The Public Relations of the Bengkulu's People Representative Council Candidates

Public Relations Calon Anggota Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat dari Provinsi Bengkulu

Heri Budianto[1], Novi Erlita[2]
[1,2]Universitas Mercu Buana, Jl. Raya Kembangan Jakarta Barat
*Corresponding author, e-mail: herbudmkom@gmail.com

Abstract

Along with political development, public relations professions have become a more widespread profession used by many organizations. In politics, public relations is useful for building a positive image in people's minds for particular purposes. In light of that, the research attempted to analyze and describe political public relations in building the reputation of the 2019 legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative of the Republic of Indonesia in Bengkulu Province. The research was designed with a case-study method, and the research found that the candidates investigated had no conceptual knowledge regarding political public relations strategy. Consequently, their public relations activities, in terms of political communication, did not work effectively. The research also found that the candidates investigated, which was running in Bengkulu province, had not managed their images and relations with media in terms of political public relations. Finally, the research found that political public relations were still conducted traditionally, making the impact less strong to furnish the image of the candidates.
Keywords: Bengkulu province; general election; legislative; public relations; politics

Abstrak

Seiring dengan perkembangan politik, profesi public relations merupakan sebuah profesi yang biasanya digunakan oleh banyak organisasi. Ranah politik menggunakan kinerja seorang public relations dalam rangka membangun citra positif di benak masyarakat untuk kepentingan-kepentingan tertentu. Berdasarkan hal di atas, maka penelitian ini berusaha untuk mengetahui dan menggambarkan tentang public relations politik dalam membentuk reputasi oleh calon anggota legislatif Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia dari Propinsi Bengkulu dalam pemilu 2019. Penelitian dilakukan dengan metode studi kasus. Hasil penelitian menunjukan bahwa untuk membangun reputasi caleg tidak mengetahui secara konseptual mengenai strategi khusus public relations politik, sehingga aktivitas public relations dalam komunikasi politik belum dijalankan dengan baik. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa para calon anggota legislatif di Propinsi Bengkulu belum menjalankan manajemen citra dan manajemen relasi media dalam strategi public relations politik. Temuan penting yang lain dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa strategi public relations politik yang dilakukan masih bersifat tradisional, sehingga kurang memberikan dampak kuat dalam membangun citra kandidat.
Kata Kunci: legislative; public relations; pemilihan umum; politik; provinsi Bengkulu

Introduction

In general, political communication is associated with political discourse or political verbal and non-verbal information spreading that can affect the government and society in a particular political system. Therefore, political communication can also be understood as political message transmission from a source to the receiver to create a shared understanding of the meaning (Susanto E. H., 2013). Similarly, Nimmo argued that political communication is verbal or non-verbal dissemination of political messages that aim to affect public opinion. In short, political communication is message transmission in which its contents are political (Tazri, 2019).

Political freedom in post-1998 has transformed the Indonesian political system. Externally, the communication pattern run by political parties has developed symmetrically with the extension of the electoral right in various countries (Suryadi, 2004). It makes political reputation necessary in politics. The reputation of political candidates is needed to provide a positive image for the voters, and, therefore, public relations, which is used by many organizations or companies, is needed to shape and establish a reputation (Jefkins, 2010). Recently, public relations have been accepted as necessary in political fields, primarily to assist the political actors in building positive images in people's minds for specific purposes.

To see the relation of public relations with politics, Bengkulu becomes a unique place to do so. Rivalry among candidates in Bengkulu is increasingly stringent. This is because the Bengkulu constituency is composed of nine regencies and one city, namely Kaur Regency, South Bengkulu Regency, Seluma Regency, Central Bengkulu Tengah, Kepahyang Regency, Rejang Lebong Regency, Lebong Regency, North Bengkulu Regency, Mukomuko Regency, and Bengkulu City. Furthermore, the constituency mentioned provides only four seats for Indonesian People Representative (DPR). The vast area of the constituency, as well as the limited number of seats available, engenders the candidates for representatives of 14 political parties competes strictly. This situation is the rationale of why the candidate should run political communication for enhancing its reputation and winning the voters' hearts.

The general election in the Bengkulu province is often participated by well-known politicians, whether nationally or locally. The preliminary finding showed that the Ministry of Village and Disadvantaged Regions, Eko P. Sandjono was candidate number 1 from the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa). His position as a ministry benefits his candidacy due to positive images and reputation that have been established. It then became a challenge for other legislative candidates, such as Mohammad Saleh, Muspani, and Dewi Coryati, who were the subjects of the present research, which did not have that political privileges. Those three are Bengkulu's local citizens that competed in the general election by developing their reputation with political communication.

