

the Politics of Indonesian Chinese

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The Politics of Indonesian Chinese at Grassroots Level (A Study of the Village Head of Indonesian Chinese in Bangka Islands)

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Abstract—In a long period, the Indonesian Chinese has avoided electoral political dynamics. Even further, Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups avoid social spaces that openly connoted to the political world. Marginalization and discrimination factors are the right terms to describe the position of the ethnic Indonesian Chinese until later, the situation changes along with the fall of the New Order Regime and the onset of The Reform Era. The emergence of Ahok Phenomenon with its various dynamics has at least become one of the momentums of the rise of Indonesian Chinese ethnic in the political world. In smaller spaces, at the village level, the phenomenon of the election of village heads which come from Indonesian Chinese race groups background illustrates political change at the grassroots level. This paper, through qualitative research methods, explores how the dynamics of power of the Indonesian Chinese ethnic who become head of The Village on Bangka Island. Interestingly, the Indonesian Chinese ethnic who have been known to be apolitical, enter public spaces that come in direct contact with diversity. This paper finds that actually Indonesian Chinese politics at the village level has its own dynamics. The development of democracy extends on the rural level and increases the political participation of Indonesian Chinese ethnic. The political elites in the village government started the career of a communal community organization not because of the influence of the Ahok phenomenon. When a civil servant acts as village head, they generally played a dynamic role and carried out a politics of pluralism. This is an anomaly condition compared to the early Reform Era., their desires more dominated by long-lost identity claims.

Keywords—Indonesian Chinese Ethnic, Electoral, Head of Village

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Chinese has been known for their apolitical principles, a condition where they keep their distance from political activity and focus more on business and wrestling with other economic sectors. Even if they have to go into politics, they generally only become part of the object, for example, being treasurers in socio-political organizations or for example being donors for political purposes. Very rare they become active subjects of a political process. This condition lasted for a long time, at least during the colonial period and also during the New Order period [1] [2].

Indonesian Chinese are difficult to contest because the access is indeed tightly closed, and it is difficult to penetrate the boundaries that Indonesian Chinese is perceived merely as economic beings [3]. There is even a clause in the term 'Indonesian Chinese Problems' which shows how urgent it is to close Indonesian Chinese identity at that time [4] [5] [6]. There are conditions in the long term in which Indonesian Chinese ethnic is always constructed as 'other' [7] [8].

The Reform Era that took place in 1998 has changed many political orders at that time. One of which is the Indonesian Chinese ethnic political format. Reformation has changed many things, especially the opportunity for ethnic Indonesian Chinese to be involved in the electoral politics activities [9] [10]. The overall principle of equality and democracy brought about by the spirit of reform brought a condition where opportunities for Indonesian Chinese to be involved in all levels of life also became more open. That is why, reforms have opened wide opportunities for the Indonesian Chinese, and are seen as a turning point in the lives of Indonesian Chinese in Indonesia.

As the Reform era progressed, a new phenomenon emerged in the electoral world, namely political improvement marked by the entry of Indonesian Chinese as candidates in various levels of elections, something very different compared to the dark days of the previous Indonesian Chinese. Ahok is a phenomenal figure who is considered to represent the spirit of Indonesian Chinese revival in the reform era. After Ahok, many figures began to appear in the political world. This phenomenon of the rise of Indonesian Chinese politics changed many maps of the political situation. Indonesian Chinese ethnicity that has been perceived as apolitical, with open opportunities, in fact, colors the world of politics because of the strengthening and reinforcement of identity and financial networks that have successfully entered the electoral world with a stronger capacity. Not surprisingly, two decades of reform were marked by ethnic Indonesian Chinese identity politics, the development of financial networks, and ethnic-based political reinforcement which eventually emerged both as a negative and positive force tool in electoral dynamics.

The interesting thing in Bangka Belitung is the development of Indonesian Chinese ethnic politics at the grassroots. The Indonesian Chinese ethnics that we have perceived as ethnicity that has a distance from the political world, in fact, began to look at the political world at the grassroots. The village head is one form of leadership at this level. The Indonesian Chinese ethnic actually color politics at the village level. There have been quite a number of village heads from the Indonesian Chinese community in villages in Bangka Belitung. Uniquely, not all Indonesian Chinese village heads became the leader in the villages dominated by *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic. Some of whom became village heads in a majority Malay and Muslim villages, some of whom actually became village heads in a majority Malay and Muslim village.

