Concept Note

Indonesian Political Parties Discussion Network

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INTRODUCTION

This is a proposal for the establishment of an Indonesian Political Parties Discussion Network. The objective of the Network would be to facilitate dialogue amongst leading elements of political parties to discuss issues about the future of parties in Indonesia’s democracy. The Network would be supported by a consortium of Indonesian and international political research and development foundations. This concept note sets out the rationale for the creation of the network, given what is argued to be an emerging crisis of the role of political parties in Indonesia, and describes a proposal for supporting the development of interchange of ideas and research on these issues.

A CRISIS OF INDONESIAN POLITICAL PARTIES?

Political parties are a central element of the operation of power and politics in Indonesia. With a few exceptions apart, it is not possible to enter the contest for public office without the backing of a political party. This is partly because electoral legislation mandates that participation in elections must be conducted within the framework of a party. But besides the legislative imperatives, parties in Indonesia have been well rooted in the soil of the country’s culture and have followed the lines of long-standing social cleavages. The four free elections in Indonesia’s post-independence history have seen the majority of the electorate consistently support two or three major “nationalist” parties, with an Islamic or santri minority divided between three or four significant Islamic parties.\(^1\) Party labels and leaders have changed, but the patterns of electoral behaviour have retained a remarkable degree of continuity. This is in contrast to many developing democracies, such as Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines in Asia and the countries of the South Pacific, where most parties are little more than labels for individual leaders or temporary alliances of convenience in parliament. Thus, in Indonesia, both the legal environment and the tendency of voters to vote along socio-religious lines (aliran) have combined to foster a political culture where voters as well as politicians have identified relatively closely with political parties.

In recent years, however, a number of trends have created new pressures on political parties and have thrown some of the apparent certainties into question. Some observers have even begun to talk in terms of a “crisis” for political parties as their standing amongst the electorate continues to decline and voter identification with parties weakens. But the story is a complex one and relates to a range of developments, some of which are particularly Indonesian, but most of which are common features of well-established democracies throughout the world, whether in the developed world in Europe and

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\(^1\) PNI and PKI dominated the nationalist or “abangan” constituency in 1955, with PDIP, Golkar and Democrat predominating since 1999 and 2004. Masyumi, NU and PNNI won the support of most “santri” voters in 1955 and PPP, PAN, PKB and PKS have held the support of the equivalent constituency since 1999 and 2004.
North America or in the developing world, such as India. Indonesia had suffered more than 30 years of political stagnation, but after more than a decade of electoral democracy its political culture is coming more and more to resemble a “normal” democracy, for better or worse.

THE DECLINE OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE FLIGHT TO THE CENTRE

The first of these developments is the blurring of the previously sharp divisions between political parties and the end of the antagonistic and sometimes violent contention between aliran allegiances, particularly of the kind that marred the political scene from 1955 to 1965-66. It is increasingly being observed that parties are moving towards the “centre” or are becoming “catch-all parties” that are forced by the realities of electoral politics to try to expand their voter base away from traditional or “primordial” loyalties. Parties must adjust to the reality that a number of factors are making voters more picky and less willing to remain loyal to a single party through repeated elections. These factors include rising standards of formal education and the role of the media as a source of information and (especially through the “new media”) a tool of participation in public life. As more and more Indonesians move from rural villages to urban and peri-urban environments, the guiding influences of local political figures and religious and traditional community leaders is declining and people’s electoral allegiances are the object of more open political competition.

The traditional distinctions between nationalist and Islamic constituencies are still very apparent, but most parties have shifted from the 1950s-era campaigns focusing on a single electoral base to electoral strategies that try to win cross-aliran support. The Democrat Party’s claim that it is a “nasionalis-religius” party is the clearest example of both the continuing salience of aliran divisions and the new ways that parties try to respond to and bridge the divide. Parties are no longer content to confine themselves to a single constituency. This makes sense in a world where old cleavages are becoming less obvious, but such strategies also run the risk of blurring the differences between parties, of homogenising parties’ appeals to the extent that the ideal of voter choice loses meaning. It can accelerate the detachment of voters from their traditional party loyalties. Some parties can also find themselves caught in the trap of alienating their core ideological or social base by trying to broaden their electoral appeal. This is more a problem for a party such as PKS, which has a clear connection with a particular constituency, than for a party such as Democrat whose major attraction has always been personalistic.