Reputation plays a huge role in the political contestation of legislative candidates. A candidate should have a clean reputation and a positive image in political contestation like a general election. One's evaluation of legislative candidates is based on their knowledge of the individual in interests. Image, reputation, and achievement should be the primary objective of a legislative candidate. However, although images can be inferred from positive or negative people's evaluation, images themselves are abstract and cannot be measured systematically. Image and imaging are essential in the political field (Basya & Sati, 2008).

In the legislative election, the candidates strive for showing their most

representative and positive image so that they can have excellent reputations in people's minds and obtain their support and faith. A set of steps only to create a reputation is not adequate. There should be a strategy to build a promising reputation, which is started by a positive image. One of the political strategies of public relations is to inform or image, or information spreading to society to attract people's attention. The method is expected to result in a positive image (Heryanto & Zarkasy, 2012). Political image is a long-term attempt to activate all values of the political party as the solution for the life of the nation and state. However, a daily endeavor is needed, and not only once in five years, to build the political image. Public relations should not be employed for polishing the outer layer. By contrast, it is a comprehensive work founded on the personality of the political party.

Public relations is a field that is inseparable from political communication. A study by Nurussa'adah concerning political communication of the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/ PKS) in the West java found that ideological openness holds and was founded on three values, namely ideological, sociological, and political values (Nurussa'adah, 2018). Sobur, on the other hand, mentioned the importance of political communication in civic society (Sobur, 2000), while Anugerah showed the importance of marketing in political communication (Anugerah, 2011). Another apposite example is Sartika's research in the South Sumatra that showed that women's political communication is one of the elements in wining female legislative candidates to the parliament. However, this element is not the main element since social network, financial and family support plays a more dominant role, especially social investment that has been established (Sartika, 2016). Different from Sartika's research, political communication in this research did not only study the political communication of the female candidate but also the male one. The location is also different from Sartika. While Sartika researched the problem in South Sumatra, this present research investigated Bengkulu. However, Sartika's research is put as a reference because South Sumatra and Bengkulu are not really far and have a relatively similar culture.

Another research regarding the dynamics of political communication and its relation with social media to build a supportive network was done by Susanto (2017). Susanto found that social media is an alternative to acquiring political support. Using social media for developing a robust political communication network is typical for gaining support. A political communication network is a systematic pattern that arranges the relationship among individuals and individuals in the political information exchange (Susanto, 2017). However, different from Susanto's research, the focus of this study is political communication that is entangled with public relations. Social media in this research is treated only as a medium within public relations' activity of political communication.

Based on the political reality mentioned and dynamics in the contemporary political communication, rivalry in the political competition in the national legislative election of Bengkulu Province become increasingly stricter. With the above in mind, a strategy is needed for political public relations in establishing reputations in the middle of voters because it can increase the winning probability of the legislative candidate in the political contestation. The research is expected to find the strategy. Against that background, the question of this research is that how political public relations shape the reputation of legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative in Bengkulu province constituency in 2019?

Method

The paradigm of this research was postpositivist, while the method was qualitative with a single-case design of legislative election in Bengkulu Province. A single-case design has three rationalizations. Firstly, the case shows a crucial case in testing a well-formed theory; secondly, the case displays an extreme or unique case, and thirdly, the case is essential in disclosing (Yin, 2011). The data in this research was qualitative, and as stated by (Moleong, 2002), it mostly consists of description, narrative, figures, or statement of the research subject. Qualitative data is essential for this research because this investigation aims to analyze directly or indirectly the political public relations role in shaping the branding reputation of the legislative candidate for Indonesia's People Representative in Bengkulu Province in 2019. The research investigated three legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative (DPR) in Bengkulu Province, namely Mohammad Saleh, Muspani, and Dewi Coryati. These candidates were chosen because they ran political public relations activities to build reputations and obtain electoral support.

The data was collected with the typical technique in a case-study method, ranging from documentation, archive recording, open-ended, focus, and structured interviews, and direct observation (Yin, 2011). By documentation and archive recording, the researcher recorded the activity of the research subjects and their archives, such as meeting notes and agenda. Interviews were only conducted to relevant subjects and informants while observation was done by observing the political communication activities of the research subjects. After collecting the data, the data were analyzed with pattern matching technique, which includes non-equivalent variable as the (dependent) pattern, counter explanation, as the (independent) pattern, a simpler pattern, and arrangement of explanation of pattern obtained (Yin, 2011). The arrangement of explanation became the result and discussion in this research.

Results and Discussion

The reputation of candidates is the image of the candidates in people's minds. According to a characteristic of public relations, politics is an intentional and conscious action in conducting a communication process to affect the political environment. A study demonstrated that in the system of open and proportional election, a legislative candidate should have a positive image in the constituency (Heryanto & Zarkasy, 2012). A positive image is necessary as the first stepping stone for the candidate to compete in political contestation. Within an open list proportional election, a legislative candidate should compete with other candidates in the legislative contestation. This contestation, therefore, is not only among political parties but also between candidates at the same party. An open list proportional election imposed the candidate to obtain the largest proportion of votes to be chosen as a legislative representative. Thus, this election system is directly related to the reputation of the legislative candidate in political contestation.