This study will explore how the face of Indonesian Chinese politics at the grassroots level on Bangka Island. Bangka, as an archipelago known for its history of tin and Indonesian Chinese porters, is an interesting area for study, especially in relation to the political dynamics of the Indonesian Chinese ethnic. Why they are interested in the world of electoral politics at the grassroots and how they lead are interesting questions to study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indonesian Chinese studies are basically carried out in the context of general political change in Indonesia. Many researchers believe that the current Indonesian regime has given great opportunities to *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic to enter into a broader political dimension. Amy Freedman believes that better-consolidated democracy will provide this ethnic opportunity to play a greater role as a pressure group and through various social organizations [11]. Various changes have taken place and basically provide a great opportunity for Indonesian Chinese ethnic to work together, even though they cannot be identically the same as indigenous ethnicities.

According to Freedman, at least change occurred at several levels after the Suharto regime collapsed. There was a change in state institutions. Although Habibie had weak political legitimacy and got a little chance to take office, he gave birth to many changes in state regulations. One of which was the amendment of the Act and the holding of elections by an independent institution. As a result, there was also a format for political change in general elections that was different from the previous regime. Along with this, there was a change in the format of Indonesian Chinese politics. As a reaction, Freedman said that Indonesian Chinese political parties emerged at the beginning of The Reform Era, they were the Indonesian Chinese Party (Partai Indonesian Chinese Indonesia) and the Indonesian Mixed Party (Partai Pembauran Indonesia). At the cultural level, the government then made many changes to eliminate discrimination and marginalization of the Indonesian Chinese ethnic. It is interesting to see one of Freedman's findings that the fact that political change at the local level is more difficult than at the national level, especially in relation to the process of accepting more open *Indonesian Chinese* ethnicity. At the same time, Freedman also saw that there was an increase in communal group activities among

the Indonesian Chinese, such as the increasing growth of their interest in social organizations.

Sarah Turner and Pamela Allen also found that there was a fundamental change after Suharto collapsed. After Suharto put *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic in a difficult position as a scapegoat, several changes occurred after the new government tried to take different policies. By identity, Indonesian Chinese ethnic were given the opportunity to celebrate Indonesian Chinese holidays, the ban on using Indonesian Chinese was revoked, and *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic no longer had to take care of citizenship certificates [12]. According to Turner and Allen, in politics, Suharto banned this ethnic from politics, but he himself used the Indonesian Chinese ethnic for his political and business interests. This at least went on during the 32 years of the New Order in power. Politically, ethnic Indonesian Chinese became more active in the political world after the fall of the New Order. Generally they are divided into two, among those who want to highlight their Indonesian Chinese identity and those who choose to join other nationalist parties.

Interestingly, Turner's and Allen study also found a fact that after the New Order era, ethnic Indonesian Chinese were more actively involved in various social organizations. Various organizations have emerged that aim to encourage ethnic assimilation and recognition of ethnic Indonesian Chinese in the midst of society. Appear for example the organization of the Indonesian Chinese Social Association (PSMTI), the Indonesian Association of Indonesian Chinese Descendants (CORE), and the Solidarity of Indonesian Chinese Youth for Justice (SIMPATIK). In short, since the reforms began, there was a change in recognition of Indonesian Chinese identity which was also followed by political change [13].

With regard to the channel to strive for this interest, Susan Giblin studied the emergence of developing institutions to create a means of reclaiming the Indonesian Chinese identity, which had been considered lost or eliminated. Giblin at least identified several groups of Indonesian Chinese organizations according to their orientation, including Socio-cultural groups, Political Parties, and Religious Groups [14]. Giblin's study concluded that the emergence of various identity groups basically aimed to fight for equal treatment in the midst of Indonesia's political context which underwent fundamental changes.

The interesting thing about some of the studies mentioned above is that it has to do with changing the political and cultural atmosphere in the body of Indonesian Chinese Ethnic identity after the New Order period. This change should be interesting if it can fill the gaps of Freedman's concerns about the format of changes in the political atmosphere at the local level, which he thinks is more difficult to do. Is it true that political change also occurs at the grassroots level, or actually it only happens at the elite level and stops in the context of changes in regulation and national recognition? This paper will provide an overview of the dynamics of ethnic Indonesian Chinese politics at the grassroots.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper was obtained from a qualitative study to get answers to the question of why ethnic Indonesian Chinese politicians at the grassroots level were interested in becoming village heads, and how then they led. Another question is, what is the fundamental challenge of their leadership in the context of the Indonesian Chinese ethnic who is still facing cultural challenges and the burden of the inheritance of perception which has so far considered the Indonesian Chinese to be within the electoral political world. The data collection techniques in this study are interview and observation. The technique of determining informants is done by purposive sampling method, which is the determination of informants based on the consideration that they are concerned with the most information and data needed by researchers. In this case, the research informants were village heads from ethnic Indonesian Chinese, were village heads from *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic, who served in the village dominated by the *Indonesian Chinese* community or not.

IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

A. *Not because of Ahok*

It is interesting to explore what actually became the fundamental motive of the involvement of Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups at the grassroots to enter the electoral world. As is commonly known, ethnic Indonesian Chinese generally prefer economic activities, while few are attracted to the world of electoral politics. Whether their involvement is triggered by the Ahok phenomenon or not is an important issue to trace. There are fears that they are plunging into politics because they were inspired by Ahok who is considered to break the injustice in politics.

Based on interviews with village heads from ethnic Indonesian Chinese, it was found the fact that Ahok was not the trigger factor, because according to them, each region had its own dynamics. So it is not because of Ahok that they were inspired to enter the world of electoral politics. There are conditions that they realize that the idea of equality is a keyword. For them, Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups no longer need to have distant, even less ethnic allergies in the political world.

Then what is their main motivation? This question is actually subjective, but they suggest that there is an encouragement from various circles to ask them to get off the mountain. The desire to do much in their own villages is the reason why entering and competing are the choices.

Andri, the Head of Bukit Layang Village said:

"I was born here, grew up here, married here, and tried here. I think that I have to do for the people here. I was encouraged by many people, even from non Indonesian Chinese. I also don't think about going up (re-elected) in the next period. Basically, I want to take care of the community. Although initially my family did not support it, but finally agreed".

Andri who was elected in an area whose 80% of its population is muslim stated that as a citizen born and settled in the village of Bukit Layang, the desire to do much was a

major consideration. Ahok, according to him is not a driving factor because in Andri's experience, pluralism has become an unavoidable color in the village he currently leads.

The same thing happened in the case of Rebo Village. Fendi who is the Village Head of Rebo. In contrast to Andri, Fandi became the village head in a village with an ethnic Indonesian Chinese majority. He also said that it was not inspired by Ahok at all. The desire to progress does come from the encouragement of members of the community. He advanced to compete with 3 other candidates, 2 of whom were also from Indonesian Chinese circles. He felt called to go forward because the village he was born in according to him had not changed much in recent years. The young figure who even just graduated from college a few moments after being inaugurated assumed that entering politics would enable him to do more. He was called not because the Indonesian Chinese phenomenon was feverish to enter politics, but purely because of the internal considerations of him and his family.

Zen, who was serving as the Head of Merawang Village for two periods, also said that his involvement in the political world was natural, unrelated because of the influence of the national leaders. Zen, who served as the Village Head in a village with about 70% ethnic Indonesian Chinese, said that it was normal for politics and he considered the encouragement of his community. Dicky, the village head of Lumut even served as the village head for three periods. He advanced because his desire to build his village and during that period could show good performance in the midst of society.

Not much different, Jhon, Head of the Jeruk Village in Central Bangka said that he progressed as the Village Head because of his desire to answer the challenges of developing the community. Jhon is indeed the Village Head in an area where 90% are Indonesian Chinese, but his desire to progress is purely a personal drive and departs from the desire to become a leader at the village level. He has been active in community organizations long before Ahok was popular in 2012 in DKI Jakarta. As told by Jhon :

"Ahok has only become famous since joining the Jakarta Governor Election. While I personally, since 2008 I have nominated myself as one of the Village Heads. Even though I failed and was only elected in 2016, I made sure that it wasn't because I was inspired by Ahok that I became the Village Head. For me, there is a pleasure in being able to perform and act for the community".

Kim, the Gunung Pelawan Village Head of Central Bangka Regency said more or less the same thing that increasing awareness of democracy gave a fresh breeze. According to him, this is a condition that supports the desire of Indonesian Chinese people to be active in politics. But he himself admitted that the news of Ahok had indeed been good news, but for him it was not principle because it was the locus in the area that was the consideration for running for office. "Ahok is indeed good news in encouraging democracy, for me, because I am aware that I want to do real things for the community," Kim said. Kim himself has been the Head of Gunung Pelawan Village since 2015.

