

Victory Amidst Suffering: Politics of Representation and Marginalization in the 2024 Surabaya City Regional Head Election

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ABSTRACT: *This research explains City Regional Head Election only presents one single candidate, namely the Eri Cahyadi - Armuji pair, there is no opponent from the proposal of a political party or individual candidate, this occurs in the midst of a social situation of residents who are experiencing forced eviction by PT Kereta Api Indonesia, even though they have paid taxes and lived there for decades, some even occupying the land for generations. Surabaya residents were evicted from their homes even though they were still in the house. The meaning of being evicted is that their ownership identity changed from a Certificate of Ownership, to the land belonging to the state, especially PT Kereta Api Indonesia. This study aims to analyze how evicted residents respond politically in a situation of limited electoral choices. With a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation, document analysis, and interviews. The analysis uses the theory of political representation (Pitkin) and spatial justice (Harvey). This study positions how evicted residents defend their property rights, but because it is in the atmosphere of the Pilkada, the researcher connects it with regional head candidates who make political promises in the hope of being elected in local democracy in Surabaya. What are the residents' political preferences for the mayoral candidate. This study found that citizens' political preferences were based on three preference patterns: apathy, clientelistic co-optation, and resistance through empty boxes. The victory of a single candidate occurred amidst social delegitimization and legal marginalization of citizens, but this did not seem to have any effect. This finding confirms the paradox of local democracy in Indonesia: electoral success is not always in line with substantive justice. This study contributes to the discourse on law and society, especially in the issue of the right to the city and the power relations between the state and corporations.*

Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Kota Surabaya 2024 hanya menghadirkan satu calon tunggal yaitu pasangan Eri Cahyadi - Armuji, tidak ada lawan dari usulan partai politik atau calon perseorangan, ini terjadi di tengah situasi sosial warga yang mengalami penggusuran paksa oleh PT Kereta Api Indonesia, meski mereka telah membayar pajak dan bermukim selama puluhan tahun, bahkan sebagian menempati tanah secara turun-temurun. Warga Surabaya tergusur dari tempat tinggalnya meski mereka masih berada di rumah tersebut. Maksud dari tergusur yaitu identitas kepemilikan mereka berubah dari Sertifikat Hak Milik, menjadi tanah tersebut milik negara khususnya PT Kereta Api Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana warga tergusur merespons secara politik dalam situasi keterbatasan pilihan elektoral. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, analisis dokumen, dan wawancara. Analisis menggunakan teori representasi politik (Pitkin)

dan keadilan spasial (Harvey). Penelitian ini memposisikan bagaimana warga tergusur untuk mempertahankan hak miliknya, namun karena dalam suasana Pilkada maka peneliti menghubungkan dengan calon kepala daerah yang memberikan janji-janji politik dengan harapan bisa terpilih pada demokrasi lokal di Surabaya. Bagaimana preferensi politik warga terhadap sang calon Walikota. Penelitian ini menghasilkan bahwa preferensi politik warga pada tiga pola preferensi: apatisme, kooptasi klientelistis, dan resistensi melalui kotak kosong. Kemenangan calon tunggal terjadi di tengah delegitimasi sosial dan marginalisasi hukum warga, namun sepertinya hal ini tidak berpengaruh. Temuan ini menegaskan paradoks demokrasi lokal di Indonesia: keberhasilan elektoral tidak selalu sejalan dengan keadilan substantif. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus hukum dan masyarakat, khususnya dalam isu hak atas kota dan relasi kuasa negara-korporasi.

Keywords: *Eviction, Pay Taxes, Candidate Victory, Voter Choice, 2024 Regional Elections* .

I. INTRODUCTION

Local democracy in Indonesia faces serious challenges when electoral contests do not provide substantive choices for citizens because the purpose of direct Regional Head Elections is for the aspirations of the people to be conveyed to prospective leaders so that after being elected the candidates work based on the aspirations of the citizens. The 2024 Surabaya Pilkada, which only presented a single candidate pair Eri Cahyadi - Armuji, took place amidst social conflict due to evictions by PT Kereta Api Indonesia against residents who legally paid taxes but did not receive legal protection. Residents felt they had rights to the land after occupying it for years, even from generation to generation, but they had to lose it without any clarity of land ownership in the middle of the Pilkada implementation. Residents have land ownership certificates in the form of SHM (Property Ownership Certificate) which is the strongest proof of ownership in Indonesia for land/land but the letter cannot function according to its function because it is unilaterally claimed by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (PT KAI). This condition shows the gap between electoral legitimacy and substantive justice (Aspinall, 2022).

Based on previous research, the practice of eviction in Asian cities has been associated with legal inequality and social exclusion (Bhan, 2020). This illustrates that some land evictions in various cities in Asian countries occur without any protection from power, even becoming a fertile ground for the authorities. During the campaign, it became a promising political commodity, but in the implementation of government after victory, it did not become a realized commodity. The voices of citizens during the campaign period were highly pursued, once they became regional heads, land conflict cases between residents and PT KAI were not the focus of resolution.

Other previous studies have shown that affected residents tend to lose access to political representation (Padawangi, 2021) and experience marginalization of space in the struggle for their rights (Douglass & Huang, 2023). Citizens' access to regional head candidates seems to have different roles, on the one hand becoming an electoral tool for candidates during the campaign, then disappearing when elected as regional head. The question is, how do Surabaya residents exercise their right to vote during the regional head election? On the other hand, the opposite question is how do regional head candidates use residents' complaints as a campaign tool and winning strategy even though they are only the sole candidate.