A candidate for Indonesia's People Representative from Bengkulu that was relatively prominent is Mohammad Saleh. Mohammad Saleh was a representative candidate number 4 from Functional Group Party (Golkar), and he was well-known in Bengkulu City, Kepahyang regency, Rejang Lebong Regency, Lebong Regency, Sukaraja District, Air Periukan District, Seluma Regency. Mohammad Saleh, as a native Bengkulu from Rejang Lebong, had been recognized by Bengkulu residents as someone with strong social sensitivity because he cared about social, educational, and religious

activities. Mohammad Saleh frequently aided the construction of mosque and Quran reciting park and donated basic needs. Indeed, Mohammad Saleh established an English village that provides free English courses to university students in Bengkulu Regency and Rejang Lebong Regency. This social sensitivity had been the denotation of Mohammad Saleh since he had been running for 2014 Indonesia's People Representative in the interview with the researchers, Mohammad Saleh described the English course as follows: "English village is provided free for students in Bengkulu. It aims to improve their English skills so that they can compete nationally or internationally (Saleh, 2019, Interview)."

Figure 1. Political communication of Mohammad Saleh through giving aids to disaster victims with self-branded cars as the public relations media

Political communication politic done by the candidate showed similarity with Sartika's research in South Sumatra (2016). The similarity is that, in political communication, the main consideration of each candidate is social investment. Aid and charity to society by Mohamad Saleh, ranging from mosque and Quran reciting park constructions to basic needs distribution, are examples of social investment.

Another legislative candidate in which its constituency is in Bengkulu Province is Muspani, a legislative candidate number 3 from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle. Muspani is a lawyer and former legislative representative from the same party in the 2009-2014 period. Muspani was well-known in the community as the benefactor of poor people, mainly farmers. As a lawyer, Muspani had been long recognized as the defense attorney of farmers' and poor people's rights and interests, especially relating to law problems. This activity of Muspani obtained a positive image in its constituency, and he was often associated as a champion of the farmers. Similar to Mohammad Saleh, Muspani also built social investment to obtain political supports. According to the informant, candidates' contributions to communities for years are social capital that is responsible for their success in candidacy. It implies that financial capital cannot be the only decisive factor.

Figure 2. Muspani's activity: visiting community cultural celebration, as an attempt of social investment in political communication.

Social activities and social investment of Muspani increased the number of voters of his to bring him back to the parliament eventually. It is not surprising because constituents tend to vote for people they have already recognized and contributed to their real lives, primarily for the working-class (Sartika, 2016).

The other candidates in this research that also had a positive reputation is Dewi Coryati. This candidate ran through National Mandate Party (Partain Amanat Nasional) as candidate number two in Bengkulu Province. As an incumbent that has succeeded going to the parliament for two periods, Dewi was benefited from programs aimed mainly for the poor people. In addition, Dewi was well known as scholarship givers.

The public relations activity of the three candidates above can be analyzed from the premise that public relations as a strategy are a unified part of a plan, while a plan is the product of planning. Eventually, planning is a fundamental function of the management process (Kriyantono, 2014). In the political field, public relations strategy is needed to establish the reputation of a candidate. For example, social aid and charity should be done during post-disaster but also regularly and planned. It is in line with a public relations strategy that emphasizes planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling. In executing the activities, Mohammad Saleh applied public relations concepts to his campaign by building an aspiration house for organizing his activities, while Muspani used outdoor mass media like billboards and banner, as well as radio and local television for building a reputation. Mass media use is often considered effective in building political images for the broader public. With mass media power, it is expected that political reputation can be more effective. In Bengkulu, the brand reputation was established by the candidates in various ways, ranging from establishing various events and promote through mass media, such as television, radio, print media, and outdoor media, such as billboards, banner, and sticker.

Gathering and having the power to build a reputation through the various communication channel is one way in building reputations. Reputation for being good or poor, strong or weak, highly depend on the quality of the strategy and the commitment of the management to achieve the aim decided. Skills and energy in any program that would be realized and communicated are also critical. The role of the communicator is vital in this process (Puteri & Sari, 2018), and it had not been executed by the candidates.

Theoretically, public relations strategy executed by the candidates in Bengkulu

can be seen from image management. In political communication, image management to build a reputation in people's mind has a particular relation with, on the one hand, personal image of the politicians and how the image is shaped to be consistent with the aim of the political party, and, on the other hand, the image of the political organization. The latter can also be described as political marketing and will import marketing techniques in general. However, the marketing cost of political identity and political reputation exceeds beyond the usual placement rules of the paid message in media, including the design of company logo, language used in the political interview and in the manifesto, and activity of a party while conducting the campaign in a public sphere (McNair, 2011).

