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2024 Riau Islands Elections: Towards Better Regional–Central Relations

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Ansar Ahmad and Nyanyang Haris Pratamura emerged winners in the November 2024 gubernatorial race in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province (KEPRI). Aside from the incumbency advantage they enjoyed, KEPRI's relationship with the central government was a determining factor in their successful campaign.



Can a balance between infrastructural enhancement and economic development on the one hand and the preservation of traditional maritime industries on the other be struck? Image from *Unsplash*.

The gubernatorial election in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province (KEPRI), held on 27 November 2024, featured two main candidates: incumbent governor Ansar Ahmad, paired with Nyanyang Haris Pratamura, and Batam mayor Muhammad Rudi, with his

running mate, Aunur Rafiq. Both candidates emphasised economic development, infrastructure enhancement and the preservation of local culture in their platforms. According to the [formal results](#) announced on 8 December 2024, Ansar and Nyanyang defeated their competitors, with 450,109 votes or about 55% of the total votes.

Rempang Eco-City Project and Other Local Grievances

The elections witnessed the continued [rivalry](#) between Rudi and Ansar. During Ansar's first term of office, he was paired with Rudi's wife, Marlin Augustina. Six months after the pair were sworn in, Ansar's relationship with his deputy deteriorated over disagreements regarding the distribution of key appointments in the provincial government. The strained relationship between Ansar and Rudi was further inflamed during the protests over the Rempang Eco-City Project in Batam in 2023. In November that year, amid public displeasure over the handling of compensations to Rempang residents who had to be relocated to make way for the project, Rudi accused Ansar's confidants of funding the protests. Both camps also were said to have tried to damage the other side's image by [initiating investigations](#) into old cases of alleged mismanagement of land use allocations.

In the end, the Rempang Eco-City controversy was probably a major factor behind Rudi's poor performance in Batam city, the largest constituency in KEPRI Province. His team lost by a margin of 3.4% or 14,342 votes. Rudi's role as the mayor of Batam and *ex officio* head of the Batam Free Trade and Free Port Zone Authority (BP Batam), which is responsible for the Rempang Eco-City project, was probably significant in this apparent decline in his popularity. When he stood for election as mayor of Batam in 2020, he had won 73% of the total valid votes. Given that Rudi's tenure in Batam saw the building of significant infrastructure that improved connectivity on the populous island, he should have had incumbency advantage in Batam. However, Batam provided almost half of the winning votes for the Ansar–Nyanyang team.

Evidently, Ansar was able to [communicate](#) to the voters that infrastructure development should not come at the cost of neglect of other sectors, highlighting his welfare provisions in the healthcare and education sectors, improvements in electricity and transportation networks, and efforts to alleviate unemployment. Ansar repeatedly contrasted KEPRI Province's smaller budget with that of Batam – KEPRI's financial centre – and highlighted that his office had worked towards equitable development across all KEPRI islands, implying that Rudi sought to develop only Batam. This was not a fair comparison, given that Rudi was not responsible for the other KEPRI islands. In any event, Ansar's incumbency advantage reached further than Rudi's, while the latter's advantage was confined to Batam.

During the 2 November 2024 debate prior to the election, Ansar [highlighted](#) BP Batam's mismanagement of the Rempang project, questioning Rudi's lack of transparency. Residents who refused to be relocated were allegedly [intimidated](#) with legal threats by BP Batam officials. Ironically, it was Rudi who had raised the Rempang project during the debate, accusing Ansar of neglecting his responsibility as governor for defusing public protests against the project, which had his [support](#). Ansar countered, claiming he was excluded from decision-making until the conflict resolution stage. This exchange backfired on Rudi, probably diminishing his ground support.

Ansar's performance during the debate also sealed the votes of the Malays, which he strategically [canvassed](#) to weaken Rudi's stronghold. Notably, residents affected by the Rempang project were Malays who had been living there [historically](#). Ansar's appeal to the Malays – the largest ethnic group in KEPRI – proved successful. Prior to the debates, an [electability survey](#) conducted in June-July 2024 had placed Rudi slightly ahead, at 43.1% compared to Ansar's 41.2%. Ansar essentially delivered on his campaign promise of “preserving the local cultures”, which was a euphemism both sides used to indicate their promises to protect the interests of KEPRI's ethnic groups, particularly the Malays.

Aside from the ethnic factor, the Rempang issue also highlighted several overlapping concerns of the KEPRI electorate. The first was the different development priorities between the central and regional governments. The Rempang project – which had been on the backburner since 2004 – was [upgraded](#) to a National Strategic Programme in August 2023. This upgrade raised the project to the [purview](#) of then president Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) and allowed it to be given preference over regional government priorities, especially on issues such as land use regulations, which were previously determined by local authorities. The problems that the project faced, as indicated in the protests by Rempang's unhappy residents, underscored the disconnect between national goals and local interests.