How is citizen participation and victory of regional head candidates when they are evicted? In previous studies, it was explained that their political choices were closed, citizen strategies included symbolic resistance to clientelist co-optation (Carpenter & Peña, 2020). When connected to the process in the Surabaya Pilkada, there are similarities and differences. Surabaya residents continue to follow the political process with three possible choices, namely choosing the incumbent because they see the incumbent's report card, second choosing the empty box because this is a group that sees the incumbent negatively, including regarding their land rights struggle, third apathetic because they do not believe in changes in life after the Pilkada. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how the political preferences of evicted residents are formed in Pilkada conditions without opposition, by emphasizing the relationship between law, state, and society. This study also analyzes how candidates achieve victory in the midst of a society that is experiencing the suffering of life because their land has been evicted or claimed unilaterally by PT Kereta Api Indonesia.

Several previous studies have highlighted the issue of evictions and agrarian conflicts in urban areas, this is different from previous studies that explain voter choices and how regional head candidates achieve electoral votes. Evictions and agrarian conflicts are interesting to present in previous research because this is the initial phenomenon in the midst of the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada. This is an interesting part because evictions and agrarian conflicts seem to have no impact on the existence of regional head candidates. Bhan (2020) emphasizes the practice of spatial exclusion due to neoliberal urban transformation, which is a reference, namely what happened to the status of land claimed to belong to PT KAI in Surabaya. Padawangi (2021) examines citizen resistance in the Jakarta eviction, but does not discuss its connection to electoral politics. How resistance in Surabaya becomes data for analyzing citizen resistance in subsequent conflicts is linked to local political processes.

Harjanto (2021) revealed the legal vacuum in the conflict between BUMN and city residents, without mentioning the political behavior of residents, when connected to this paper there is a connection even though this study is a continuation of the research. Meanwhile, the Carpenter and Peña (2020) study explains the practice of clientelism in poor urban areas, but in the context of multi-candidates, not a single candidate. This second study has given color to local democracy, the difference in the way the contestation is different because the number of candidates still influences promises.

This is different from the other two studies, namely Aspinall's (2022) and Mietzner's (2021) studies, both of which focus more on national political polarization, not the local dynamics of marginalized citizens, so what happened in Surabaya regarding the victory of regional head election candidates who were faced with the suffering of people who were evicted from the land they had previously inhabited is very interesting to study.

There has been no study that specifically examines how evicted residents respond to the limited political choices in single-candidate regional elections, especially in the context of legitimacy, representation, and social justice. This study is interesting because of the gap in previous research. This study fills this gap by examining how evictions carried out by a state corporation (PT KAI) in Surabaya affect the political behavior of residents in the 2024 regional elections, which occurred in a veiled manner. The public was angry about the policy, but the implementation of the regional elections continued without any

boycotts or anarchic demonstrations. This focus presents a new contribution to the literature on law and society in Indonesia.

This study also presents a new contribution by empirically examining how urban residents evicted due to land acquisition by PT KAI respond to single-candidate regional elections in the context of urban Indonesia. It seems hard to believe that regional elections can take place, or that residents are willing to exercise their right to vote because they are disappointed to pay taxes, but there is no defense from the government that receives the tax payments. There has been no study that connects the relationship between eviction, limited political choices, and social delegitimization within the framework of law and society. This study expands the discourse on spatial justice and political representation in a formal local democratic system but with minimal substantive alternatives.

II. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, which is suitable for studying complex socio-political dynamics in a local context (Yin, 2018; Rachman, 2021). This method was chosen to make it easier for researchers to produce data used for the phenomenon of victory amidst the political suffering of representative society. The research location is the areas affected by evictions by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) in Surabaya, especially in areas that were previously inhabited by residents for decades such as in the RW 03 Sawahan Baru area, Petemon, then in the Pacar Keling area of Surabaya, the area around Pasar Turi including the Gundih area and its surroundings, where the land was seized by PT KAI. Data collection was carried out through field observations, document analysis (tax letters, eviction letters, and local media news), and semi-structured interviews with affected residents, RT/RW figures, and urban advocacy activists.

The selection of Surabaya as the case location is based on its status as a metropolitan city that has experienced rapid growth in the country's transportation infrastructure and has no opponents in the 2024 Pilkada, only one candidate pair was present whose civil society did not carry out open resistance as happened in Trenggalek Regency. In this case, this study applies thematic analysis to identify patterns of citizen political preferences: apathy, clientelism, and electoral resistance through empty boxes (Carpenter & Peña, 2020; Padawangi, 2021). The three major sub-themes are discussed until the community's decision on their political choices.

The analysis to unravel the problem of the victory of a single candidate amidst the eviction of land ownership is based on the theory of political representation (Pitkin, 1967) to map political power during the 2024 Pilkada and its relationship with political parties at the national level. The theory of spatial justice (Harvey, 2012) is used to continue the theory of political representation because this justice does not only occur in front of the judge's courtroom, and is strengthened by the critical urban studies approach (Douglass & Huang, 2023). Urban groups are characterized by being more enthusiastic about fighting for their rights openly.

