Indonesia’s third democratic transition: are the parties ready for the 2014 presidential election?

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Introduction: Indonesia’s third transition

Indonesia today is facing its third historic transition since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. The first was the transition to democratic elections in 1999 and the second occurred with the change to a directly elected presidency in 2004. The third will take place in 2014 when the first entire cycle of a two-term directly elected presidency comes to an end and the transition to a new popularly elected administration takes place. The first two post-New Order Presidents were elected through parliamentary vote, so the upcoming election will witness the first handover of power between two directly elected Presidents.

In a presidential system with fixed terms, such as in Indonesia, the constitutional process relies on the political class to produce the choices for a changeover of leaders according to a strict (and arguably arbitrary) timetable, rather than allowing it to occur in response to the tide of political events, as tends to be the case in a parliamentary system such as in the UK or Australia. Linz (1990: 67) observed that fixed presidential terms “mean that the political system must produce a capable and popular leader every four years or so”. And if democratic choice is to be real, there should be a choice of such leaders presented to the electorate. This creates expectations that the conduit for the recruitment process, the party system, will be able to fulfil this role in time with the election cycle. In Indonesia, the centrality of parties in the process is reinforced by legislation that makes it impossible to enter the presidential race outside the framework of the party system. In the US case, a highly institutionalised two party system with broad coalition parties has evolved over many decades within the framework of a presidential constitution. The pre-
selection process of the “primaries” allows a certain degree of public input into an otherwise internal party mechanism.

Despite massive progress, Indonesia has not had sufficient time to test and refine the political mechanisms of its particular version of presidentialism, nor to nurture the informal practices, unspoken agreements and conventions that develop with usage and experience. The question is: how well will the Indonesian party system handle its part in managing the transition to the next five or ten year cycle?

**Fifteen years of progress**

The country has experienced an astonishing transformation over the last fifteen years, from being one of the political laggards of Southeast Asia under the personalised regime of Suharto to being the best functioning democracy in the region. Compared with Malaysia and Thailand’s political logjams and the one-party rule of Cambodia, Vietnam and Singapore, Indonesia is a home for vigorous and healthy political competition. One element of that change was, of course, the largely voluntary withdrawal from politics by the military. Notwithstanding the continuing prominence of individual ex-generals, the Indonesian army as an institution no longer has a guiding role in government and no special influence on policy outside defence and security.

There have been three peaceful transfers of power in mostly well-organised and fair elections, and free expression and the media are flourishing, non-government organisations and social movements such as organised labour are increasingly prominent. There are signs of growing political awareness and assertiveness on the part of the electorate, with a number of interesting examples of the use of new media to campaign around issues and grievances (Sherlock 2010).

The changes were facilitated and strengthened by major institutional reforms. These included direct presidential election, which helped clarify the respective powers of the legislature and executive, as well as the introduction of direct election for the heads of regional governments. The local elections reflected the huge transfer of administrative authority from the central government in Jakarta to the regions – Indonesia has undergone a simultaneous process of central regime change and geographic decentralisation of power. Other reforms strengthened mechanisms to enforce the transparency and accountability of government, including reinforcing the powers and resourcing of the national audit agency (BPK) and the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission (KPK), Ombudsman, Constitutional Court and Judicial Commission.

**Stalled reform and policy paralysis**

The last few years, however, have been less encouraging. The excited talk of *reformasi* (reform) has largely evaporated and has been replaced by disappointment about lack of further progress, entrenched corruption and the continuing stranglehold of a self-serving political elite. Recent academic analyses of Indonesian politics have used the language of “stagnation” (Tomsa 2010), “regression” (Fealy 2011) and “missing … political accountability” (Hamid 2012).
To some extent the ebbing tide of euphoria reflects the fact that Indonesia is now a “normal” country (McIntyre and Ramage 2008), no longer a place of exciting hopes and fears, but a country where politics has resumed the prosaic reality of coalition-building (Hamid 2012), division of the spoils of office and wrangling over policy differences. In other words, politics as played out in any “advanced” democracy.

With the era of political and constitutional reformasi having passed, we should shift our attention to the full range of policy issues and the lack of progress in a whole gamut of pressing national problems. The SBY administration has been marked by something of a policy paralysis and apparent incapacity to make progress on a long agenda of unfinished business. Issues include the distorting effects of oil-price subsidies on the state budget and foreign exchange, the dilapidated state of roads, rail, seaports, airports etc, poor quality government services such as health and education, unemployment, lack of development in remote regions, environmental degradation and urban pollution and congestion. An especially alarming development has been the indecisive and ineffectual response by the SBY administration to the rise of religious intolerance and persecution of minorities which threatens the pluralist compact on which the stability of the post-independence Indonesian state has been based.