The findings above confirm that political change basically occurs at all levels, not only in the elite and in Jakarta. After the fall of the New Order, there were conditions that did allow the Indonesian Chinese to become active in the social, community and government world, something which was considered taboo during the New Order and was often partitioned by discriminatory and marginative behavior. If Park's study [15] says that widespread activity among ethnic Indonesian Chinese after the New Order would make it easier for them to form networks, in the interest of securing and fighting for the interests of their groups, this study found that widespread ethnic activity would contribute to expansion and acceptability. Mutual interests, minus group interests, at least in the context of this study.

B. Politics from the Bottom

The interesting thing about Indonesian Chinese politics at the village level is that almost all Village Heads have actually pioneered their political careers from below. This also reduces the assumption that entering electoral politics is driven more by the desire to be like Ahok or because of the desire to be in power. This fact also indicates that the acceptability of the community towards the village head figure because they are generally known to have taken part in the community. In Andri's case in Bukit Layang, he stated that basically he had pioneered his political career from a position as Chair of the RT (neighborhood association) for several years, something which he said was not a political pilot, but as something natural as part of the community. After serving as Chairman of the RT, he rose to the position of Kadus (Hamlet Head).

The same thing is also an experience for Fendi. He became the village head after several years as a member of the BPD (Village Representative). Previously, he learned a lot as one of the RT administrators in Pangkal Pinang who gave him provisions to become the Village Head. This is also the case with Jhon, who became the Village Head in Jeruk Village after previously working in the 'Central Bangka Regency Aquaculture and Fisheries Development Unit' organization. Jhon became the unit secretary from 2008-2011 and became Chairperson from 2011-2015, before being elected as Village Head in 2016.

Meanwhile, Zen who was the Head of the Merawang Village was able to be re-elected as the Village Head in his second period. He progressed at the instigation of the community, then was re-elected without any specific strategy because it did allow the contestation process to proceed naturally.

The above phenomenon confirms what was stated by Freedman [11], Turner and Allen that at the grassroots level there was very different participation among the Indonesian Chinese, after the New Order. After only being busy with the business world, the Indonesian Chinese political elite at the grassroots also experienced a significant development of orientation. This means that change does not only occur in politics at the elite level, but also occurs at the grassroots level.

C. Politics of Pluralism

Then what are the challenges faced by the Indonesian Chinese Village Heads in leading? According to the informant, that after becoming the Village Head, in the end the dynamics became more or less the same as those faced by various groups. Cultural challenges predicted at the beginning to become obstacles in leading were not found.

One thing is certain, that there is no village led by the Village Head from the Indonesian Chinese ethnic population whose population is 100% Indonesian Chinese. The politics of pluralism has finally become a choice. The politics of pluralism in this case is that politics is accommodative of differences. Andri who leads in the region of 80% of Muslims, according to him, does not experience problems in terms of acceptability. He is accustomed to filling out various events on a Muslim basis and his capacity as a Village Head is different from the religion which he does not feel is an obstacle.

The same thing was said by Fendi. He said:

"There are 3 hamlets in my village. 1 Muslim-based hamlet and 2 Indonesian Chinese-based hamlets. But my experience, taking care of those who are Moslem and Malay tends to be easier and more participatory than the two hamlets which are mostly Indonesian Chinese".

Fendi also said that there were no cultural constraints when he had to take care of areas that were indeed Muslim based, such as in the Tanjung Ratu Hamlet area which was part of his territory. After becoming the village head, according to him there were no obstacles because the community basically accepted and could cooperate. In the case of the Merawang Village Head, Zen said that the village he led was indeed a majority of Indonesian Chinese, however he applied the neutral principle when dealing with different identities. During his leadership, he acknowledged that there were no conflicts that stemmed from differences in identity, such as religion or ethnicity. Dicky, Lumut Village Head, who led approximately 50% of the ethnic Indonesian Chinese with the most varied distribution between Madura, Palembang, Malay, and so on also stressed that the politics of pluralism became a key word. Tolerance was the main thing and during the three periods he held office Dicky assured that there was no conflict, meaning relating to identity. If there is a conflict, he will usually quickly communicate with the figures from each group.

An interesting challenge was expressed by Jhon in a village whose population was 90% Indonesian Chinese, besides Malay, Madura, and other ethnicities in a small percentage. Indonesian Chinese culture generally deals more with the business world and is difficult to participate actively in various activities [16]. Apparently the condition of most people who feel that they are not directly in touch with the political world is relatively difficult to be involved in a wider scope. Even so, Jhon said that since he became the Village Head, there was an increase in participation, if previously the population participated in various forums only around 20% of the total invitations, since the past few years it has tended to increase to 50%. According to him,

the most important thing is to ensure that every meeting has benefits and looks real to them.