The validity of data from the field is strengthened through triangulation techniques of sources and time (Lucas, 2020). This method allows researchers to evaluate the relationship between evictions, citizens' rights to the city, the victory of regional head

candidates, the choices voters make and the legitimacy of election results in a local political system without opposition (Purba & Siregar, 2020; Bhan, 2020). This is different from the dynamics of national politics or at the regional level .

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

State Decision after PT KAI Director Takes Gronkart Documents from the Netherlands

The initial problem in this paper is based on the land ownership status in Surabaya. So far, residents have occupied the land for decades, even from generation to generation. They have a Certificate of Ownership so that it can be bought and sold at the standard price in Surabaya. This has changed since 2017 because there was a change in ownership at the central government level, the process of which the community did not know, suddenly they did not have rights to the land they owned. Based on the statement of the head of RW 03 Sawahan Baru, Petemon as follows:

"Our SHM (Land Ownership Certificate) was issued in 1967 and some were issued in 1970. During the year of issuance until before 2017, residents were still able to buy and sell land at the BPN (National Land Agency) and could change the name, then after 2017 until now 2025, residents' SHMs were blocked (frozen) at the request of PT KAI DAOP 8 Surabaya... so that currently even though residents have SHMs, the certificates cannot be used." (interview with Supriadi, May 26, 2025)

The land ownership controlled by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) partly comes from colonial heritage assets belonging to the Dutch East Indies railway company, Staatsspoorwegen and Gronckart. Since the nationalization of transportation after independence, these assets have become state property and are managed by PT KAI. In 2017, the Indonesian government accelerated the nationalization and certification program for PT KAI land assets throughout Indonesia through collaboration with the BPN and the Ministry of SOEs (Yusuf & Dewi, 2020). This is the explanation that the community does not have authority over the land they occupy. This process often ignores the existence of residents who have long lived on the land, creating complex urban agrarian conflicts (Harjanto, 2021). It can even be said that this is like a unilateral transfer of ownership because in reality the community has been living there for a long time, without any dialogue and communication between PT KAI and the community, they immediately cannot process the sale and purchase of land because the land belongs to PT KAI. Likewise, it cannot be processed for other uses. This condition applies not only in Surabaya because it is national in nature as a result of the nationalization of PT KAI assets in 2017.

Starting during the leadership of Ignasius Jonan as President Director of PT Kereta Api Indonesia (2009–2014), a strategic step was taken by retrieving historical documents of colonial assets of *Gronkart* from the Netherlands. This document records the ownership of land and infrastructure of Staatsspoorwegen and other private Dutch railway companies that were nationalized after independence (Jonan, 2014). This was a unilateral step, because the residents were not consulted. In the name of the Dutch Colonial Gronkart, all those who used land ownership certificates could no longer have

ownership rights. In fact, one resident went to the Surabaya district court and won, but PT KAI appealed and they won at the Supreme Court. So practically like that, even though they have official SHM land, the actual condition is that the letter is useless.

This step is the initial step for the reconstruction process and legal claims over PT KAI assets, including land inhabited by residents for generations in urban areas such as Surabaya. Since 2017, the government through the Ministry of SOEs and ATR/BPN has encouraged the acceleration of land certification owned by SOEs, including PT KAI, in order to strengthen state assets and development efficiency (Susanto, 2019); (Ministry of SOEs, 2018).

This program was then institutionalized through national policies such as *Presidential Regulation Number 62 of 2018 concerning the Acceleration of Certification of State Property in the Form of Land* (President of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018), as well as technical cooperation between PT KAI and ATR/BPN to re-acquire former colonial lands (Ministry of ATR/BPN, 2020).

This policy has created new agrarian conflicts, because many residents do not have formal legal evidence, even though they have paid taxes and have lived there for generations. The state is in an ambiguous position: as the owner of the corporation and at the same time the guardian of citizens' rights to fair living space.

Studies in *the International Journal of Law and Society* show that the legalization of state assets often conflicts with citizens' rights to housing and social justice. Rahman (2022) emphasizes the importance of legal protection for communities affected by eviction in urban areas. Meanwhile, Anwar and Karim (2021) highlight the inequality of access to justice for the urban poor in conflicts with state-owned enterprises. Yusuf (2023) found that the state tends to side with the legal claims of institutions, not with the historical rights of citizens. This is reinforced by the findings of Ningrum (2024) who stated that local democracy without channels of representation strengthens the political exclusion of marginalized citizens.

After learning that the land they had lived on for decades was part of the colonial heritage assets belonging to Staatsspoorwegen and Gronckart—which are now controlled by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI), Surabaya residents experienced a **legal-historical shock** that deepened the uncertainty of their land ownership status. Many residents felt disappointed and betrayed, especially because they had been paying taxes and maintaining the land with social legitimacy, not administrative (Wijaya, 2021; Harjanto, 2021). This information gave rise to a new sense of colonialism in a legalistic form (Rachman, 2021), reinforcing the perception that the state was more on the side of state-owned corporations than its citizens (Yusuf & Dewi, 2020). The Surabaya city government, which had been collecting taxes, was powerless except to remain silent without any return of the taxes that had been paid by residents. This condition is according to the statement of the Head of RW in the Gundih area of Surabaya as follows:

We have occupied the land and house from our grandparents for generations. Until now, we have not been able to buy and sell the land and change the name because it was unilaterally acquired by PT Kereta Api Indonesia. The SHM (Ownership Certificate) for the land we hold has no value because the certificate is dead. It was unilaterally claimed by KAI and the residents could not do

anything. Submitting to the court always failed, and until now we have not been informed what the use of our RW land by PT KAI is. There is no dialogue and no official notification" (interview with Wandoyo, May 2025)

Some residents organized legal resistance and advocacy, assisted by NGOs and legal aid organizations (Fauzi, 2023; Nurdiansyah & Lestari, 2020). However, others chose to remain silent, surrender, or adapt through informal or clientelist channels (Carpenter & Peña, 2020). When colonial history is used as the legal basis for state claims without taking into account citizens' social rights, there is **a conflict of representation** between "formal legal rights" and "historical settlement rights" (Douglass & Huang, 2023; Padawangi, 2021). This indicates that the urban agrarian issue in Surabaya is tearing apart the feelings of the people who have been living in and paying to the Surabaya city government.

After learning that the land they inhabit was claimed by PT KAI as a state asset inherited from the colonial era, and the Surabaya City Government did not provide legal protection even though they had received tax payments, residents showed a complex and disappointed political attitude. For most residents, this condition reflects a form of administrative neglect and political betrayal - because the local government not only failed to defend them, but also played a passive role in the eviction process that took place in the name of the state.

Citizens' Political Preferences Amid Legal Uncertainty Over Land

In the contemporary urban political landscape, citizens' political preferences cannot be separated from the socio-economic context and structural tensions they face on a daily basis. One crucial factor influencing citizens' political attitudes is the legal uncertainty over the land they occupy. Case studies in several areas of Surabaya show how the uncertainty of land ownership status, power relations between citizens and the state, and historical experiences of eviction and agrarian conflict, form distinctive and complex patterns of political resistance (Lindsey, 2020).

Legal uncertainty over land has long been a latent problem in several major cities in Indonesia, including Surabaya. In such situations, residents face the threat of eviction, weak legal protection, and minimal access to formal processes in spatial planning policies (Padawangi, 2018). This not only creates social tension, but also forms new dynamics in the political behavior of residents, especially in the context of regional head elections. As found in the field in several sub-districts such as Sawahan Baru, Gundih, Pacar Keling, and the area around Pasar Turi, there are variations in the form of political expression that indicate the transformation of the meaning of political participation itself (Winayanti & Lang, 2004).

The political attitudes of citizens towards the regional head elections (Pilkada) are not homogeneous. Various forms of symbolic and real resistance emerge from the experience of injustice felt by citizens. For example, in Sawahan Baru Village, residents tend to carry out resistance in secret by not coming to the polling station (TPS). This is a form of white group (golput) which reflects despair towards the political system which is considered incapable of protecting their interests as land dwellers without clear legal status (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014).

On the other hand, the Gundih area, which is close to the Pasar Turi commercial area, also shows a mass abstention pattern as a form of protest. They realize that whoever the regional head candidate is elected, it is unlikely that they will fight for legal certainty for land which has been a source of collective anxiety. Absence from the election process is not merely due to political apathy, but rather a form of articulation of protest and distrust of the existing representative system (Hadiz, 2017).

Meanwhile, in Pacar Keling, residents took a different path. They chose to continue to actively resist, not by using their voices in the voting booth, but through legal advocacy and cooperation with NGOs. This shows a shift in political preferences from formal institutions such as elections to non-state social institutions. This form of political engagement is an expression of political efficacy that is shifted to the realm of civil society (Törnquist et al., 2022).

This is different from the residents around the Pasar Turi area, who have a long history of conflict and social trauma due to fires and conflicts of interest between the government and the private sector. Residents here chose to use their voting rights to choose an empty box. This choice symbolically voices rejection of all candidates who are considered not to side with the common people. This action is a form of passive but highly political resistance, which indicates a crisis of legitimacy for the entire formal political process (Hidayat, 2020).

From the observations above, three forms of political preferences of Surabaya residents can be categorized which emerged due to legal uncertainty over land:

1. Golput as a Silent Protest
Not voting does not mean not caring. In this context, golput is actually a form of expression of disappointment and resistance to a political system that is considered unfair and unrepresentative. Citizens who choose to golput consciously want to show that they are not willing to support a system that does not recognize their existence as legal and political subjects (Aspinall, 2014).
2. Empty Box as an Expression of Passive Resistance
Choosing an empty box is a symbolically intelligent political act. This choice signifies that citizens have not found a single candidate they consider capable of fighting for their rights. Thus, the empty box becomes a medium for expressing peaceful yet meaningful political resistance (Hadiz, 2017).
3. Advocacy as an Alternative Path of Resistance
Citizens who work with NGOs and choose the legal advocacy path show a shift from electoral forms of political participation to forms of participation based on civil society organizing. This reflects the growing political awareness of citizens who no longer rely on formal political actors, but rather on community solidarity and the power of advocacy (Törnquist et al., 2022).

What happened in Surabaya cannot be seen as merely a variation in the political attitudes of the citizens. This phenomenon indicates a deepening crisis of legitimacy in the local democratic system. In many ways, the election of regional heads has become a political formality that has lost its substantive meaning. Electoral victory no longer automatically means social acceptance. Moral legitimacy and public trust have become increasingly

rare currencies in electoral politics that ignore social justice (Dryzek, 2000).

