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No. 162/2013 dated 30 August 2013

Indonesia's Democratic Evolution: Political Engineering Post-*Reformasi*

By Jonathan Chen and Adhi Priamarizki

Synopsis

Indonesia's General Elections Commission recently passed a law specifying electoral ground rules. How has recent legislation changed the electoral landscape? This is the second article in the Indonesia Programme's series on the 2014 Election Watch.

Commentary

THE ELECTORAL landscape in Indonesia has undergone a whirlwind transformation under the banner of *Reformasi* since 1999. Substantial reforms hastily undertaken in the early post-Suharto years to democratise and decentralise the political system included reinstating the independent role of the People's Consultative Assembly (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat* or MPR) and removing New Order provisions that restricted the number of political parties to three.

Such reforms led to a precipitous expansion and liberalisation of electoral space without the necessary checks and balances. After a series of trial and error, Indonesia's fourth democratic elections since the political reforms of 1998 set for 2014 will see 15 eligible political parties participating - out of 34.

Thresholds and direct elections

The most recent rules set by the General Elections Commission (KPU) stipulate that political parties must meet the following four requirements to qualify as contestants: They should have: (1) regional chapters in all provinces; (2) have these chapters in 75% of the *regencies/municipalities* in the province; (3) have these chapters in 50% of the districts/*kecamatan* (at the Regency/Municipal level); and (4) have at least 30% women in the management of the central chapter of the political party.

These legislations have resulted in a much leaner electoral landscape for 2014 compared to the general elections in 2009 (34 political parties) and 2004 (24 political parties). The role of women in politics was also given a boost following a mandatory representation cap. While such thresholds for electoral participation have been designed to contain and limit entries into the electoral space, thresholds for votes were specifically aimed to check entry into the national parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or DPR), the Provincial DPRD and Regency/Municipal DPRD.

Law No. 8/2012 stipulates a threshold of at least 3.5% of the total national valid votes, upping the stakes from a

threshold of 2% in the last general election in 2009. Under these new requirements, contesting political parties will go through a further winnowing before being officially granted seats in the DPR.

Since the 2004 general election, Indonesia has adopted an open-list proportional representation (PR) system. Voters select legislative candidates based on names and faces instead of their associated political parties. These moves represented a definitive departure from how politics had been conducted previously. Implicitly, personal appeal now carried more weight and visibility than party identities and slogans.

Significantly, when direct elections were conducted at the presidential level for the first time in 2004, a further threshold of 25 per cent of national valid votes had been determined by the leading incumbents at that time - Golkar and PDI-P - for the legitimacy to run for the presidency and vice-presidency. This legislation has remained unchanged since 2009 and implies that there could be no more than four candidates.

Towards a leaner parliament

Electoral legislation so far has narrowed the political playing field to a handful of parties already well-established, along with a smattering of smaller splinter parties including regional ones (primarily the Aceh-based Partai Aceh). Nonetheless, this has not deterred new parties from joining the fray. The nationalist-democrat NasDem Party (*Partai NasDem*) is one such party slated for the 2014 general election. Other smaller parties such as Gerindra (*Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya*) and Hanura (*Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat*) had their maiden political campaigns in the 2009 general election.

The tightening of electoral ground rules will continue to lead progressively to a leaner parliament as they are intended to streamline a disproportionately over-crowded legislature. Policymaking efficiency within parliament during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's first term (2004-2009) had been compromised by contentious factions (*fraksi*) consisting of 16 political parties.

Growing political elitism

While raising the electoral bar and putting entry limits for admission into parliament may produce a slimmer coalition government in Indonesia, it also reveals growing political elitism in Indonesia. While reigning political parties are entrenched, launching a new political outfit has become the preserve of the rich and powerful.

Electoral and parliamentary thresholds inadvertently eliminate those without clout and/or money. The open list system introduced a distinct individualism into Indonesia's political dynamics at the legislative level while direct elections for the presidencies facilitated the rise of personalism. Hence, it is no surprise that political parties running primarily under distinct presidential candidates have emerged.

As people lament the prevalence of familial dynasties within the electoral landscape, the establishment of presidential vehicles couched as political parties do not gel well with them either. It is gradually becoming a catch-22 scenario for Indonesians where despite regeneration at the cadre-level, political positions at the highest level have either been statist or predictable.

Enter Jokowi's *blusukan*: A more congenial personalism?

Indonesians have expressed their displeasure at such turns in the political process. The burgeoning rise of the "*golongan putih*" or *golput* for short, indicates dissatisfaction of an electorate that chooses not to be involved in the political process. Figures for the *golput* segment in both legislative and presidential elections reflect this. The 2004 elections registered a *golput* total of almost 16 per cent for the legislative elections and 22 per cent and 23 per cent respectively for the presidential elections. In 2009, the *golput* figures for the legislative election stood at 29 per cent while that for the presidential poll had climbed slightly to 28 per cent.

High-handed and often elitist approach to post-*Reformasi* politics, aided by political tinkering has taken a toll on the Indonesian political scene. Recently, public interest has found a kindred spirit in the person of Joko Widodo (or Jokowi) the Jakarta Governor. His *blusukan* approach to politics has been welcomed by Indonesians at large. This is the approach he takes in his meet-the-people sessions as governor without the usual fanfare or pomp of a political elite. He has even been popularly named as a potential candidate for the presidency in 2014 by the media.

If Indonesian politics is moving in the direction of greater personalism, it is imperative that political parties and their selected candidates assess the kind of personalism that they seek to project. The so-called "Jokowi effect" is perhaps indicative of the public's preference for a more genial and consultative form of personalism. Notwithstanding, Indonesia's likely electoral landscape in 2014 can be found in the status quo composition of the 15 political parties comprising celebrities, incumbents and dynastic members.

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