The second concern is the maritime interests of KEPRI residents. Both sets of candidates campaigned on visions of economic development by leveraging the region's maritime advantages. However, the divergence in national and regional government priorities is counterproductive to this vision. Backed by regulations [signed by Jokowi](#), Indonesia allowed the export of marine sand in May 2023. This aroused concern among KEPRI residents and became an important electoral issue since the potential environmental damage caused by the extraction of marine sand includes the destruction of fish habitats, which had impoverished fishermen of the maritime region in the past, and erosion and water pollution, which affected residents of small coastal islands. Any aspiration to elevate the blue economy in KEPRI would be rendered irrelevant if the ecosystem to support it was not given due consideration.

Given these concerns, the desire to better align KEPRI's development priorities with those of the new Prabowo administration played a part in Ansar's victory. Prabowo had garnered 55.6% of the total valid votes in KEPRI during the February 2024 presidential election, greatly outperforming the other two candidate pairs. Since the gubernatorial election was held just nine months after the presidential election, the Prabowo factor may have played in the voters' minds. Both Ansar and Nyanyang are associated with Prabowo's Forward Indonesia Coalition (KIM Plus): Nyanyang is chairman of Prabowo's Gerindra Party in Batam and Ansar is a cadre from Golkar, which is part of KIM Plus. Eight members of the KIM Plus coalition, including Golkar and Gerindra, officially endorsed the Ansar–Nyanyang pair. Altogether these eight parties control 32 out of 45 seats in the KEPRI provincial parliament. Ansar's alignment with Prabowo was further reinforced by Prabowo's [visit](#) to KEPRI in August 2024, during which time he personally endorsed the Ansar–Nyanyang team.

For their part, Ansar and Nyanyang successfully played the Prabowo card during their campaign. Apart from wearing light blue clothes [reminiscent](#) of Prabowo's campaign, they campaigned on alignment between the KEPRI centre and regional government

of Batam city through the “ASLI-SAYANG Batam” tagline. ASLI is short for Amsakar Achmad and Li Claudia Chandra, candidates who won the Batam mayoral elections, whereas SAYANG is short for Ansar–Nyanyang. Also, Ansar’s son, Roby Kurniawan, won against an empty ballot (*kotak kosong*) as head of Bintan district, extending the unstated alignment between the central and KEPRI governments under Prabowo and Ansar’s leadership. Arguably, for residents of KEPRI, “better alignment” between the Batam mayor and the KEPRI governor would be an improvement over the past tension between the two regional governments that resulted in the Rempang crisis.

Consequently, the Rudi–Rafiq pair only won in one electoral district – Karimun, the second largest electoral district in KEPRI. This victory was largely due to Rafiq’s reputation as a native son (*putera daerah*) of Karimun, where he started his career as a bureaucrat and was eventually elected as the deputy district head for two consecutive terms (2006–2011 and 2011–2015). Rafiq was also a former chairman of the Golkar Party’s regional branch in Karimun. While he may not have benefitted from his former party’s political influence there, his grassroots reputation carried his team to 51.5% of the votes in Karimun, with a small winning margin of 3,125 votes.

Conclusion

Ansar–Nyanyang’s victory at the KEPRI gubernatorial election came as no surprise, given Ansar’s incumbency advantage and his ability to project unified development priorities between the Jakarta and KEPRI governments under his leadership. While Rudi and Rafiq put up a strong challenge in Batam, Ansar and Nyanyang were able to win in Batam, which secured half of the winning votes for them. The latter’s success in the other islands could be attributed to Ansar’s campaign, which emphasised sustainable development across islands and sectors of concern to the voters, such as healthcare, education and inter-island connectivity. Arguably, the Rempang Eco-City issue played a role in diminishing Rudi’s popularity in Batam. The election results also highlighted KEPRI voters’ desire for a better relationship with the central government, particularly with the newly inaugurated Prabowo administration.

Having promised greater synergy between the offices of the KEPRI governor and Batam mayor, Ansar will have to work closely with Amsakar Achmad to prove to voters that the investments streaming into Batam could improve the economy and quality of life in all of KEPRI’s constituent islands. By aligning KEPRI’s regional interests with national goals, Ansar–Nyanyang and Amsakar–Claudia can pave the way for the province to fully capitalise on its strategic maritime position while preserving local culture and livelihoods.

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