

## IMAGE POLITICS IN THE CONTEST FOR THE REGIONAL HEAD ELECTION OF GIANYAR REGENCY IN THE REFORM ERA

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### Abstract

Direct local elections, as a reform response, have driven regional head candidates in Gianyar Regency, Bali, to adopt various strategies to win the contest. The candidates use image politics by crafting cultural activities as part of their political art to build a positive image in all available spaces. The primary goal of these image-building efforts is to shape public opinion and gather support. This approach also serves as a means of communication, allowing candidates to address the aspirations of grassroots communities directly. This study employed qualitative research methods, starting with observation, document collection, online data searches, and in-depth interviews with informants. The research identified various forms of image politics used by regional head candidates in Gianyar during the reform era elections. These included community engagement activities like *simakrama* (gatherings with traditional communities), collective prayers at temples and *subak* (irrigation associations), free medical services, fishing events, and blood donation drives. These efforts aimed to build a positive public image and connect with voters directly.

**Keywords:** image politics, contestation, regional head elections

### A. INTRODUCTION

Since June 2005, Indonesia has entered a new phase in the administration of local governance, where regional heads, including Governors and Regents/Mayors, are directly elected by the people. The direct election of regional heads is in accordance with the mandate of Law Number 32 of 2004 concerning Regional Government, aimed at producing democratic regional leadership that reflects the will and demands of the people. The restoration of the basic rights of communities in the regions is part of the recruitment process for regional leadership, which is expected to enhance democratic life at the local level. The direct election of regional heads leads to contests between candidate pairs to secure the people's votes and garner support.

According to Budianto (2019), contestation can be understood as a struggle between various groups, each fighting for ideologies, values, solutions, and so on. Contestation takes place within an arena, which serves as the stage for the competition for power. Arena, according to Bourdieu as cited by Pahmi (2010), is a "field of forces," a dynamic space where diverse potentials are involved. The arena is a contest to seize and maintain power. This contestation is seen as a means to transform and preserve the arena of power.

In direct regional head elections, the political arena is very broad, starting from the national scale, as each pair of candidates must obtain recommendations from the party's central executive board (DPP), and the party's regional executive board (DPD) provides input to the DPP. The involvement of both national and regional elites serves to strengthen their political network. The political contest in the regional head election in Bali Province is very

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complex, as all interest groups are involved: political elites, local intellectuals, traditional leaders, mass organizations, art groups, farmer groups (subak), dadya groups (soroh), and various associations, including school alumni.

The direct election of regional heads during the reform era in Gianyar Regency, as viewed from the political parties supporting the candidates and their origins, saw competition between two major parties, PDIP and Golkar. Among the competing figures were those from Puri Ubud, Puri Gianyar, and Puri Peliatan. Figures from Puri Ubud and Puri Peliatan were supported by Golkar and its coalition, while Puri Gianyar was supported by PDIP. In addition to the figures from the Puri, political party figures from ordinary citizens with social capital also emerged to contest the direct regional head election in Gianyar Regency. Below are the names of the regional head candidates along with their supporting parties and vote results in the reform era regional head election.

Table 1. Names of Regional Head Candidates in Gianyar Regency during the Reform Era

No	Names of Regional Head and Deputy Regional Head Candidates	Year	Supporting Party	Number of Votes
1	Anak Agung Baratha with I Putu Yudany Tema	2008	PDIP	134.527 (49,33%).
	Cokorde Artha Ardhana Sukawati with Dewa Made Sutanaya		Golkar, PKPB, PNBK, PNIMarhaen, Demokrat, Patriot, PKPI, Pelopor,	138.182 (50,67%)
2	Agung Baratha with I Made Mahayastra.	2012	PDIP, Demokrat	193.643 (69.79%)
	Cokorda Putra Nindya wiith Anak Agung Gede Agung		Golkar, PDP, Hanura, PPIB, PNI Marhaen	83.838 (30.21%)
3	I Made Mahayastra with Anak Agung Mayun	2018	PDIP, Hanura, PAN	193.259 (67.51%)
	Cok Kerthiyasa with Pande Maharani		Golkar, Nasdem, Demokrat, PKPN, Gerindra	93,336 (32.49%)

Source: Gianyar Regency General Election Commission (KPUD)

The table above shows that political parties are still heavily reliant on figures from the Puri to nominate candidates for regional head positions. The table also indicates changes in political coalitions in each regional election period, and some smaller parties no longer secure seats in the Gianyar Regency Regional Legislative Council (DPRD).

