

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 107/2024 dated 20 December 2024

Between Political Ideology and Political Reality: The Case of Riau Islands

Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff

SYNOPSIS

Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff reviews the evolution of political party dynamics in Indonesia since the Reformasi era of 1998, highlighting the shift from ideological divisions to pragmatic alliances. Focusing on the November 2024 local elections in Riau Islands Province, he explores how local political strategies starkly contrast with national trends, reflecting broader pragmatic realignments. He concludes that Indonesia's complex multi-party system will involve a continuous cycle of political recalibration driven by pragmatic needs rather than ideological commitments.

COMMENTARY

Since Indonesia's Reformasi era began in 1998, politicians have been able to exploit the unprecedented opportunity to form political parties based on a wide range of political ideologies and platforms. However, 25 years on, the resulting mushrooming of political parties has resulted not in divisive ideological and political cleavages that hinder policymaking but instead large, catch-all pragmatic political alliances with the leading presidential candidate of the day.

Pragmatism in Political Alignments and Electoral Strategies

Under President Prabowo Subianto's leadership, the Indonesian political landscape continues to encourage political power-sharing instead of ideological cleavages. His strategy of inclusivity — incorporating a wide range of political parties and civil society organisations into his cabinet — serves a dual purpose: it consolidates his power while minimising potential opposition and allowing him to govern effectively.

Concurrently, there are significant top-down pressures for political parties to strategically align themselves with Prabowo's administration to avoid losing influence

or access to state resources. This realignment, driven by practical rather than ideological considerations, reinforces a broader trend of political pragmatism in Indonesian politics over the past two decades.

The shifting allegiance of parties like the National Democrat Party (Nasdem) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) underscore the trend away from ideological cleavages towards political pragmatism. Nasdem's shifting support — from endorsing the presidential candidacy of Anies Baswedan prior to the elections to aligning with Prabowo's Forward Indonesia (KIM) coalition post-election — highlights its preference for strategic positioning for political power-sharing over ideological consistency.

Likewise, the PKS's political allegiances have shown fluidity, notwithstanding the party's strong commitment to Islamist principles. [PKS aligned with Prabowo's administration following his inauguration and joined his KIM Plus coalition](#), departing significantly from its previous support for Anies during the presidential election. This strategic realignment is particularly striking given PKS's ideological roots. It suggests an adaptation to the evolving political currents within Indonesia, where political expediency and power-sharing with the winning presidential candidate often trumps ideological fidelity, highlighting the pragmatic realities of governing in a complex multi-party system.

However, although national politics often showcases pragmatic alignments characterised by coalition-building and strategic alliances, these do not always reflect the complex political realities in Indonesia's diverse regions. For instance, in Riau Islands Province (KEPRI), regional politics demonstrates a diverse array of strategies and alliances that starkly contrast with the broader national-level politics. These local variations were particularly evident during the November 2024 regional elections. The divergence not only underscores the variety of local political manoeuvres, but also highlights how regional politics can remain distinct and operate independently from national trends.



A red and white celebration to declare peaceful regional elections was held in Tanjung Pinang, capital city of the Riau Islands Province. *Image from [Riau Islands Province Website Portal](#).*

Regional Politics: KEPRI Bucks National Trends

The gubernatorial race in KEPRI showcased this divergence strongly. The incumbent pair, Ansar Ahmad and Nyanyang Haris Pratamura, supported by [thirteen political parties](#), many from Prabowo's KIM coalition, faced off against the [Muhammad Rudi-Aunur Rafiq pair](#), who, despite drawing less support, were backed by notable parties such as Nasdem, which is now in Prabowo's coalition, and the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), indicating a more diffuse local strategy that challenges the dominance of Prabowo's coalition at the national level.

On the other hand, the Batam mayoral election underscores the strategic importance that national endorsements and alignments play in local elections. Amsakar Achmad and Li Claudia Chandra, whose platform was aligned with central government policies, received [substantial support](#), significantly outpacing their opponents, who were supported by only [three parties](#): PDI-P, Labour Party (Partai Buruh) and Gelora. In this instance, national endorsements and alignments impacted the electoral landscape dramatically.

Further south, in the *kabupaten* (district) of Bintan Island, where Tanjung Pinang — the capital of KEPRI — is located, the only candidate pair for the district leadership, Roby Kurniawan and Deby Maryanti, received [unanimous support](#) from all contesting political parties, standing against an empty box (*kotak kosong*). The broad coalition supporting them included the Golkar Party, Nasdem, Prabowo's Gerindra Party, PKS, Democrat Party, and the National Mandate Party (PAN). This overwhelming support highlights the unique political dynamics at play in different regions of Indonesia.

The Bintan district election also showcased how PDI-P shifted its support to cater to unique local politics. In the race for KEPRI governor, PDI-P backed the candidate running against Ansar Ahmad, whom Prabowo had endorsed. But in the election for district head of Bintan, PDI-P made a strategic pivot and fully endorsed Ansar's [son](#), Roby Kurniawan, suggesting a selective alignment motivated by strategic interests rather than party ideology.

Similarly, Nasdem's shifting allegiances provide insight into the fluid nature of party support. As mentioned earlier, Nasdem [backed](#) Anies and his running mate in the presidential race, only to later [join](#) Prabowo's KIM Plus coalition, indicating a pragmatic approach to political alliances. This adaptability was further highlighted in the KEPRI gubernatorial elections, in which Nasdem [supported](#) the Rudi-Rafiq pair, diverging from Prabowo's preference for Ansar Ahmad. Yet, in the Bintan district head election, Nasdem supported Ansar's son, Roby Kurniawan. These decisions underscore a complex web of strategic decisions that prioritise local over national interests.

The political landscape in Indonesia, notably in regions like KEPRI, exemplifies a consistent trend toward promiscuous power-sharing, where political elites forge broad, encompassing coalitions that often blur traditional partisan lines. This trend, explored in Dan Slater article on "[Party Cartelization](#)", and Slater and Erica Simmons' article on "[Promiscuous Power Sharing](#)" in Indonesia, represents a strategic response to the high uncertainties typical of multi-party democracies with no strong ideological allegiances. While such arrangements may stabilise the political arena in the short term by minimising opposition and consolidating power, they also pose significant

challenges by diluting opposition and obscuring the policy preferences of the parties involved.

Conclusion

The KEPRI gubernatorial, district head, and mayoral elections clearly showcased the dynamic realignments among both coalition members and opposition parties that prioritise short-term party political advantage over ideological purity and longer-term goals. While this trend reflects a broader national trend towards pragmatic, if not opportunistic, coalitional power-sharing, it also underscores the political manoeuvring in response to local conditions.

In short, over the past two decades, we have been witnessing a pragmatic shift in party political strategy where the priority of securing electoral victory and resource- and power-sharing often outweighs the traditional ideological battles that once defined political discourse in Indonesia. Prioritising practical alliances can be viewed as a strategic decision to adapt and thrive within the constraints of the current political environment. Such an approach may precipitate a cycle of continuous political realignment and strategic recalibrations, as parties and politicians navigate the complex interplay of power, influence, and local priorities in a highly competitive electoral environment. While pragmatism in politics can streamline policymaking and foster a cooperative political environment, it also necessitates maintaining a delicate balance between short-term goals and fidelity to the party's ideology and values. For the perceived erosion of a party's ideology and values may cost it the support of its grassroots in the long run.

Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff is an Associate Research Fellow of the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).