The “flight to the centre” and the accompanying homogenisation of parties could be seen as an indication of the extent to which Indonesia is maturing as a democracy. Trends towards the dissolution of party differences have been observed and decried in most Western democracies. And the introduction of direct presidential election in Indonesia has had a particular effect of creating incentives for the creation of the personality-based parties that tend to be a feature of presidential systems. Indeed, there are some political scientists who argue that the era of parties attached to organised social constituencies such as the labour movement or the churches was a passing historical feature of the twentieth century and will not return. Thus the growing problem of how to differentiate their product in the political marketplace is one that Indonesian parties are sharing with the rest of the advanced democratic world.
POLICY FAILURE

But if such trends can be seen as normal, though challenging, features of a mature democracy, there are a number of serious problems that post-1998 Indonesian parties are facing that are not so widespread internationally and together might even be seen to constitute a crisis of role and identity. The first is that while the primordial symbolism that used to dominate parties’ appeal to the electorate have declined in importance, they have not been replaced by any kind of policy differentiation. This is less the case in the West, where sharp ideological, class and confessional differences no longer characterise elections, but where parties usually campaign around policies related to issues that are seen as of national importance. An example has been the often heated debate that has occurred in recent US elections over health policy, the environment and government spending. Parties in the West may struggle to voice the grand narratives that they did in the past, but they usually succeed in presenting a range of policy choices to the voters.

Indonesian parties, in contrast, produce virtually interchangeable policy statements during election campaigns. The void being created by the relative decline of identity politics in the electoral arena is not being filled by contestation over policy. This is not to say that the parties always think the same on every issue: for example, one can usually predict the conflicting response of parties such as PDIP, on the one hand, and PKS on the other, when confronted with issues that touch on the role of Islam in politics or the protection of cultural and religious minorities. But these differences usually emerge in reaction to events, not as a product of articulated policy positions. And when it comes to matters such as the economy, health or education policy, there is little or no consistent pattern of policy response amongst the parties. The parties are thus arguably failing at what is usually seen as one of their critical roles: aggregating and articulating the different interests and opinions in society, providing policy choices to the electorate and contributing to the formulation of national goals and government policy.

THE DOMINANCE OF MONEY POLITICS

The second way in which Indonesian parties can be seen to be failing the country is that the policy/political vacuum is being filled by what is variously known as “money politics” or “distributional politics”. In the apparent absence of substantive debate over policy, the fuel that drives the engine of party activity is money and the attainment of office in order to make money. The centrality of financial exchange affects both internal relationships within parties and the way the parties relate to the world of the voters. If a party is primarily policy-oriented or ideologically motivated, the interaction between its members, including the ongoing formation and re-formation of factions and alliances, tends to revolve around questions of policy orientation and/or differences of political philosophy. There is an expectation that ambitious members will be rewarded with leading positions if they can make a contribution to policy development or develop a profile amongst one of the internal political groupings. But in a party propelled mainly by “money politics”, the lubricating oil of internal relationships is the exchange of money and rent-seeking. This inevitably attracts people who are primarily motivated by financial gain, along with the capture of key party positions by those who can buy them.
In terms of relations with the voters, the culture of “money politics” has become a growing and pervasive force in parties’ electoral campaigns with each successive election since 1999. With the decay of the parties’ social roots and the growing mutual detachment between voters and parties, parties have increasingly concluded that the only way to win elections is to spend money. The mounting costs of media-dominated election campaigns force parties and candidates to seek funding by methods that arguably corrode the political process. These include the sale of positions on the party ticket, soliciting donations with promises of concessions and special favours, through to the manipulation of government budgets and abuse of discretionary state funds. The recent change to an open list system for legislative elections, while motivated by the objective of improving voter choice, has arguably created increased pressures for campaign spending by individual candidates, in addition to party expenditure.