Political parties supporting a candidate pair are a key factor in winning the regional head election. According to Neumann, as cited by Budiardjo (2015), political parties are a large intermediary that connects social forces and ideologies with official government institutions.

In addition to leveraging their political machinery, regional head candidates and their winning teams also mobilize primordial forces to gain support, using approaches such as *simakrama* (traditional social interactions) and social service activities to introduce themselves to the community. *Simakrama* and social service activities serve as media to enhance the political image of the regional head candidate. Bungin (2018) states that political leaders, heads of state, and other organizational leaders who want to gain support from the

masses must have a strong public image. The image of a regional head candidate is necessary to show that they care about the needs of the community in the areas they visit. The image politics in the regional head election contest in Gianyar Regency is an interesting subject for research, as it will reveal how image politics played a role in the regional head election contest during the reform era.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The General Election Commission (KPU)**

Political candidates often utilize various strategies to build their public image and gain electoral support (Bungin, 2018). Simakrama, or traditional social interactions, serves as a medium for political branding and direct engagement with voters (Mietzner, 2009). Goffman (1959) argues that political candidates engage in impression management, presenting themselves in ways that resonate with voters' cultural and emotional values.

Norris (2000) highlights that political image plays a critical role in voter perception, influencing trust, credibility, and electability. Similarly, McAllister (2007) states that candidates who successfully build a strong political persona are more likely to gain public support and electoral success.

Primordialism, which refers to the use of cultural, ethnic, or religious identity in political mobilization, is a common strategy in regional elections (Geertz, 1973). Hadiz (2010) argues that political candidates often exploit local identity and networks to create a sense of belonging among voters. Studies by Aspinall & Sukmajati (2016) demonstrate that patron-client relationships remain a dominant factor in Indonesian electoral politics, where candidates rely on personal networks and traditional leaders to mobilize support.

Research by Choi (2011) suggests that social service activities, such as charity work and community events, help enhance the candidate's visibility and acceptance among voters. This aligns with Sulistyono (2002), who states that voter loyalty is often built through direct social engagement rather than policy promises alone.

The General Election Commission (KPU) plays a fundamental role in ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections (Santoso, 2019). Mietzner (2012) emphasizes that the effectiveness of electoral institutions is a key factor in determining democratic consolidation in Indonesia. However, Ufen (2008) argues that electoral governance in Indonesia still faces challenges such as vote-buying, administrative inefficiencies, and political interference:

1. Voter Participation : High turnout is an indicator of public trust and electoral engagement (Liddle & Mujani, 2007).
2. Availability and Accessibility of Election Information : Transparency in electoral processes and accessible voter education are essential for informed voting decisions (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).
3. Voter Registration Process : An efficient and inclusive voter registration mechanism ensures no eligible voter is disenfranchised (Schiller, 2009).
4. Transparency and Accountability : Electoral transparency reduces the risk of fraud and strengthens public trust (Hadiz, 2017).
5. Availability of Facilities and Infrastructure : Providing disabled-friendly polling stations and remote area access improves electoral inclusivity (Davidson, 2009).
6. Election Supervision : Strong oversight from Bawaslu (Election Supervisory Body) is crucial in detecting and preventing fraud (Mietzner, 2012).
7. Resolution of Election Disputes : A fair and transparent election dispute mechanism enhances public confidence in the system (Ufen, 2008).
8. Valid and Legitimate Election Results : Ensuring the accuracy and credibility of vote counting and result announcements prevents post-election conflicts (Liddle, 2018).

9. Involvement of Stakeholders : Collaboration between civil society organizations, media, and international observers promotes credible elections (Schulte Nordholt, 2016).