Many studies have looked at the sources of policy paralysis and deficiency in service delivery in terms of problems caused by decentralisation, the need for civil service reform and an overhaul of government administration. Particular blame is usually apportioned to national and regional parliaments, as well as to ministerial and cabinet decision-making and, of course, to corruption and waste of state resources. It is generally agreed that the most telling weakness of Indonesian democracy today is a lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making. Politicians understand that they must be popular to be elected but act as if achievement of office confers carte blanche to distribute resources without being answerable to anyone. Government officials resent having to make and implement policy under new levels of scrutiny from the media, the public and the parliament.

The failings of the party system and the 2014 election

The presidential election to be held in 2014, entailing as it does a handover over power from the current regime to a new set of national leaders, thus represents both an opportunity and a burden of great responsibilities. The rest of this paper is devoted to the particular question of whether, in the lead up to the presidential election, the political elite will be able to produce a new leadership with the capacity to grasp the initiative on the agenda of urgent policy issues. Specifically, the paper asks whether political parties are equipped to play their role in recruiting a viable choice of presidential candidates. It concludes that democratic decision-making processes in the parties are being overwhelmed by money politics, dynastic and clan obsessions and the incapacity to accommodate political and personal differences and build inclusive internal party coalitions.

Observation of the first fifteen years of electoral politics reveals a very mixed picture of the capacity of the parties to foster and produce successive line-ups of candidacy for national leadership. The major problem appears to be that the parties have a
“winner takes all” attitude to party leadership and to presidential candidacy and that losing contenders conclude that they have no alternative but to leave and form their own party.

In the first transition of 2004, for example, the eventual winner, SBY, did not emerge into the first rank of political choices until quite late in the process. This was, in part at least, because his obvious choice of party, PDIP, was unable to accommodate him without the entrenched leaders of the party, Megawati and her husband Taufik Kiemas, feeling threatened by his presence. This led him, apparently reluctantly, to relent to pressure from ex-PDIP supporters and join forces with the new party (the Democrat Party) that had been created by them as a vehicle for SBY’s candidacy (Honna 2012: 475).

A succession of new parties has been formed by presidential candidates who could not find a place within the existing parties. Hanura was created by former general Wiranto after he split with Golkar following his weak performance as Golkar’s presidential candidate in the 2004 election. Another presidential aspirant from Golkar, Prabowo Subianto, also left the party to form his own party, Gerindra, as a vehicle for his candidacy in the 2009 election. A further “presidential” party established by a former Golkar leader has recently been added to the list with the creation of the National Democrat Party (Nasdem) by media tycoon Surya Paloh in order to support his likely bid for the presidency in 2014.

The existing major parties have a poor record in the two big tasks for successful parties – firstly, producing credible candidates for national office and, secondly, maintaining inclusive and cohesive internal coalitions, both of which are necessary for attracting winning levels of voter support. Golkar has driven a succession of leaders from its ranks and has now elected a leader, mega-wealthy businessman Aburizal Bakrie, who appears to have very little prospect of election in 2014. This is a clear sign of the fatal weakness in Golkar’s political culture: it has produced a leader who can win internal elections through the power of money but whose credibility as a vote-winner amongst the people is extremely low.

In the case of PDIP, the problem is less money politics than dynastic politics. As mentioned, PDIP could not find a place for the man who went on to win two elections and instead seems incapable of putting forward any presidential candidate except Megawati, a person who has failed election three times, under both the indirect and direct electoral systems. The only candidates who gain favour from the dominant Sukarno clique are members of their own family, such as the uninspiring Puan Maharani. A new generation of talented potential leaders committed to the party’s ideals of pluralist nationalism languish in frustration behind an immovable front rank that holds the franchise on the dynastic name.

Even a party as apparently youthful as Democrat, having been formed in 2003 with none of the historical baggage carried by Golkar and PDIP, has foundered over the task of putting forward a post-SBY leadership. The problem of money politics has overwhelmed all the figures who were touted as successors to SBY. The rising stars of the party, Anas Urbaningram, Muhammad Nazaruddin, Angelina Sondakh and Andi Mallarangeng have all been politically destroyed by convictions for corrupt use
of funds for political purposes or by damaging allegations. SBY himself seems to have fallen for the fatal temptation of dynastic politics, pushing forward his own son, Eddie Baskoro, into leading party positions in apparent disregard for voter perceptions of such practices (Honna 2012).