When citizens prefer to remain silent, abstain, choose an empty box, or even withdraw from the election process and divert their energy to advocacy, then there is something wrong in the local political system. Democracy, which should guarantee participation and substantive justice, has turned into a five-yearly ritual that only touches the surface. The aspirations of citizens, especially those marginalized by legal and economic structures, have not yet been answered by government institutions (Haryanto, 2018).

Moreover, residents who have been paying taxes as a form of obedience to the state, do not receive any guarantee of rights to the land they have lived on for decades. The imbalance between obligations as citizens and protection of their basic rights shows a disjunction in the practice of city government. In this context, the state is present more as an institution that collects taxes than as a protector of citizens' rights (Padawangi & Douglass, 2015).

The political preferences of Surabaya residents in the context of legal uncertainty over land provide an important lesson on how democracy can lose its vitality if it is not accompanied by social justice. The regional elections are not just about who wins, but about the extent to which the political system is able to guarantee the basic rights of citizens, including the right to decent and legally secure housing.

Therefore, efforts to build strong local democracy cannot be separated from solving structural problems such as agrarian conflicts, unequal access to law, and the dominance of corporate interests over urban space. As long as the aspirations of the urban poor continue to be ignored, the legitimacy of democracy will continue to be on the brink, and citizens will continue to find other ways to voice their resistance—whether through empty boxes, silent action, or grassroots advocacy.

This condition reflects a crisis of legitimacy, where electoral victory no longer means moral and social acceptance. Local democracy that loses public trust is threatened to lose its substantive meaning. The victory of the Pilkada in Surabaya still leaves unfinished work because the community still has aspirations that have not been answered by the city government which has so far received payments of land occupant taxes.

NO	Candidate	Number of Votes	Percentage
1	Incumbent Single Candidate (Eri Cahyadi - Armuji)	1,351,000	78.3%
2	Empty Box	374,000	21.7%
	Total Valid Votes	1,725,000	100%
	Invalid Vote	56,000	
	Number of Voter Participation	1,781,000	68.5% (of total DPT)
	Permanent Voter List	2,600,000	100%

Table 1: Overview of the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada

This study found that Surabaya residents who were displaced by the nationalization project of PT KAI assets responded to the 2024 Pilkada—which only presented a single

candidate—with three patterns of political preferences: apathy, clientelist co-optation, and symbolic resistance through an empty box. Apathy arises because residents feel they do not have a legitimate channel for political representation (Bhan, 2020; Padawangi, 2021). This situation strengthens the finding that unequal access to legal and social justice results in the disengagement of political participation of marginalized residents (Mietzner, 2021; Pratiwi & Tanjung, 2019). Apathy can be interpreted as two models of voters, first as voters whose choice is not to vote, second withdrawing from the local democratic process, namely fighting with NGOs and advocacy.

Clientelistic co-optation is evident from the involvement of RT/RW networks that act as distribution channels for promises of compensation or social assistance from candidates, even though residents are aware of the lack of commitment to their legal protection (Carpenter & Peña, 2020; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). This phenomenon reinforces the pattern of patron-client politics in post-eviction urban spaces (Lucas, 2020; Douglass & Huang, 2023).

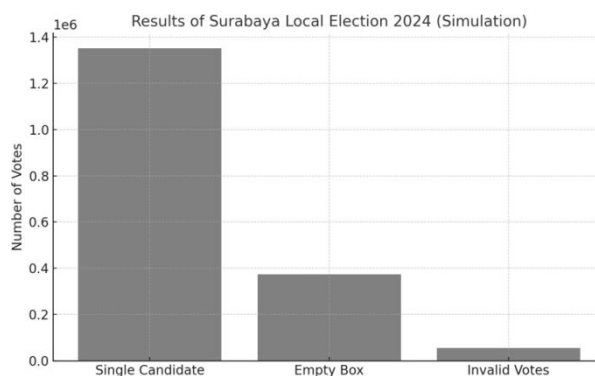


Figure 1: Results of the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada

Meanwhile, resistance emerged in the form of an increase in empty ballot boxes, especially in polling stations in areas affected by evictions. This shows that residents express dissatisfaction with the local political configuration symbolically, in line with Schedler's (2020) findings that electoral democratic spaces without opposition encourage passive-aggressive expressions from residents (Rachman, 2021; Harjanto, 2021).

