

# Post-Reform Chinese Political Dynamics in North Sumatera

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**Abstract:** One of the positive impacts of the 1998 Reformation was the opening of the tap of opportunity for all citizens to be directly involved in electoral politics as political actors elected at the ballot box or as constituents who have the right to vote. Courage then grows to uphold democracy for both minority and majority groups. There are several important reasons that underlie the ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera who were previously less interested in getting into politics, starting to enter the general election arena to participate in the contestation as executive and legislative candidates. The purpose of this study is to explain how the political dynamics of ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera after the Reformation. The research method is qualitative with descriptive analysis. The results of this study describe the social dynamics of the ethnic Chinese before the reformation, the reasons for the involvement of the ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera to be involved in politics and the social and political impact of the involvement of the ethnic Chinese in contesting the general election in North Sumatera after the Reformation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Research related to ethnic identity politics in the last decade has attracted the attention of experts and researchers in Indonesia. Especially if it is linked to the democratic process in the general election after the end of the New Order Regime for 32 years. Where one of the positive impacts of the 1998 Reformation was the opening of the tap of opportunity for all citizens to be directly involved in electoral politics as political actors elected at the ballot box or as constituents who have the right to vote (Setijad, 2016).

Courage then grew to uphold democracy for both minority and majority groups, including ethnic Chinese who during President Soeharto's administration were not too interested in politics but after reformation began to open up to politics (Pratama, 2016). There are several important reasons that underlie the ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera who were previously less interested in getting into politics, starting to enter the general election arena to participate in the contestation as executive and legislative candidates.

One of the reasons is that political openness after the reformation era moved figures of Chinese ethnic descent in North Sumatera to engage directly in practical political activities as politicians. As it is known that previously the Chinese were more involved as entrepreneurs and traders in regional development indirectly or the inherent image as ethnic intermediaries tended to be politicized by various political interests.

Ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs in North Sumatera are increasingly aware that regional development must be directly involved in the formal political system in order to make changes quickly to keep up with the current political changes. The business network capital and financial strength certainly help the ethnic Chinese elites to compete with other politicians who are used to electoral battles.

However, the increasingly wide-open current of political change from political parties to attract figures, especially those with business networks and financial strength, is a practical political fact for ethnic Chinese businessmen to become politicians.

In general, not all ethnic Chinese who fought in the election managed to sit as regional heads or

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members of the legislature. However, not a few politicians of ethnic Chinese descent can be elected and even become elites in a political party in North Sumatera. For example; A doctor and a philanthropist social activist named Sofyan Tan, in the 2010 regional head election in Medan City, he ran in pairs with a female education figure named Nelly Armayanti.

At that time there were 10 pairs of candidates and the pair Sofyan Tan-Nelly Armayanti entered the 2nd round but lost to the pair Rahudman Harahap-Zdulmi Eldin who was eventually elected Mayor and Deputy Mayor for 2010-2015. However, after losing in the Regional Head Election, in the 2014 legislative election, politician of ethnic Chinese descent, Sofyan Tan did not give up and was discouraged, he then ran again and was successfully elected to parliament from the PDI-P from the constituency of North Sumatera I which covers the area, namely the City of Medan, Deli Serdang Regency, Serdang Bedagai Regency and Tebing Tinggi City.

Then another ethnic Chinese descendant, Hasyim SE, who currently serves as the chairman of the parliament in Medan City for the 2019-2024 period. Then, there is the name Iskandar ST who succeeded in occupying the chairman of the North Sumatera Nasional Demokrat Party which was previously led by H.T Erry Nuradi who is a senior politician and also the Governor of North Sumatera. Not only that, the PDI Perjuangan politician named Brilian Moktar is also a descendant of ethnic Chinese who managed to sit as a member of parliament in North Sumatera for two terms.

The dynamics of success of the ethnic Chinese political elite in North Sumatera brought a shift in the voting behavior of the people of North Sumatera. Where sociological factors, religion, ethnicity play an important role in the rational choice of society. This strengthens the argument that the journey of the ethnic Chinese in politics in North Sumatera has been accepted by the wider community. Of course, this is very dynamic and does not run automatically, considering that if it cannot be managed properly, the situation for the entry of ethnic Chinese into politics will continue.

