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## **PKS Electoral Setbacks in the Indonesian Regional Elections: Pragmatism at the Cost of Losing Core Constituencies**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Alexander R Arifianto discusses recent electoral setbacks suffered by Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in the country's recent regional elections. He argues that Indonesian political parties need to find a balance between adopting pragmatic stances to widen their electoral appeal and maintaining their ideological positions to cater to their core constituencies and safeguard their party base.*

### **COMMENTARY**

On 27 November 2024, Indonesia held its simultaneous regional executive elections (Pilkada) to pick governors, regents, and mayors in 570 regions throughout the country. The results indicate that two ideologically opposed political parties — the nationalist-leaning [Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle \(PDI-P\)](#) and the Islamist [Prosperous Justice Party \(PKS\)](#) — suffered what was considered their biggest electoral setbacks in more than two decades. Many of their candidates who lost were incumbents.

This article focuses on understanding PKS' electoral setback. It argues that PKS — once a rising conservative religious party — has gradually replaced its Islamist orientation with a politically pragmatic platform. After the February 2024 Indonesian general election, the party [aligned itself with the Onward Indonesia Coalition \(KIM\)](#), a nationalist-leaning coalition that supports newly inaugurated president Prabowo Subianto. However, this pragmatic move has caused PKS' more ideologically inclined

cadres to feel increasingly alienated from the party's leadership. Eventually, these cadres decided to desert the party in large numbers during in the 2024 Pilkada.

### **PKS' Past Electoral Successes**

PKS was founded in 1998 as the party of the [“Religious Nurturing” community \(Jemaah Tarbiyah\)](#), an Indonesian Islamist movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. The movement grew in the 1980s at student-run mosques in major state universities like the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB), and University of Indonesia in Depok, West Java. The [first generation of PKS leaders](#) were engineers and university lecturers who attended universities in the Middle East and Malaysia, where they were attracted by Muslim Brotherhood teachings, and then formed *Jemaah Tarbiyah* upon their return to Indonesia.

Throughout the past decade, [PKS enjoyed modest electoral success](#). The party won 6.8 per cent of the total votes — and 40 seats — in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) during the 2014 general election. In 2019, it won a vote share of 8.2 per cent and 50 DPR seats. In this year's general election, the party won 8.4 per cent of total votes and 53 DPR seats.

Some analysts have interpreted the fact that PKS has never received more than 9 per cent of total votes despite its respectable electoral results as a sign that the party's conservative ideology has reached its limit among Indonesia's largely moderate Islamic voters. They believe the party [needs to moderate its ideology](#) and be politically pragmatic in its platform in order to reach out to voters from diverse sociocultural and religious groupings.

The PKS leadership appears to have heeded this advice. Over the past two decades, the party has [evolved](#) from a religious party that emphasised the need for Indonesian society and state to be based on Islamic principles to one that has for pragmatic reasons de-emphasised its religious agenda in favour of campaigning on everyday issues that resonate with voters, such as poverty, cost of living, and corruption.

As the party's ideology and leadership changes, the make-up of its constituency has changed as well. Whereas the party initially attracted urban Indonesian Muslims with modernist and reformist theological leanings, from 2010 onwards it has [increasingly attracted those with traditionalist Islamic leanings](#). As part of its strategy to make inroads into Indonesian regions where traditionalist Islam is predominant, primarily rural regions in West, Central, and East Java provinces, PKS teamed up initially with the National Awakening Party (PKB) — a party affiliated with Indonesia's largest Islamic mass movement, the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama — to support Anies Baswedan and his running mate, the chairperson of PKB, for the 2024 presidential race.

### **PKS Losses in the 2024 Pilkada**

Notwithstanding the party's respectable performance in the 2024 general elections, it suffered heavy losses in last month's regional executive elections.

For example, in the West Nusa Tenggara gubernatorial race, PKS politician Zulkieflimansyah [lost his re-election bid](#) to a former diplomat who was backed by Prabowo's KIM coalition. Zulkieflimansyah failed to get re-elected because PKS lost the backing of Nahdlatul Wathan, the largest Islamic organisation in the province. When he first ran for governor in 2018, Zulkieflimansyah was endorsed by Muhammad Zainul Majdi (Tuan Guru Bajang), his immediate predecessor as governor. Majdi currently serves as the general chair of Nahdlatul Wathan. However, while [Majdi officially backed Zulkieflimansyah](#) in his re-election bid, Nahdlatul Wathan's support was divided, given that Majdi's sister was also running for the governor's position. The resulting split among Nahdlatul Wathan followers worked to Zulkieflimansyah's disadvantage.