These indicators assist the KPU in ensuring that the election process is conducted properly and in accordance with the democratic principles of transparency, fairness, and accountability (Santoso, R. 2019). Despite progress in electoral administration, challenges remain in ensuring fully democratic elections. Hadiz (2017) highlights that money politics and clientelism continue to undermine electoral integrity. Aspinall & Berenschot (2019) argue that local political elites manipulate the system to maintain power, often through vote-buying and patronage networks.

Tomsa (2019) suggests that stronger legal frameworks and law enforcement are required to combat electoral fraud and corruption. Additionally, Mietzner (2014) emphasizes the need for increased political literacy among voters to reduce susceptibility to manipulation. The regional election process in Indonesia, particularly in Gianyar Regency, reflects the importance of political image, primordial strategies, and KPU governance. Candidates use *simakrama* and social service activities to build a strong public image and mobilize voter support. The KPU plays a crucial role in ensuring electoral integrity, yet challenges such as money politics and electoral fraud persist. Strengthening institutional frameworks, transparency measures, and voter education programs is essential to enhancing democracy in Indonesia.

### **Political Party**

According to Prasetya (2011), a political party is an organization composed of a group of people who share a common goal to acquire, maintain, or influence power within the government. Political parties function as a tool to realize the political interests of the members or groups within them. The main objective of a political party is to gain power through elections and then implement policies that align with the ideology or program they promote. In general, political parties are an essential component of a democratic system because they formulate, promote, and execute programs that are expected to meet the needs and aspirations of the people.

Indicators of political parties refer to the factors or characteristics that can be used to measure the performance, influence, or effectiveness of political parties within a political system. Below are some indicators commonly used to assess the success or role of political parties:

1. Ideology and Political Programs
2. Political Participation
3. Representation
4. Organizational Structure
5. Performance in Government
6. Transparency and Accountability
7. Influence and Popularity
8. Relations with Other Political Parties
9. Leadership
10. Innovation and Adaptation
11. Management of Internal Conflicts

### **C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research on image politics in the contestation of the regional head election in Gianyar Regency during the reform era, as outlined in the issues above, uses a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is conducted because the researcher aims to explore the

phenomenon of image politics in the 2008, 2012, and 2018 regional head elections in Gianyar. The initial data collection was done through observation, followed by in-depth interviews with informants. The informants were selected using purposive sampling due to their knowledge about image politics in the contestation of regional head elections. Data was also obtained from documents from the Gianyar Election Commission (KPUD) and other institutions, as well as data collected online. The informants in this research include community leaders, puri figures, and political elites.

#### **D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Image politics in the contestation of the regional head election in Gianyar Regency during the reform era was carried out through various activities such as *simakrama* (social gatherings), joint prayers, free medical treatments, fast-water fishing competitions, and blood donations.

##### **Simakrama**

*Simakrama*/silaturahmi/face-to-face meetings with the residents of *banjar adat* (customary village) are held to present the programs that will be implemented if the candidate is elected as the regional head. A struggle occurs between the winning team and community leaders to carry out *simakrama*. *Simakrama* holds important values in strengthening political relations between the regional head candidates and the community, breaking the deadlock among various elites, community groups, and political factions. Through *simakrama*, the political deadlock among various elite groups and political factions becomes fluid. *Simakrama* can take place in the *wantilan pura* (temple hall) or *balai banjar*, attended by the *prajuru adat* (customary village leaders) and the community.

According to Agus Mahayastra, the candidate for Bupati (Regent) of Gianyar, number 2, who was supported by PDIP, quoted from NusaBali.com on June 19, 2016, he said that in the 2018 local elections, he had reached voters in 453 of the 504 *banjars* in Gianyar over three years. Since the start of the Gianyar election campaign in January 2018, the Aman package and its winning team have been intensively conducting *simakrama* with the community. In one day, they could visit four to six places for *simakrama*, in addition to attending invitations for religious ceremonies. Besides *simakrama* by directly meeting the community, the winning team also worked in several *banjars*.