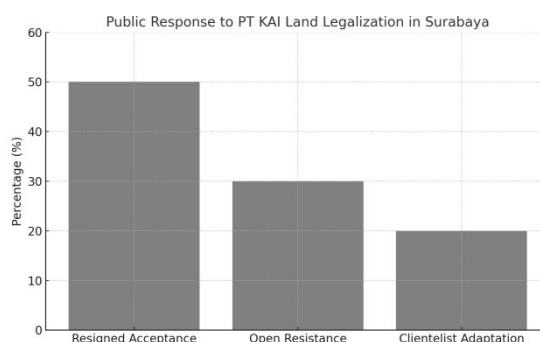


Figure 2: Public Voice on Land Acquisition by PT KAI



Figure 3: Homeowners' Demonstration Demands KAI DAOP 8

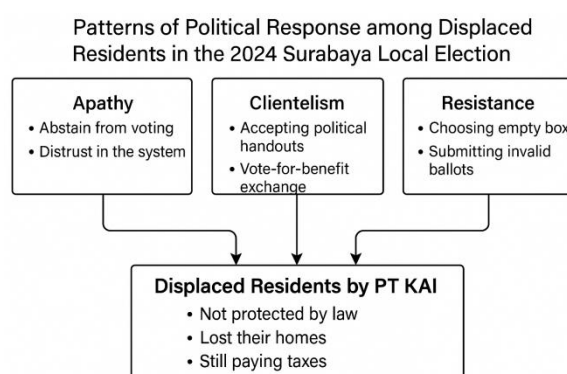
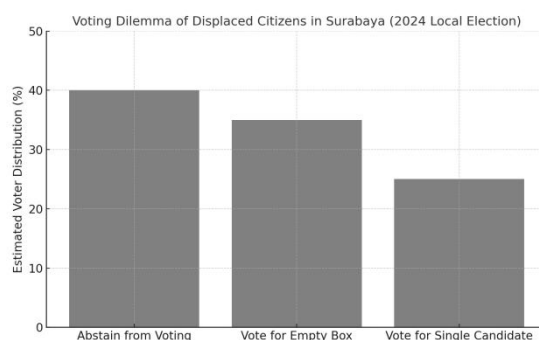


Diagram 1: Surabaya Citizens' Resistance to State Decisions

Incumbent's Efforts to Maintain Power Amidst Agrarian Conflict Issues

In general, the victory of a single candidate in the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada coincided with a social defeat in terms of citizen representation. Formal electoral victories were not accompanied by substantive legitimacy (Aspinall, 2022; Bhan, 2020), indicating a crisis of confidence in local democracy in the context of legal marginalization (Yusuf & Dewi, 2020; Purba & Siregar, 2020; Padawangi, 2021).

In the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada, residents who were evicted from the land they had occupied for decades faced a political dilemma. Although they routinely pay taxes as a form of citizen responsibility, they do not receive legal protection for their right to reside. The absence of political opponents in the Pilkada (single candidate) worsened the situation, because there was no representation channel that was considered biased. Some residents chose not to exercise their right to vote, reflecting a form of *democratic alienation* (Kuskridho, 2022). Others chose an empty box as a symbol of passive electoral resistance (Setiawan, 2023). This condition emphasizes that administrative legality such as taxes is not immediately recognized as legitimacy of ownership by the state (Wijaya, 2021). For the urban poor, the right to residency is not only a matter of law, but also the right to the city and broader political recognition (Nurdiansyah & Lestari, 2020; Hadi, 2022).



This finding is also supported by local studies. Fauzi (2023) noted that evicted residents tend to show symbolic resistance through increasing illegitimate votes. Studies in *The Journal of Society and Media* show that local media help shape the political perceptions of marginalized residents (Rahman, 2022; Sari, 2021; Yusuf, 2023; Fauzan, 2024), especially on the issue of rights to urban space and eviction policies.

Regional head elections (Pilkada) should be a substantive democratic mechanism that allows citizens to voice their aspirations, control power, and assess the performance of the previous government. However, in many large cities in Indonesia, Pilkada has instead become an arena where the power of incumbents is consolidated through capital alliances, bureaucratic networks, and sophisticated political technology.

Surabaya residents who live in strategic areas such as Sawahan, Pacar Keling, and Gundih experience various forms of legal uncertainty over the land where they live. Even though they have paid taxes and have a domicile certificate, the state still does not recognize their rights to the space they have occupied for decades. In this situation, administrative legality is not immediately recognized as proof of legitimacy of ownership (Wijaya, 2021). This confirms that there is a separation between civil rights as citizens and collective rights as residents of urban space.

In the context of the 2024 Pilkada, this dilemma becomes even more complicated because there is only one regional head candidate, namely the incumbent. The absence of political opponents strengthens the assumption that the election process has lost its essence as an arena for contesting ideas. Some residents affected by the eviction chose not to come to the polling stations as a form of distrust in the system—an expression known as democratic alienation (Kuskridho, 2022). Others used their right to vote to choose an empty box, a passive but symbolic form of electoral resistance (Setiawan, 2023).

However, their voices were not strong enough quantitatively. The empty box still lost badly. This is a sign that the electoral democracy system can be manipulated to produce formal legitimacy, without ensuring meaningful participation from marginalized citizens. One of the main strengths of the incumbent in the Surabaya Pilkada was the consolidation of support from all major political parties. Not a single party nominated an alternative candidate. All shifted their support to Eri Cahyadi, the current Mayor of Surabaya. This condition created a political space that was almost sterile from opposition, leaving citizens with no viable alternative options.

This situation is reminiscent of the concept of procedural democracy without substance (Dryzek, 2000), where democratic procedures such as elections are still carried out, but

the essence of participation and representation is lost. Democracy becomes merely a mechanism to legitimize previously accumulated power through political and economic capital. In addition, the incumbent has unlimited access to the bureaucratic network and city infrastructure. Almost all public spaces in Surabaya are filled with the incumbent's self-image—from billboards at intersections, videotrons in the city center, to covert campaigns in public service activities.