The Islamic parties have been afflicted by their own range of similar problems. PKB is a tragic lesson of the fate of parties dominated by one extended family and unable to resolve the tensions produced by competing ambitions that inevitably arise in politics. The party has repeatedly split, with each splinter appearing to be believe that the party’s most loyal voter base (traditionalist Muslims in East and Central Java) would automatically adhere to them. With the death of Abdurrahman Wahid, the party has lost its one dominant national figure and shows no sign of being able to replace him. Because of the party’s failings, a clear constituency of voters and a political tradition dating back from before independence has been left without what was once a united voice.

PAN was strongly identified with its prominent founder, Amien Rais, who for a short time after the fall of Suharto was seen as a leading presidential contender. But in the 1999 and 2004 parliamentary elections the party failed to win a significant slice of the vote (6% and 7% respectively) and Amien’s presidential bid attracted only 15%, well behind the leading contenders, SBY and Megawati. The party has survived Amien’s subsequent retirement from politics, but it has failed to produce any outstanding national leaders. In fact, the party has become notorious for its propensity for selecting celebrity candidates in national and regional elections, few of whom perform effectively in office (Jakarta Post 28/1/13).

PKS is an interesting and unusual case because, as a party, it has captured a loyal following (principally pious Muslims in urban areas) largely on the basis of ideas and policy, without the attractions of a charismatic leader. While PDIP, PKB and PAN combined an appeal to a well-defined social/religious base with prominent leaders – Megawati, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais respectively – PKS has built itself behind rather stolid figures such Hidayat Nur Wahid. The party has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Shihab & Nugroho 2008, Tanuwidjaja 2012, Buehler 2012). But it is notable that the literature has focused on issues such as PKS’s organisational capacity and the dilemmas the party faces in trying to broaden its base beyond an Islamic constituency while retaining its core support, while almost ignoring the personal qualities and electoral appeal of its leaders.

The party came from obscurity in 1999 and continues to argue a relatively well-articulated view of politics, but its very character as a cadre-based party limits its capacity to produce a compelling leadership choice in the presidential race. Its strengths in organisational and ideological terms mean that PKS is less likely to suffer the personality-based schisms that weaken other parties, but these features also discourage the emergence of a figure who could capture the wider electorate’s imagination. The party is likely to remain a stable force in parliamentary politics but
will continue to find it difficult to be a major contender in the more personalised atmosphere of a presidential poll.¹

The one new figure on the national political stage is Joko Widodo, who rose to prominence with his election to the position of Governor of Jakarta in September 2012. Jokowi, as he is popularly known, attracted attention in his previous position as Mayor of Solo (Surakarta) in Central Java where he gained a reputation for non-corrupt, effective government and for his popularity amongst the people of the city. In his campaign for the Governorship of Jakarta he was seen as a fresh uncorrupted figure opposed to the old circles of entrenched power represented by his main contender, the incumbent Governor, Fauzi Bowo. With his election as Governor of Jakarta and his populist, unorthodox style in that office (including publicly embarrassing obstructionist senior bureaucrats), he has achieved national attention and has become touted in the media as a presidential candidate. A number of recent polls have placed him ahead of Megawati and Prabowo in popularity. Jokowi himself has, however, rejected suggestions he will stand for the presidency in 2014 and, in fact, has expressed annoyance with journalists who he accused of diverting attention from his job as Governor.²

It is notable that, despite his nation-wide reputation as a popular Mayor of Solo, Jokowi’s party, PDIP, has been far from unified in backing his advancement. Just as SBY’s ascent in 2003-04 was seen by some within PDIP as a threat, so the party was deeply divided about whether to support Jokowi’s candidacy for Jakarta Governor in 2012. Although Megawati reportedly championed his candidacy, her husband Taufik Kiemas was deeply opposed. Since the 2012 gubernatorial election, Taufik has been vocal in his attempts to put down any ideas that Jokowi is an appropriate candidate for the 2014 presidential election. Mietzner (2013) has argued, however, that if Jokowi continues to climb in the polls there would be a compelling case for the PDIP leadership to accept him as the party’s candidate. This would certainly be the case if an ascendant Jokowi was seen to been responding to overtures from Democrat or Golkar, leaving PDIP with only Megawati as an option.