HOSTILE PUBLIC OPINION

One of the most disturbing trends that has accompanied these developments has been the sharp decline in public regard for parties and increasing disillusionment with the electoral process since 1999. Surveys have indicated that political parties are seen as amongst the most corrupt organisations in the country and amongst the least trusted. One result is that fewer and fewer voters now feel a strong identification with a party. As the parties’ philosophical and ideological identities have waned, their appeal to voters’ “primordial” loyalties has weakened and their reputation for corruption has grown, there has been a continuing decline in the number of people who feel a sense of connection or affiliation with a particular party. Parties are losing their capacity to provide a sense of political belonging. People still come out to vote in large numbers (perceptions that voter turnout is low in Indonesia do not take account of international comparisons), but the number of “swing voters” is increasing. It is clearly desirable that the electorate should be demanding and expect results, but the party system is arguably failing if it is not able to maintain some continuity of support amongst voters, sceptical and choosy though the voters may be.

A symptom of hostile public opinion about parties is the syndrome of “anti-partyism” in NGO, media and academic circles. Many NGO activists and other commentators often give the impression they think Indonesian politics would somehow be more democratic and produce better outcomes for the people if political parties were weakened or even eliminated. Much of this discourse ignores the central role that parties have played throughout the democratic world in the last two centuries and is based on naïve and simplistic notions about politics. But if such notions are increasingly taking hold in the public sphere, parties cannot escape some of the responsibility for these ideas developing, nor escape the responsibility of responding effectively to such thinking. If such ideas spread from public and NGO opinion into powerful institutions they could be very damaging for the role of parties in Indonesian politics. This appears to have been the case with the Constitutional Court’s decision on the open-list electoral system where the anti-party views of many NGOs seem to have won over the Court’s judges. We need to ask questions about why so many intelligent people have become so hostile to political parties and what can be done to reverse the trend.

WHY A POLITICAL PARTIES DISCUSSION FORUM?
This concept note has attempted to set out a frank analysis of a range of problems facing political parties in Indonesia’s democracy. There is a pressing need to come to terms with some of these trends in order to overcome them. Despite the litany of problems, however, there are great strengths in Indonesian political institutions, including parties, and democracy is clearly “the only game in town”. As mentioned, most Indonesians still vote in elections, even though they may hold negative attitudes about many of the candidates. The occasional nostalgia for the Suharto era should not be confused with a serious desire to return to authoritarian governance and, despite concerns about a drift towards religious intolerance, the appeal of extremist groups is tiny. Most importantly, political parties continue to attract people of integrity and intelligence who are committed to working in their parties for reasons of nation-building, social change and policy development. And within NGO and academic circles there are many individuals and institutions who understand the importance of political parties in democratic governance, even though they may be very critical of the failings and bad behaviour of many party leaders.

The objective of the Political Parties Discussion Network would therefore be to bring together individuals working within political parties, in a non-partisan atmosphere, to share concerns, ideas and possible solutions to the problems of political parties in Indonesia today. The Network would be an opportunity for party members, both elected representatives and party activists, to discuss some of the issues described above in a spirit of shared national concern, away from the pressures and divisions of day-to-day partisan debate and contention. The Network would also be a place where constructive dialogue could be encouraged between party members and the wider community, including NGO activists, media commentators and scholars from the academic world and think tanks.

The motivation behind the proposed Network is that there is no other place where discussion on these issues can take place in both non-partisan setting and in an ongoing way. One-off public seminars and debates regularly occur throughout the capital and in the rest of the country, but the goal of the Network would be to stimulate a regular and continuing series of interchange and dialogue. This would be an opportunity to meet on neutral ground, to share experiences and make connections with like-minded people from different parties and to develop a deeper mutual understanding of the perspectives of critics and supporters alike. While some of the Network meetings might be public, others could be restricted to participants only, according to the subject and the choices of those involved. But the emphasis would be on discouraging public performance and media attention and on encouraging thoughtful and productive ideas.

The secondary objective of the Network would be to support research and analysis into the issues under discussion. This could take two forms. The first would be material to feed into Network discussions, to provide information and to stimulate the thinking of the participants. The goal would be to provide participants with brief, succinct and easily absorbed analysis of problems, trends and data, rather than primary or field research. A second form of material would be more extensive primary research, including on topics suggested by Network discussions, inquiring more deeply into related political issues and which would be suitable for wider dissemination and publication. Research projects would be commissioned by the consortium of organisations sponsoring the Network.