Amid the worsening issues of evictions and land conflicts, the incumbent's digital campaign appeared massive and organized. On Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Eri Cahyadi's official and supporting accounts produced visual content that emphasized development, city cleanliness, and closeness to young people. For example, the official Instagram accounts @sapawarga_sby and @ericahyadi_ displayed the narrative "Surabaya Maju Bersama Warganya", which showed the incumbent's activities greeting the community, providing social assistance, and inaugurating infrastructure projects. On TikTok, short videos with viral backgrounds were used to attract sympathy from Gen-Z, with narratives such as "The Mayor of Surabaya is a cool leader, real work not promises". These narratives continue to appear on social media homepages, thus creating public opinion that Eri Cahyadi is a successful figure in building the city.

However, the issue of evictions and land conflicts never appeared on these channels. Instead, with a digital political marketing strategy, the incumbent's campaign shifted the public narrative from structural issues to a positive personal image (Lim, 2022). This is in line with the pattern of technocratic populism that is developing in many Asian cities, where leaders present themselves as development managers, not political leaders responsible for justice (Bunnell et al., 2012).

Although the empty box is a symbol of citizen disappointment, the power of this symbol is unable to counter the logistical power and political capital possessed by the incumbent. In polling stations identified as being near eviction areas such as the former Pasar Turi and Jalan Kalisari, votes for the empty box did increase significantly, but were unable to match the dominance of the incumbent's votes in other areas. Even according to reports from local NGOs such as LBH Surabaya and the Urban Poor Consortium, there were practices of voter mobilization through incentives and social pressure, especially in economically vulnerable inner-city kampung areas. This confirms that in local electoral democracy, unequal access to political resources results in distorted representation (Hadiz & Robison, 2013).

Local media played a dual role in the Surabaya Pilkada. On the one hand, several media outlets such as *Surya*, *Radar Surabaya*, and *JTV* actively featured the incumbent's campaign in a format that resembled news. On the other hand, alternative channels such as *Suara Warga Kota*, a citizen-based community media, tried to raise the voices of eviction victims. However, information balance is difficult to achieve. Media capital is intertwined with political interests, marginalizing land conflict issues in the mainstream narrative. Studies by Rahman (2022) and Fauzan (2024) show that social media algorithms also play a role in narrowing the space for public debate, strengthening the "echo chamber" that favors the incumbent. In this position, the incumbent has a very dominant position in the battle of issues on social media.

The 2024 Surabaya Pilkada is a reflection of local democracy in a crisis of representation.

On the one hand, the incumbent's power is strengthened by political alliances, bureaucratic control, and campaign technology. On the other hand, the urban poor affected by evictions lose meaningful political articulation space. When political participation is limited to voting without fair alternatives, democracy turns into a procedural formality. The incumbent's victory is not merely an administrative victory, but evidence of structural inequality in the city's political contestation. The agrarian conflict that is the root of the suffering of the poor is not handled fairly. Therefore, it is important to re-imagine a form of democracy that is able to guarantee the right to the city—a democracy that not only elects leaders, but also fights for spatial, social, and ecological justice for all its citizens. The conditions in Surabaya provide an important lesson that the progress of the city's physical infrastructure with its many towering buildings must be balanced with an increase in social aspects, especially spatial justice within it.

The need for land policy reform and mechanisms for representing marginalized citizens in the political process.

Inequality in land ownership and access is one of the roots of structural injustice in urban areas. Cities are not only physical spaces, but also political, economic, and cultural arenas that are full of conflicts of interest between the state, capital, and the people. In the context of Indonesia, especially in big cities like Surabaya and Jakarta, this inequality is further exacerbated by the absence of representation mechanisms for marginalized citizens in decision-making, especially those concerning spatial planning and land policies (Padawangi & Douglass, 2015).

As revealed in this study, the incumbent's victory in the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada took place amidst the alienation of citizens from the electoral political process. The evicted groups not only lost their homes, but also lost their channels of political representation. Therefore, a dual reform agenda is needed: on the one hand concerning fairer land policies, and on the other hand concerning the expansion of truly democratic political participation for marginalized citizen groups (Bhan, 2020; Purba & Siregar, 2020).

Land policies in Indonesia tend to favor corporate and state interests, while residents—especially the urban poor—are often positioned as illegal occupants or “development disruptors.” In fact, in many cases, they have inhabited the land for decades, paid levies, and built strong social communities (Fauzi, 2023).

The power relations between the state, corporations, and citizens become increasingly unequal when land acquisition policies are implemented without adequate public consultation, and are based solely on the logic of investment and capitalization of space (Harvey, 2008). The state acts as a facilitator of capital accumulation at the expense of citizens' rights to the city (Lefebvre, 1996). Within the framework of positive law, land ownership is still formalistic, eliminating the historical and social dimensions of citizens' existence in urban spaces (Lindsey, 2020).

Forced evictions carried out by the state, either directly or through state-owned enterprises such as PT KAI, are a real form of legalized structural violence. This process shows that land law in Indonesia is still very vulnerable to being used as a tool of domination, not as a means of distributive justice (Saptari, 2015; Hadi, 2022). Therefore, land policy reform is a fundamental prerequisite for building an inclusive city. The concept of **the right to the city** introduced by Henri Lefebvre and expanded by David

Harvey emphasizes that city dwellers have the right not only to live, but also to shape, organize, and enjoy the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008). This right cannot be reduced to formal legal rights alone, but includes political, social, and economic rights to urban space.