The existence of ethnic Chinese in politics cannot be separated from the social changes of the Chinese ethnicity in improving their Chinese image, by shifting the traditional Chinese image to a nationalist Chinese (Yudono et al., 2018). This tendency continues to develop among the younger generation, where they They no longer master traditional Chinese customs and instead participate in assimilate and learn the culture of other ethnicities so that this new

packaging and image is more acceptable to local community groups (Ho, 1985).

Ethnic Chinese citizens who used to only routinely cast their votes, have slowly but surely begun to participate in political contestations, both legislative elections and regional head elections (Jayusman, 2019). This means that through the direct involvement of ethnic Chinese on the political stage in North Sumatera, it will automatically build interactions between ethnic Chinese politicians and other communities. This is certainly good for non-Chinese people in North Sumatera because there is a cultural understanding that can have a direct impact on regional development.

The Chinese trade ethos and mentality that puts forward mutual trust and efficiency certainly builds representation, not falsehood between the people and their representatives in parliament. The fact that ethnic Chinese descendants have started to exist in North Sumatera politics has a positive impact on the beliefs and motivations of ethnic Chinese in the public policy process. The purpose of this study is to explain how the political dynamics of the ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera after the Reformation.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODS

The writing of this article uses a descriptive analytical research method with a qualitative approach. The use of this method is intended, referring to (Creswell, 2016) Researchers can focus on phenomena that occur on problems or phenomena that are actual at the time the research is carried out, then describe the facts about the problem being investigated as they are accompanied by rational and accurate interpretations. This method will help researchers to understand the realities that occur regarding the political dynamics of the ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera after the Reformation. Then the primary data of this research was obtained by the author from journals, books and documents or reports related to the research focus. The author then analyzes the phenomenon of the case inductively regarding the social dynamics of the Chinese before the reform, the reasons for the involvement of the Chinese in North Sumatera to be involved in politics and the social and political impact of the involvement of the ethnic Chinese in contesting the general election in North Sumatera after the Reformation.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Chinese Ethnic Social Dynamics Before Reform

The existence of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, including in North Sumatra Province, has existed for hundreds of years, even before the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence was read on August 17, 1945. Several residents of ethnic Chinese descent even participated in seizing and defending Indonesian independence. Such as: Tjia Giok Thwam who was a fighter with the military rank of Second Lieutenant of Chinese descent who was involved in the battle in Surabaya in 1945. Then there was a name, Lie Eng Hok, a journalist who had spearheaded the Banten rebellion movement against the Dutch East Indies government. Then there is the name Ferry Sie King Lien who fought in the Solo battle in 1949. Then Liem Koen Hian is a journalist and politician who succeeded in founding the Chinese Indonesian Party (PTI from Banjarmasin and ethnic Chinese descent named John Lie, a naval military officer who defended independence Indonesia in Cilacap (Chen, 2022).

In its development, during the New Order era, the existence of ethnic Chinese was a crucial problem that had a very complex level of complexity. The problem is so complex, not only regarding its national identity, but also the political, economic and cultural issues that are developing in Indonesia (Lubis, 1995). The negative image of the Chinese Ethnic in the New Order government, which was seen in its policies, resulted in many ethnic Chinese being discriminated against. One of the policies carried out by the New Order Regime was the issuance of Presidential Instruction Number 14 of 1967 which contained a ban on Chinese religious activities, beliefs, and customs in Indonesia. Through this policy, the government of President Soeharto gave discriminatory treatment and restricted the Chinese ethnic group in social and political matters.

Of course, the policy of the New Order Regime continued the policy of Dutch colonialism so that the Chinese did not merge with the community. This also happened in several areas in North Sumatra. For example, regarding the discrimination experienced by ethnic Chinese in Medan City, there were not many Chinese people who entered and were in government (Tan, 1994).

However, the spirit of economic development in North Sumatra Province became important as a turning point for the social dynamics of the Chinese ethnic. Moreover, settlements based on plural

ethnicity began to occur in the province of North Sumatra, where the separation of regions based on ethnicity was part of the policy of Dutch colonialism by separating one ethnic group from another. Until the Javanese village area, Mandailing village, Indian village (rivet) and Chinese settlements were formed in Medan City, North Sumatra Province (Pelly, 1994).