The regional head candidates' participation in *simakrama* is facilitated by the *prajuru adat*, such as the *Bendesa* (customary village leader) and assisted by the *Kelihan adat* (customary village chief). Meanwhile, village heads and sub-village heads, according to Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, Article 29, point j, are prohibited from participating in electoral campaigns. The limited movement of village apparatus at the village level gives the *prajuru adat* absolute authority, making their role in every political activity, including the regional head election, very strategic. The following is the *simakrama* of the Aman package, accompanied by the winning team and legislative candidates from the supporting party in the 2018 Gianyar regency head election.



Figure 1. *Simakrama* of the Aman Pair  
Documentation: Tribune Bali

In *simakrama*, the candidate for regional head can present their flagship programs, convincing voters to come to the polling stations and vote for them. The delivery of political programs requires knowledge and intelligence so that the public does not feel coerced into participating, nor do they see it as violence, but rather as something natural and acceptable. According to Bourdieu, as quoted by Lubis (2014), symbolic violence generally occurs in the process of socialization and the instillation of ideological values in daily life. Therefore, the delivery of programs by the candidate, facilitated by the Bendesa and *prajuru adat* in *simakrama*, aligns with Foucault's statement, as quoted by Lubis (2014), that power is a relationship that operates within certain spaces and times. Power does not only function through intimidation and violence, but primarily through rules and normalization. *Simakrama* serves as an arena used by the regional head candidates and their winning teams to build public support, often ending in a unified resolve. The unified resolve, as a result of agreement in *paruman adat*, becomes binding rules for the *adat* community, with penalties for violators.

Various strategies are used by candidates to gain sympathy from the *adat* community. In addition to *simakrama*, where they directly present their programs at the *banjar* or *wantilan* halls, candidates also engage in joint prayers and meet directly with *adat* leaders, who are expected to act as intermediaries to introduce the candidates to other members of the *adat* community. Candidates compete to build their political image and win the public's sympathy to secure victory in the regional head election. According to Pahmi (2010), the political image constructed typically emphasizes the candidate's strengths and minimizes their shortcomings.

According to Piliang (2011), image is an instrument for controlling the psyche and regulating the external behavior of those influenced. Through *simakrama*, candidates can directly communicate their programs, which creates a political impression aimed at attempting to hegemonize the public with policies that are perceived to address the people's needs. For Gramsci, as quoted by Simon (2004), hegemony occurs when the way of life, thinking, and perspectives of the lower class, especially the proletariat, have adopted and accepted the way of thinking and lifestyle of the dominant elite class. In other words, the ideology of the dominant group has been voluntarily adopted by those being dominated.

Paul Virilio, as quoted by Piliang (2010) in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, states that modern social and political worlds cannot be separated from the politics of image or spectacle politics. This involves creating various forms of public spectacles as part of a political strategy to shape the desired image by certain political groups, where depictions of truth are mixed with the veil of interests (social, political, ideological). In

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addition to *simakrama*, political image-building is now also conducted through social media such as Facebook, vlogs, and Instagram. The millennial generation in Bali, with the rise of information technology, has become more aware and critical of current issues, moving away from the "*koh ngomong*" political culture. This shift requires the acumen and skill of the success/winning team in packaging and communicating candidates through mass media and social media. Any mistakes in the packaging can significantly affect the candidate's image during the campaign.

In addition to *simakrama*, joint prayers, and attending major ceremonial invitations like *Ngenteg Linggih*, *Pedudusan Agung*, and *Ngusaba Desa Ngusaba Nini* ceremonies, candidates also build their image by organizing health safaris, such as offering free medical services to the public.

### Joint Prayer

In the campaign, the use of places of worship and educational facilities is prohibited, but candidates for regional leadership often receive invitations from traditional leaders as representatives of the local community to participate in joint prayers. These invitations from the community must be attended by the candidates, serving as an opportunity for them to introduce themselves to the public. Joint prayers are usually held at the *Khayangan Tiga* temple, which is owned by the traditional village. This temple complex consists of the *Desa/Balai Agung* temple, where *Dewa Brahma* resides; the *Dalem* temple, where *Dewa Siwa* resides; and the *Puseh* temple, where *Dewa Wisnu* resides. According to Parimarta (2013), a traditional village is a community that governs itself autonomously and democratically within a clearly defined territorial boundary (*ulayat* rights), with its own leaders, rules (*awig-awig*), and wealth, and is not subordinated to a higher authority. Joint prayers are also held at the *Subak* temple, which is owned by the farmers. The prayers take place during the peak of ceremonies at these temples, where the candidate for regional leadership, accompanied by the traditional leaders, performs the prayers together with the community. The close relationship between the candidate for regional leader and the traditional leaders indirectly signifies support for the candidate in the local election. Since traditional leaders are respected figures, the local community tends to follow their lead.