In the Indonesian context, the right to the city is often ignored because development policies tend to be top-down and non-participatory. Marginalized citizens not only lose their living space, but also lose their capacity to influence policies that directly impact their lives (Winayanti & Lang, 2004). Therefore, political representation is not just about being present in the voting booth, but also about the capacity to influence the process of deliberation and distribution of urban resources (Dryzek, 2000). Substantive democracy requires meaningful citizen involvement, not just procedural. In this regard, strengthening community institutions, grassroots organizations, and NGOs that represent the interests of the urban poor is very important (Törnquist et al., 2022). They are actors who have been working in the empty space of formal representation, fighting for justice from outside the system.

Land policy reform needs to cover several main aspects, including the following:

1. Legal Recognition of People's Housing
The state needs to recognize the existence of informal housing areas that have developed historically as part of the city structure. Legal recognition must be based on the principles of social justice and housing history, not solely on formal ownership documents (Yusuf & Dewi, 2020).
2. Transparency in Land Governance
The land acquisition process for infrastructure development or commercialization must be carried out transparently and participatively. Residents must be involved from the planning stage, not just informed during implementation (Kurniawati, 2019).
3. Land Banking and Urban Land Redistribution
City governments need to have a land banking mechanism to ensure the distribution of urban land not only to the private sector, but also for the development of public housing and social facilities (UN-Habitat, 2020).
4. Moratorium on Forced Evictions
An eviction moratorium policy needs to be implemented, while designing a relocation system based on human rights principles, not just physical displacement (Hadi, 2022).

The urban poor are often not represented in formal processes such as Musrenbang, RTRW formulation, and Pilkada. Therefore, there needs to be an affirmative mechanism that guarantees their involvement in the political process. This could be:

- Quota for village community representatives in city councils or citizen forums
- Facilitating participation through digital governance that enables citizens to report on spatial and policy issues.
- Strengthening the capacity of citizen organizations to engage in urban planning policy advocacy

For example, the *Participatory Budgeting program* in Porto Alegre, Brazil, has shown how the city budget process can involve poor citizens in determining development priorities

(Avritzer, 2002). In Indonesia, similar efforts have been limited to simulated participation, without real decision-making power.

Thus, the study in this research provides important contributions, including, first, the findings strengthen the argument that local democracy cannot be separated from spatial justice. The concept of procedural democracy needs to be expanded into substantive democracy that prioritizes the representation of vulnerable groups in public decision-making (Young, 2000). The theory of the right to the city and social justice enriches the understanding of agrarian conflict not only as a legal issue, but also as an ethical and political issue. Second, this study provides concrete recommendations for land policy reform and political representation of marginalized citizens. This can be the basis for city governments, legislative institutions, and civil society organizations in designing a more inclusive and equitable system. Therefore, it needs to be emphasized once again that the city belongs to all, not just a handful of capital owners. Land policy reform and strengthening the political representation of the urban poor are the keys to creating an inclusive, equitable, and democratic city. Without it, local democracy will only be a stage for the elite, while the people lose their voice.

IV. CONCLUSION

The victory of a single candidate in the 2024 Surabaya Pilkada leaves important notes on power relations, citizens' rights to the city, and the crisis of political representation at the local level. This research starts from observations of the socio-political dynamics of residents amidst the evictions carried out by PT KAI against a number of settlements that have been inhabited for decades. Administratively, residents in the areas affected by the evictions routinely pay land and building taxes to the city government. They are also recorded in the official population system and actively participate in social activities in the local environment. However, ironically, this administrative existence does not necessarily guarantee legal protection for their rights to remain on the land. The state, through PT KAI, came to unilaterally take over the rights to land ownership that had been owned by residents. This condition reflects the imbalance in power relations between city residents and the state itself. In this conflict, residents are in the weakest position structurally. When the right to housing is not recognized, while political options to change the situation are also very limited, residents respond in ways that are reflective of this inequality. Three patterns of political attitudes emerge. First, apathy, which is an attitude of not caring about the regional head election process. Residents in this category choose not to use their voting rights because they feel that whoever is elected will not defend their interests. Second, clientelist co-optation, where some residents continue to follow the direction of local elites or community leaders who are already affiliated with power, either because of certain promises or unbalanced socio-economic relations. Third, symbolic resistance, which is choosing an empty box as a form of rejection of candidates who have no opponents and are considered unrepresentative. This phenomenon reflects a crisis of legitimacy in local democracy. Democracy should open up space for broad, representative, and fair participation. However, in reality, the existing system tends to strengthen the dominance of political elites and state arbitrariness. Electoral victory procedurally does not always reflect substantive victory. When the majority of citizens feel that their choice will not change anything, democracy loses its spirit. The people's

votes become mere numbers, not a collective will capable of directing public policy. In this context, the success of a candidate in gaining a seat of power becomes paradoxical: winning formally, but failing to build social legitimacy.

This study shows how important it is to review the relationship between the state, in this case its business entities, and citizens, especially in the issue of the right to the city. The city is not only a physical space to live and work, but also a social, political, and cultural space. The right to the city includes the right to participate in decision-making, the right to a decent place to live, and the right not to be marginalized by exclusive development projects. When cities are managed more as economic assets and not as shared living spaces, what happens is social exclusion that is legitimized by formal rules. In situations like this, the urban poor are the most vulnerable to being evicted, sacrificed, and silenced. Land policy reform is an urgent need to improve this condition.

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