Another reason why ethnic Chinese were discriminated against (Coppel, 1994) during the New Order Regime was that many ethnic Chinese were accused of being involved in the left, so that many ethnic Chinese figures were arrested. It is clear that the Chinese have experienced political trauma as a result of the massacre of ethnic Chinese carried out in the early days of Suharto's rule. The massacre of ethnic Chinese was indicated as a follow-up to the government which took the pretext of suppressing the events of September 30, 1965.

This is also the reason, regarding the National Identity Card and birth certificate, ethnic Chinese must include Proof of Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia. Where most of the adherents of the Confucian Religion in North Sumatra end up registering other religions on their Identity Cards, if they do not choose one of the existing religions, it is the same as not getting their rights as citizens and even being accused of being part of the Indonesian Communist Party which creates no space for citizens of ethnic Chinese descent in Indonesian politics.

It was only during the Reformation period, when President Abdulrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) became President of the Republic of Indonesia, that the situation changed. The fourth president of the Republic of Indonesia on January 17, 2000, President Gus Dur made a historic and monumental decision. Gus Dur issued Presidential Instruction No. 6 of 2000 which revoked Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 which contained a ban on Chinese religious activities, beliefs, and customs in Indonesia. Gusdur's policy gave birth to the freedom of ethnic Chinese in carrying out religious rituals, customs, and allowed the expression of their culture in Indonesia (Lubis, 2015).

So it is very relevant behind Gus Dur's idea when it comes to abolishing all racist and discriminatory regulations in Indonesia. The idea was born so that the values contained in the spirit of anti-racism reflect into the souls and lives of all elements of the nation. The value of sincerity, the spirit of anti-racism struggle, and respect for fellow citizens of the nation. This is very important for the future of the nation in the future. This is the starting point for the opening of

the Ethnic Chinese accessibility in politics in Indonesia, including in North Sumatera Province.

### **3.2 Reasons for Involvement Ethnic Chinese in North Sumatera Are Involved in Politics**

President Gus Dur's policy of issuing Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 6 of 2000 which contained the repeal of Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 which contained a ban on Chinese religious activities, beliefs, and customs in Indonesia, was a momentum for Ethnic Chinese Descendants to enter politics in Sumatera. North. Ethnic Chinese have a long history in many areas of North Sumatera Province. They are citizens of Indonesian descent who feel they have a debt of gratitude to advance the Province of North Sumatera through the policy and development process.

Of course, the motivation is that being elected as a public official, either as a member of the legislature or as an executive member of the policy process by citizens of Chinese descent can improve many aspects (La Ode, 2012). As; economy, infrastructure, defence, education and technology, institutions, and culture. Development in North Sumatera Province has become a transformation of change for the better through planned efforts. In the context of North Sumatera Province, expectations for the Transformation influenced by the Chinese Ethnic directly touch the economic structure with the increase and rapid production growth in the industrial and service sectors. So that the contribution of the ethnic Chinese to the income of the community is getting bigger along with the opening of many jobs and the decline in the unemployment rate.

Post-reform, especially in the period from 2005 to 2021, the contribution of the Chinese ethnic in development in North Sumatera Province looks great. The main thing is regarding the open involvement of the Chinese in politics, which continues to develop and gets the attention of the public. Politician Sofyan Tan, for example, when he was elected as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives in the 2019 General Election which then won the most votes in North Sumatera with 109,374 votes, defeating other political figures who are much more famous such as Yasonna Laoly (Minister of Law and Human Rights), H.T Erry Nuradi (Former) Governor of North Sumatera, Tifatul Sembiring from Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, and Father Muhammad Syafii from the Partai Gerindra (Antara News.com, 2019).

What made Sofyan Tan's voice so high in his constituency was his clear policies related to the construction of schools, hospitals and his attention to

small businesses in helping the community so that Sofyan Tan gained such great trust from the community. This is certainly a role model and excellence for the ethnic Chinese of Chinese descent in the economic field to contribute to development in North Sumatera through the political process (Erniwati, 2007).

