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Indonesia's 2009 Legislative Election: The Emerging Danger of Charismatic Politics

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Indonesia's Constitutional Court recently ruled that legislative candidates must win their parliamentary seats through a majority of votes in their electoral districts. This ruling effectively abolishes the party list ranking system -- with far-reaching consequences. Contrary to common view, the verdict could be detrimental for Indonesia's fledgling democracy in the long-run while making this year's elections very difficult to predict.

IN LATE December 2008, Indonesia's Constitutional Court – *Mahkamah Konstitusional* (MK) -- issued a verdict that could significantly influence not only the upcoming legislative election, but also Indonesia's electoral system and democracy. The crux of the verdict is that for a politician to gain a seat in parliament, he or she must obtain a majority of votes in the electoral district being contested. This could potentially encourage the “personalization of politics” and weaken the role of political parties in the long run.

Previously, parliamentary candidates who obtained the most votes might not have a seat as the law requires that their respective political parties determine a “ranking list” first. Subsequently, if a candidate wins the most votes in the district but does not fulfill a 30 percent electoral threshold required, then the first name on the list will grab the seat, regardless of his or her popular votes. The 30 percent threshold is obtained by dividing the votes obtained by all political parties in that electoral district with the available seats allocated to that respective district.

The verdict effectively abolishes this party list system. Thus, many observers believe that this is the “triumph of democracy” as it brings back the “people's voice” into the equation by creating a “more legitimate” parliament — one that supposedly represents the people, not the political parties. However, there are at least two possible implications of the Constitutional Court's verdict which could be detrimental to the democratic consolidation process in the long run.

Between party strength and individual popularity

First, the new system could weaken the role of political parties — one of the crucial pillars of an

effective democracy. Parties are supposed to bridge public interest and government action, while promoting political stability. This is mainly due to their supposed function of representing the aspirations of their constituents through their parliamentary representation. These representatives would then theoretically legislate key policies on their constituents' behalf. Thus, a strong political party is crucial in a consolidating democracy like Indonesia.

A supportive electoral system is needed to that effect. However, in the next legislative elections, scheduled for April this year, changes have been made that could have an opposite effect.

For one thing, the upcoming legislative election would already be highly competitive even before the Constitutional Court's ruling. This can be seen in the fact that the number of political parties contesting the election jumped from 24 to 44 while parties now can only obtain a parliamentary seat if they win at least 2.5% of the national popular vote. On top of that, the number of electoral districts spiked from 69 to 77, while accompanied only with an additional ten seats in parliament.

These highly competitive developments would make the electoral system more "exclusive". Under the circumstances, only the major parties with strong financial and structural support could have the clout to enter parliament, effectively crowding out minority views or representation. For instance, recent surveys show that with 2.5% of threshold, only 9 parties out of 44 will enter parliament.

For another, and perhaps most importantly, the Constitutional Court's ruling that created the 'majority of votes' system would further weaken political parties. With this system, parties are now only limited to submitting a list of candidates for each electoral district, leaving the ranking system obsolete. This would not only make the upcoming and future elections more competitive. It could in the long-run also make political parties more 'reliant' on their candidates' popularity to increase the parties' overall votes.

Conversely, many candidates are now also becoming less dependent on their party as popular votes is all that counts. In addition, when a candidate is more appealing in his/her respective district than their party, then he/she could easily switch parties. In the end, all the abovementioned would effectively disrupt the gradual process of party development and regeneration. Furthermore, the new system could also intensify intra-party competition, which could further threaten party unity and discipline.

This is not to mention the likely event that the new system could result in the victory of "popular" candidates such as movie stars or local "figures"— all of whom might not have the necessary political and public policy experience to further develop the party.

The emerging politics of charisma?

This relates to the second possible detrimental effect of the new system -- the further endorsement of individual charisma and popularity. For a candidate to win, he/she does not necessarily need to have a public policy or political experience, or even a firm grip on the pressing issues facing their constituents.

Voters would elect their candidates based on his/her personal charisma, regardless of his/her party affiliation. Indeed, a poll done in April 2008 by *Kompas*, Jakarta's leading newspaper, showed that 49.3% of respondents will vote based on the candidates' personal charisma. In the long run, the "endorsement" of such voting behaviours could prove to be detrimental for Indonesia's fledgling democracy.

For one thing, it does not really educate the public in the long run to not simply vote for 'charming' candidates. For another, a system that promotes individual popularity instead of issue or policy profile could further encourage voter bias in the long run.

As Bryan Caplan argues in *The Myth of The Rational Voters*, voters who tend to gravitate towards self-serving biases would continually elect candidates that share those biases —eventually resulting in

“bad public policies”. This is especially so when coupled with a massive mass media that shares and shapes such personalization of candidates. Thus, democracy, he argues, fails precisely because it does what voters want.

Furthermore, the new system could also further encourage “money politics” at the grassroots level. On the one hand, candidates might go all out to win votes in a highly competitive system — whether through direct or indirect “vote buying”, or simply increasing their advertisement buys. On the other hand, we could also expect — as some parliamentary candidates note — to see the rise of “political brokers” offering votes for sale.

Whither the 2009 General Elections?

How then do we forecast the coming legislative election in April? If there is any kind of certainty, it is that the new system would render definitive predictions redundant. That said, we could infer that the political battle on the ground will be between candidates, not necessarily parties -- assuming that most parliamentary candidates will throw in everything they have into their campaign.

Thus, any effort to predict the election result might want to start with the candidates and their respective popularities and strategies rather than the political party machinery that they represent, although clearly we cannot rule out their significance. Party strength could perhaps be better felt in areas where there is a large majority of educated voters, or where voters’ electoral biases are historically deeply attached to a particular party. In these areas, the parties’ infrastructure might still have some sway.

As Indonesia is less than 100 days away from the legislative election, competition among parties and candidates will intensify. Political machinery will be geared full throttle to support their candidates, while the candidates themselves will toil harder than ever. But, in the end, the people will call the shots, literally -- no matter how unruly that may seem.

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