According to the interview and observation of the researchers, the legislative candidates in Bengkulu had not conducted image management effectively. The reason is that political public relations activity had not been planned well. Consequently, the image of the politicians individually cannot be really integrated with the image of the political organization. The public relations conducted by the candidate was not integrated very well with the public relation of the political parties. As a result, political identity becomes less clear.

The power of a legislative candidate in using public relations strategy to build reputation highly depends on the creativity of the candidate in exhausting all channels available to reach the constituency. What makes the candidates in this research advantageous in terms of political communication in Bengkulu is that they did not only come months before the election. The weakness of Indonesian political parties and their politicians is that they merely 'greet' their constituents once in five years before the election. After the election, the parties and politicians only greet higher class people (Anshari, 2013). However, the candidates investigated were still monotonous and not noticeable because the public relations activities should also be able to attract media coverage, and run media management in the public relations activities is one feasible way to be conducted (McNair, 2011). Bengkulu's candidates had not managed media management activities. They still oriented with conducting public relations activities to gather the public in a particular location while in political communication, public relations activity was conducted to attract the media's attention. The attention from the media would push news about the candidate itself. The news coverage of the candidate in the mass media is essential to build a good reputation and increase popularity.

The significance of managing media management in the public relations activities in Bengkulu should be founded on the size of the province of the constituency. Bengkulu province is composed of nine regencies and one city, making the candidate to run political public relations strategies by conducting media management to build reputations. A well-received reputation can be the key to achieving the objectives of political communication, namely getting elected. Fortunately, the activity has not been executed well by the candidates in Bengkulu's Regency.

McNair identified four types of public relations activities in political communication: the first is media management. Media management is a set of planned activities aiming to address the needs and demands of the media. In this context, political public relations maximize access and increase coverage about the politicians in the media without costing expenditure. The next activity is image management (McNair, 2011). This management should be twofold. On the one hand, managing images is for the personal image of the politicians. This image should be shaped according to organization objectives. On the other hand, management should also be

done for the political organization. Thirdly, public relations should develop the internal communication of the organization, including preparing the communication channel. It is similar to what modern companies do to support regular internal communication for maximizing organization efficiency. It is not the exception of political parties. They should also develop an effective structure of internal communication. The last activity is information management. In the information era, messages management to receive adequate information regarding the political actors and their policies are needed (McNair, 2011)

The four activities of public relations above in political communication have been executed by the candidate for Indonesia's People Representative from Bengkulu. However, their activities have not managed well in all types of public relations. Image management was done sporadically without mature planning. The general image of the candidate preferred by the constituents referred to two things, namely the political roles and stylistic roles of the candidates. The political roles of the candidates are related to the qualification of the candidates in fulfilling the public expectation of the role they play. The political roles of the candidates in the past and future would be a determining factor of the voter's perceptions. It is different from the stylistic role that has no direct correlation politically but relatively contributive to the candidate image. This is because the stylistic role is related to how the candidate showed themselves and impressed the voters.

In the social media era, creating public opinion by using social media is inevitable. It is especially relevant to image management of the candidate. The candidate as a political actor should be not only capable of persuading and engaging with public participation in real-life but also social media. Referring to two ways of symmetric communications, the candidate should manage social media with proper attention. As stated by Susanto in the introduction of this article, two ways communication by employing various media is public relation activity that is adequate and accommodative towards values expected by the constituents to their candidates (Susanto, 2017).

Conclusion

Based on the research above, the research has shown that legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative of the Republic of Indonesia from Bengkulu Province conducted social, education, and empowerment activities to build images and eventually reputations. Legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative of the Republic of Indonesia from Bengkulu Province conducted various communication channels, ranging from face-to-face communication through building friendship by visiting villages, weddings, or other invitation from the constituents, to mass media, such as radio, television, print media, outdoor media. The channels were used to build the political reputations of the channel.

Legislative candidates for Indonesia's People Representative of the Republic of Indonesia from Bengkulu Province did not individually understand political public relations strategy. Image management and media relation management in the political public relations strategy had not been executed well by the candidates. The candidates were still relying on mass gathering in the campaign location as their strategy. Against the result of the research, the researchers recommend that the legislative candidates in the general election manage their public relations in a more modern way. Management activity and media relation management should obtain more significant attention in the

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future. Furthermore, another research should be designed to analyze the relation of public relations of legislative candidates of Indonesia's People Representative and the electability of the candidates. This is because, eventually, the end of political contestation is to win the election.

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