In addition, PKS [lost the mayoral race in Depok, West Java](#), one of its major electoral strongholds. Its candidate, the deputy mayor, lost by six percentage points to a politician from the Gerindra Party who was backed by the KIM coalition. The city's previous two mayors were PKS politicians, who each won two consecutive five-year terms, testifying to PKS' past strong standing in Depok.

PKS also [lost the mayoral race in Bandung](#), West Java's capital city, where its candidate lost to one from the National Democrat (Nasdem) Party. This loss was another major setback for the party, which had won the last mayoral election in Bandung in 2018.



Many PKS cadres supported Anies Baswedan's 2024 presidential bid and hoped to vote for him again during the Jakarta gubernatorial election. [AntaraTV, CC BY 3.0](#), via *Wikimedia Commons*.

## Understanding the PKS Setback

Why, after successfully building a stable and steady electoral base, did PKS lose strongholds that it had long held? Some analysts indicate that PKS' reverses are due to two pragmatic decisions taken by the party's leadership over the past few months.

The first was PKS' decision to [join Prabowo's KIM Coalition](#) in August 2024 after spending the previous year backing Anies Baswedan's presidential candidacy and mobilising its highly loyal cadres to support Anies. The second decision was PKS' reversal relating to the November 2024 gubernatorial race for Jakarta. PKS initially

decided to [support Anies' bid to run for Jakarta governor](#), only to [backtrack and withdraw that endorsement](#) when it agreed to join KIM. This reversal was in spite of the fact that many of the party's grassroots-level cadres are diehard Anies supporters.

According to analysts whom the writer has consulted for this article, PKS lost in its West Java strongholds like Depok and Bandung, and also lost the West Nusa Tenggara governor's race because it has been abandoned by its own cadres at the grassroots level who were disillusioned by the PKS leadership's political manoeuvres. These cadres have been fiercely loyal to the party and were responsible for PKS' respectable standing in the last three legislative elections (2014, 2019, and 2024).

By and large, PKS cadres are [religiously conservative and fiercely loyal to the party](#) largely because of their shared Islamic ideology, as articulated by Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna and by PKS founder Hilmi Aminuddin. Many supported Anies' 2024 presidential bid and hoped to vote for him again during the Jakarta gubernatorial election. However, Anies' inability to run in the latter election amid the lack of support from political parties, [caused discontent among PKS cadres](#). The discontent turned into anger at their own party once PKS decided to withdraw its support for Anies [in favour of Ridwan Kamil](#), the KIM-sponsored gubernatorial candidate. The cadres consider the party's u-turn on Anies as a betrayal both of him and of their political aspirations,

Hence, many PKS cadres apparently did not turn out to vote in the Jakarta gubernatorial race and in the mayoral elections in Depok and Bandung. The number of absentee voters in the [Jakarta gubernatorial election](#) is estimated to be 3.49 million, approximately 42.5 per cent of eligible voters, while in Depok, [nearly 547,000 voters](#) (approximately 38 per cent of eligible voters) decided not to cast their ballots.

It is believed by some analysts that the high number of absentee votes in Jakarta and Depok can be attributed to PKS cadres boycotting the Pilkada elections. This absence affected the number of votes received by PKS candidates, contributing to their electoral losses.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The Indonesian party system presents a competitive electoral environment for all political parties running for election. The fact that not a single party has been able to gain more than 20 per cent of the votes in general elections has created incentives for all parties to moderate their ideologies and develop politically pragmatic programmes to attract prospective voters.

The PKS strategy of moving away from its ideologically conservative original platform to embrace more pragmatic policies and programmes is a politically rational decision in a highly competitive electoral environment. In fact, the party has become so pragmatic that it decided to join the nationalist-leaning KIM coalition of Prabowo, something that was unthinkable when the party was founded in 1998.

However, this new pragmatic political orientation has alienated PKS grassroots-level cadres, who constitute a pivotal voting bloc in strongholds like Jakarta, Depok, and Bandung. They are not appreciative of the party leadership's decisions to join KIM and

to abandon Anies' Jakarta gubernatorial bid and hence deserted the party *en masse* in the November Pilkada, contributing to the defeat of its candidates in its erstwhile strongholds.

The main lesson from PKS' recent electoral setback is that political parties need to find a balance between political pragmatism and the political views of their core constituencies. While parties need to be pragmatic to maximise their electoral support, they must also pay attention to the concerns of their core supporters in order to avoid major erosion of their bases.

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