### Free Medical Treatment

Corkorda Putra Nindya, the candidate for the Regent of Gianyar in the 2012 regional election, quoted from [coknindia.blogspot.com](http://coknindia.blogspot.com), stated: "Free medical treatment is carried out as one of the forms of the NING package's pro-people program and concern to assist the community and support the government's health programs.



Figure 2. Free Medical Treatment from the NING Couple  
Documentation: [coknindia.blogspot.com/2012](http://coknindia.blogspot.com/2012)

Free medical treatment as a campaign medium for regional head candidates to meet directly with the community is also a strategy to attract public attention. During the campaign period, candidates and their campaign teams must be able to utilize every available space, as political activities are regulated by election laws, meaning politics cannot be separated from the spaces that have been designated. This is different from Pahmi's (2010) statement, which suggests that political image-building operates freely and penetrates the spaces that have been created, reaching all available spaces. To gain public sympathy, regional head candidates and their campaign teams must build a positive image by taking actions that align with the needs of the community.

### **The Fishing Competition in Fast-Flowing Water**

The fishing competition in fast-flowing water is often organized by various groups, traditional villages, and banjar (neighborhoods). In these fishing contests, which are held by sekaa (youth groups), traditional villages, or banjar, they are typically used to raise funds for supporting traditional activities, such as mass cremations, temple renovations, and other adat (customary) facilities. The income generated from these fishing competitions comes from the registration fees or ticket costs for each participant. The ticket price depends on the size of the grand prize being contested.

The fishing competition in Gianyar Regency also has a large following, attracting participants from various age groups, including children, teenagers, and adults. This atmosphere is utilized by political figures to gain the sympathy of voters. In the direct election of regional heads, the fishing competition is also used by candidates to introduce themselves to the participants. Typically, at a designated time set by the event organizers, the regional head candidates release the master fish that will be the focus of the competition. The participant who catches the master fish is declared the winner. The prize ceremony for the winner is conducted by the candidate for regional head or by their campaign team.

### **Blood Donation**

Blood donation, as a social action, is not something that everyone can do, because before the donation, a strict health check is conducted by the officers. If the requirements are not met, the blood donation cannot take place. Political parties, as organizations that are closely connected to the community and show sensitivity to the public, often carry out blood donation activities with their members and sympathizers. Blood donation can enhance the image of the political party, especially when the regional head candidate they support actively participates as a donor. Various social activities are carried out by regional head candidates to improve their political image in the community, in order to gain support and win in the regional head election contest in Gianyar Regency during the reform era. According to Bungin (2018), the image of a good leader, with proper branding, will help strengthen public acceptance of the leader. Political image-building is constructed well and positively to achieve the desired goals.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Political image-building in the contest for the regional head election in Gianyar Regency during the reform era was carried out by the candidates and their winning teams. The main objective of image politics is to generate a positive image, shape public opinion, and garner votes to win the regional head election. Image politics serves as one of the communication tools for the candidates to directly convey their message to the public, allowing the aspirations of the grassroots community to be heard.

Forms of image-building by regional head candidates in Gianyar Regency during the reform era include *simakrama*, typically held at the banjar or *wantilan* halls, and joint prayers at the Pura *Khayangan Tiga*, which is a temple owned by the adat village. Through these

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activities, candidates have the opportunity to meet directly with the community. Free medical services and blood donations are social service activities that have received significant attention from the public. Meanwhile, fishing in the fast-flowing river is another form of social service by the candidates to engage with the fishing community.

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