Conclusion: failings of the party system

With little more than a year to run before the presidential election, the party system is failing to put forward a choice of candidates which is finding resonance in the electorate. Until recently, most polls were topped by Megawati (reflecting the resilience of a core PDIP social base (Mietzner 2012)) and Prabowo (testimony to

¹ The poor performance of Hidayat Nur Wahid in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election is an illustration of how difficult it is for one of the party established leaders to perform well in the more personality-based character of direct executive elections at the national and regional level. With 12% of the vote in the first round, Hidayat captured the support only about a half of the voters who identified themselves as PKS supporters (Lembaga Survei Indonesia, Exit Poll Pilgub Jakarta, 2012, p.35).

voter recognition, if not charisma), but both individuals rarely exceed 15-20% electoral support. Recent polls have put Jokowi in the lead, but still usually below 25% support. Both Megawati and Prabowo are, for different reasons, deeply problematic as viable options for the presidency. Megawati’s poor performance as President from 2001 to 2004, together with the drastic slump in support for PDIP under her leadership (from 32% in 1999 to 19% in 2009), suggest that she would attract little more than diehard PDIP supporters to vote for her. Prabowo may have the personal profile and financial resources to mount a serious bid, but his human rights record during the Suharto era may well be an electoral liability and would certainly cause problems for the conduct of foreign policy under any administration he headed. Bakrie is seen as a greedy capitalist, Wiranto a relic of the past and Jusuf Kalla’s name evokes a combination of the two: none has registered more than about 10% support in public opinion polls. Jokowi certainly does not carry any such negative baggage, and as the only new figure on the scene, he may well emerge triumphant in 2014. But his slight political experience as Mayor of a middling provincial city and short time as Governor of Jakarta does not seem sufficient for a position of such immense responsibility as President of Indonesia.

The voters’ current choice is thus a range of rather worn-out or unappealing figures, plus one fresh but inexperienced neophyte who is reluctant to stand. Unless some stronger candidates emerge very soon, it is likely that the 2014 elections will be contested by a dispersed field of candidates, none of whom comes anywhere near to winning 50% of the vote in the first round. This could lead to a second round run-off between two candidates whose personalities and programs find very little resonance in society. Alternatively, should Jokowi decide to stand he could be elected merely because someone has to come out of the process a winner and he is the only candidate without huge negative baggage.

These scenarios are problematic from two perspectives: democratic principle and political need. From the point of view of principle, genuine democracy depends on genuine choice. After fifteen years of democracy, it should be a point of concern that the party system as a whole cannot produce new generations of leaders and that the only scenario that might include a new figure revolves around an inexperienced and reluctant candidate who had difficulty being accepted by his own party.

From the point of view of political need, the agenda of urgent policy issues calls for a president with a strong popular mandate and a proven capacity to build political alliances. A post-2014 president with an uncertain mandate may find it very difficult to maintain his/her authority. The deals and compromises necessary to put together a workable cabinet and to maintain relations with the parliament will lead to another “coalition” government that might be even more indecisive in dealing with national issues than was the SBY administration. In these circumstances, the existing tendency of ministerial posts, and the resources attached to them, to be treated by ministers as their personal fiefdom will be exacerbated. Policy development and coordination would become even more difficult and reform of government administration would be an even more remote possibility. There is also the relatively remote possibility that such an administration might be openly defied by elite or
mass opposition, with the possibility of instability or violence, particularly in existing trouble spots in Papua and other outer island provinces.

This article is not alone in raising concerns about the unclear choice of contenders for the 2014 election. But much previous writing has concentrated on the personal qualities of the leaders. What this article has shown, however, is that the problem is not merely an unfortunate coincidence of personalities but is the product of structural weakness within a party system that appears incapable of performing the vital role of recruiting a choice of leaders in whom a majority of the electorate can have confidence. A fixed-term presidential system demands that parties produce leaders according to a precise electoral schedule, but selection processes within Indonesian parties have been subverted by money politics, dynastic ambitions and a systemic neglect of the task of developing policy alternatives.

The problem with the party system is possibly the most critical example of the limitations of post-Suharto political reforms. While the “hardware” of constitutional and institutional structures are in place and there is no significant anti-regime or anti-democratic sentiment, inchoate or organised, the “software” of the system still has many bugs in it. The actual human beings that make institutions work have become very adept at manipulating the system for short-term and sectional gain and the old autocratic players have “reorganised” themselves (Robison and Hadiz 2004) to survive and prosper in new democratic environment. But the political class appears less capable of producing a spectrum of new political leaders from which the electorate can choose. Coalition-building has been random, “promiscuous”, opportunistic and related to a division of the spoils of office rather than reflecting coalitions of interests committed to policy outcomes (Hamid 2012). Unless these tendencies are overcome, the policy paralysis of the last few years will continue and the economic progress that has drawn attention to Indonesia’s “ascent” will stagnate or even regress.
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