Meanwhile, Kim which is the Head of Gunung Pelawan village, said that the information is more complex; namely the village with a Muslim majority of about 65%, with more diverse ethnicities, ranging from Malay, Indonesian Chinese, Sundanese, Javanese, Palembang, and even indigenous Bangka tribes, such as the Lom Tribe. With an area of 6 hamlets, he assured that there were no significant obstacle during his administration regarding the matter of culture and identity. The plurality in the village led by Kim not only concerns ethnicity, but also diverse religions and cultures.

The condition above confirms the perception that has been developing so far that Indonesian Chinese ethnicity is less proactive in the social world and that it is still experiencing a transition. Changes in culture from passive to active still require a long process, at least at the grassroots level in a broader dimension beyond business and economic activities. Such character indicates that time is still needed to make Indonesian Chinese ethnic really works like most ethnic groups, although of course at the elite level and at the village level have shown significant changes.

The figure shows that in the village whose population is either majority, equally, or minority consisting of *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic, more groups of people grows awareness to contribute more. Those who take part in politics generally depart from participating under government organizations or within broader organizations so that they were known first and then received support when running for village head. This study also found that Indonesian Chinese ethnic in the leadership management succeeded in applying the principle of pluralism which was characterized by the absence of conflict with nuances of identity. Figure 1 above shows that the political character of the Indonesian Chinese village heads are the same in all regions, either in those of with majority, equally and minority of *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The ethnic Indonesian Chinese who had previously been known to be only interested in being involved in politics has shown a fundamental change at the grassroots level. As the elite and national levels experience regulatory changes and widespread political dynamics in the movement to revive the Indonesian Chinese identity, then the same conditions occur at the grassroots level. Indonesian Chinese ethnic at the village level began to look at opportunities to be involved in the world of electoral politics.

This study concluded that ethnic Indonesian Chinese experienced significant changes in the electoral political dimension. That the Indonesian Chinese chose to be involved in the world of electoral politics at the village level because of the desire to contribute more for their communities. At least in the study, it was found that village heads from Indonesian Chinese circles basically pioneered political careers from below, ranging from administrators of RT, RW, BPD, and even socio-economic organizations to a wider scope. They have been involved in the social process

and are not politicians who have embarked into politics instantly.

This study found the fact that Indonesian Chinese involvement as the village head was not due to a boom in discourse on strengthening the Indonesian Chinese ethnic identity politics. Ahok did not inspire them, instead they are self-assured that that the electoral political path at the village level was their own choice supported by strong encouragement from the community. Whereas all this time Ahok was known as the inspiration of the Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups to enter the world of politics, in the context of the village head, it was precisely the pioneering from below that determined their political lines. It can be said that the influence is almost non-existent except simply being a 'good news' as stated by one of the village head.

In the end, pluralism politics became a choice when the village head of the ethnic Indonesian Chinese took the lead. There are several variations in the composition of the population they lead, among them are the majority of Indonesian Chinese, the majority of non-Indonesian Chinese, and a wider variety of ethnicities. By the context of this research, it was found that politics of pluralism is one's consideration when leading his region. The village heads did not experience identity constraints and were generally accepted by various groups, including during some religious events that were not part of the village head's religion.

This study finally confirmed that, after the reformation period, there was indeed a change in political dynamics and identity among the Indonesian Chinese. The politics of transformation is more open not only among the political elite at the Jakarta level, but also in the regions. It is interesting that the change in the political format was also followed by changes in their political orientation that were not only limited to re-claiming identities after being revoked for a long time during the New Order period, but also making them become accustomed to the general political format. If the early reforms were still marked by efforts to seize lost identities, the afterwards politics normalization has become the indicator of how *Indonesian Chinese* ethnic became indicator that Indonesian Chinese Ethnic became increasingly moderate and open in the political constellation, at least at the grassroots level as shown in this study.

Thus, the expansion of the meaning of participation and activity in a broader spectrum, is interesting in its correlation with the study by Reid [17] which says that a new label is needed for Indonesian Chinese. The new label, according to the author as also in conjunction with this study, is a label that is more substantive political participation in social spaces, half of electoral politics, half of pluralism politics.

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