Of course, the superiority of the Chinese in the economic field cannot be separated from the kinship ties that provide the internal social network among the Chinese entrepreneurs with the social network as an anchor. Where trust and commitment to political promises inspire the formation of social networks, which start from kinship ties and bonds of friendship that exist within the ethnic Chinese community itself.

Another factor that motivates ethnic Chinese descendants to enter politics is to provide hope and a new picture that politics is a free space that can be accessed by all groups. In addition, the presence of ethnic Chinese in politics is proof to the public that their difference in politics is a positive thing and eliminates the stereotypes that were inherent during the reign of President Soeharto. So that the involvement of ethnic Chinese descendants in North Sumatera in politics will automatically give a new color to existing political life. Mainly about diversity and tolerance in North Sumatera.

### **3.3 The Social Impact of Ethnic Chinese Involvement in Politics**

In general, the involvement of ethnic Chinese descent into politics in North Sumatera has an impact on increasing public confidence in diversity and tolerance. In particular, of course, the social impact on the confidence of the people of ethnic Chinese descent in interpreting themselves as an inseparable part of Indonesia which was discriminated against during the administration of President Soeharto during the New Order era.

Of course, the pioneers of ethnic Chinese descent who first entered politics will encourage people to participate in politics. So that the ethnic Chinese community feels that participation in formal discussions and news in the mass media with political themes is important for them. It must be admitted that it takes a very long time to break through the limitations or at least increase the role of the ethnic Chinese community in politics. The reason is the attitude and behavior of ethnic Chinese descent who prioritize the economic side rather than looking at politics which is not considered a priority.

Despite their own political instincts, the ethnic Chinese still have a tendency to gain public office

through the election process. Of course, this is their motivation for ethnic Chinese descent who are included in the structure and intend to nominate themselves as members of the local parliament in North Sumatra, become members of the senate from North Sumatra or nominate themselves as members of the Indonesia parliament from the electoral districts in North Sumatra.

For this reason, the political attitudes and behavior of ethnic Chinese descendants in North Sumatra after the Reformation are certainly determined by the process of political socialization they experience. Political socialization of ethnic Chinese descent is a process in which individuals passively accept the values, attitudes, and political roles that will be implemented in their society, while actively developing their pattern of independence through public policies to place ethnic Chinese descent into a role in Sumatran North society.

This of course does not stand alone, but there is support from stakeholders including political parties in North Sumatra in conducting cadre recruitment for residents of ethnic Chinese descent. Through political socialization, each party in North Sumatra actually shows the process of forming political attitudes and behavior patterns and is also a means for generations to pass down the line of demarcation that political beliefs must be carried out through virtue. Of course, when more and more ethnic Chinese descendants in North Sumatra are involved in politics, it will have an impact on the next generation. That there is hope through politics and public policy to erase and erode the bad memories of the past that are obtained by ethnic Chinese descendants in North Sumatra.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Ethnic descendants of Chinese descent have a long history of social and political dynamics in North Sumatra Province. Being an inseparable part in the history of seizing independence and defending the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, ethnic Chinese descendants were discriminated against during the New Order Regime. The policy of President Abdulrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) which issued Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 6 of 2000 which contained the repeal of Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 which contained a ban on Chinese religious activities, beliefs, and customs in Indonesia. into politics in North Sumatra.

Through electoral battles in the legislative and regional head elections, politicians of Chinese ethnic descent in North Sumatra have slowly received

attention and positive responses from the voting community. Several Chinese figures were later elected to become members of the local Parliament in North Sumatra, became members of the Indonesia parliament from electoral districts in North Sumatra and some even became the Chair of the local parliament in Medan City for the 2019-2024 period.

This is very important in removing Chinese citizens from getting negative stereotypes. Through the involvement of ethnic Chinese descent in politics, a person's psychological bond with one particular political party or organization is formed in the form of sympathy for the organization or political party. So that psychological bonds are formed as party identification that does not discriminate against ethnicity and ethnicity. Identification of ethnic Chinese descendants in North Sumatra is equal to other citizens so that negative perceptions are not based on ethnicity or ethnicity in North Sumatra but because of the behavior of politicians themselves.

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