumbent's performance (43.5%). Only 8.8% of respondents who were satisfied with Burhanudin's performance supported Afa, while 3.5% of respondents who did not disclose their evaluations also leaned toward the challenger.

These results clearly indicate that retrospective performance assessments played a decisive role in shaping electoral outcomes. Poor evaluations of incumbent performance substantially reduced Burhanudin's ability to retain political office.

3.5. Social Capital, Ethnic Considerations, and Political Support

To further reinforce the argument that strong social capital mitigates the influence of ethnic sentiment in voting behavior, **Table 3** presents a crosstabulation of social capital indicators, ethnic considerations, and political support in the 2024 election.

Table 3. Crosstabulation of Social Capital, Ethnic Considerations, and Political Support in the 2024 Regional Election

Source: Primary data

First, respondents who agreed that ethnic differences are not socially detrimental overwhelmingly supported Afa–Khairil Anwar (36.1%), compared to only 13.0% support for Burhanudin–Ali Reza Mahendra. Among respondents adopting a neutral position, support remained higher for Afa (15.8%) than for Burhanudin (7.5%). Even among respondents who disagreed with the statement, support for Afa (1.8%) slightly exceeded that for Burhanudin (1.5%).

Second, attitudes toward leadership by a non-Muslim regent further illustrate the moderating role of social capital. A majority of respondents who were willing to be led by a non-Muslim supported Afa (52.0%), while only 10.8% supported Burhanudin. Conversely, among respondents unwilling to accept non-Muslim leadership, support shifted toward the

incumbent. These findings indicate that, despite Afa's non-Muslim status, Muslim voters in East Belitung were more inclined to support him than a Muslim incumbent candidate.

Third, when examining the role of candidates' ethnic origins in voting decisions, respondents who rejected ethnicity as a relevant consideration predominantly supported Afa (41.0%), compared to 11.3% for Burhanudin. Even among respondents who acknowledged ethnicity as a factor, support for Afa (12.0%) exceeded that for the incumbent (10.0%).

The evidence from **Chart 7** and **Table 3** demonstrates how the interaction between ethnic sentiment, social capital, and incumbent performance shaped the 2024 East Belitung regional election. When ethnic sentiment at the community level weakens, strong interpersonal trust and tolerance across ethnic boundaries become more influential in guiding voter behavior. Negative evaluations of incumbent performance further reinforce these conditions.

The East Belitung case thus illustrates that in a multicultural society, robust social capital and retrospective performance assessments can significantly reduce the political salience of ethnicity. This dynamic provides a coherent explanation for the electoral success of ethnic Chinese candidates such as Afa and underscores the conditional nature of identity politics in local democratic competition.

4. Conclusion

The experience of East Belitung in the 2024 regional election demonstrates that the success of minority candidates within a predominantly Muslim society cannot be adequately explained through ethnic identity alone. Instead, this case provides a critical opportunity to reassess how identity, political representation, and voting behavior operate in local democratic contexts. The East Belitung election reveals that ethnic background does not function as a fixed or deterministic factor in shaping electoral outcomes, even in societies characterized by long-standing ethnic diversity.

This study finds that the declining salience of ethnic identity in the 2024 election was closely associated with two interrelated factors. First, strong social capital, manifested in high levels of interpersonal trust, tolerance, and acceptance of ethnic and religious differences, created a social environment conducive to cross-ethnic political support. In such a context, voters were more inclined to evaluate candidates based on inclusiveness and social cohesion rather than on primordial identity markers. Second, negative public evaluations of incumbent performance played a decisive role in reshaping voter preferences. Dissatisfaction with governance performance encouraged voters to prioritize competence, responsiveness, and accountability over ethnic or religious considerations.

These findings suggest that identity politics in local democracy is highly conditional rather than structurally entrenched. When social trust is strong and incumbent performance is perceived as weak, identity-based appeals lose their mobilizing power. The East Belitung case thus illustrates that minority candidates can successfully compete and win in local elections when performance-based evaluations and social capital outweigh ethnic sentiment. This conclusion not only challenges deterministic views of identity politics but also underscores the importance of institutional performance and social cohesion in strengthening inclusive local democracy.

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6. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal affiliations that could have influenced the research or findings presented in this article.

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