One of the most important reforms of the post-Suharto period has been the creation of a highly dynamic and competitive party system - particularly remarkable given an absence of democratic party politics in Indonesia for more than 40 years. Yet despite positive indicators for a healthy and functioning party system, Indonesians are highly critical of the parties and their leaders; and opinion polls rank political parties among the institutions considered most corrupt, ineffective and unresponsive. Marcus Mietzner examines whether this criticism is justified.

Stable but unpopular: political parties after Suharto

Marcus Mietzner

Since the late 1950s, two authoritarian regimes (first Sukarno's Guided Democracy, then Suharto's New Order) had tightly controlled and regulated the existence and activities of political parties in Indonesia. Under Suharto, the number of parties had been reduced to three, with the government's electoral machine Golkar ensured of regular triumphs at the ballot box. By contrast, the post-1998 party system has witnessed almost no institutional restrictions or government interference. Except for a continuing ban on communist-leaning platforms, parties are largely free to choose their ideological orientation and organisational structure. In addition, all post-Suharto elections (two parliamentary polls and two rounds of a presidential ballot) have been widely acknowledged as free and fair. In this liberal climate, parties of all colours and convictions have mushroomed, with 17 of them holding seats in the current parliament and another 95 registered at the Department of Justice and Human Rights.

Yet, ten years after Suharto's fall, Indonesian political parties are the target of fierce criticism by observers, civil society leaders and the general public. Opinion surveys show that Indonesians view the parties as corrupt, unresponsive, self-absorbed and ineffective. Newspaper columns regularly launch stinging attacks on party leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have focused many of their programmes on scrutinising the activities of political parties – or the lack thereof. At the same time, however, the party system seems surprisingly stable. Despite the constant outpouring of criticism, there have been very few calls for the disbandment of the party-based democratic system, and parties continue to receive large numbers of new members.

What are the reasons for this seemingly paradoxical situation? How to explain this love-hate relationship between Indonesians and their political parties? This article discusses the reasons for the institutional solidity of the Indonesian party system, but also explores why this significant success has not been accompanied by higher levels of public support among ordinary Indonesians for the parties. After evaluating structural, political and ideological issues involving the state of Indonesia's party system, I conclude that, despite ongoing problems, Indonesia's parties deserve more credit for their contribution to the strength of the democratic polity than is usually extended to them.

Stable

The first significant feature of Indonesia's post-Suharto parties is their relative stability and continuity. All large parties that contested the 1999 elections still exist a decade later. They are: the secular-nationalist PDI-P (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan*, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), the former government party Golkar, the traditionalist Muslim party PKB (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa,* National Awakening Party), the Islamic PPP (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, United Development Party), the modernist Muslim party PAN (*Partai Amanat Nasional*, National Mandate Party), the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) - a puritan Islamic party that participated in the 1999 polls as PK (*Partai Keadilan*, Justice Party), and the ultra-modernist Islamic party *Partai Bulan Bintang* (Moon and Crescent Party). There has been only one noteworthy addition to this club of major parties in the last ten years: President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party (PD, *Partai Demokrat*), founded in 2001.

This stability of the party system is an unusual phenomenon among Asia's emerging democracies. Even in more established democratic systems, the lifespan of political parties is often much shorter. For instance, the average life expectancy of political parties in South Korea is three years, while parties in Thailand and the Philippines survive only a little longer. In Indonesia, by contrast, three of the biggest parties were founded in the 1960s and 1970s, with the rest established after Suharto's fall. Ten years into the post-authoritarian era, there are no signs that any of the larger parties will collapse anytime soon.

"The stability of the party system is an unusual phenomenon among Asia's emerging democracies"

The relative longevity of Indonesian parties is due to a mixture of politico-ideological and structural reasons. To begin with, most Indonesian parties are still rooted in distinct social, religious or ideological milieus, and the majority of voters feel reluctant to move between those constituencies. This entrenchment of paradigmatic divisions in Indonesian society has obstructed the internal modernisation of the mainstream parties, but has also been responsible for their institutional persistence. Furthermore, Indonesian law forces parties to establish a nationwide structure down to the sub-district level, strengthening their organisational roots and making it difficult for newcomers to challenge the already established parties.

The stability of the national party system is also reflected in the continuously high voter turn-out. In 1999 and 2004, participation in national elections ranged between 75 and 93 percent, a rate that even consolidated democracies would consider healthy. Even in direct elections for local government heads, in which the role of the parties is weaker, an average of 69 percent of registered voters took part in the ballots. While these figures are not an endorsement of the party system as such, they indicate that Indonesians deem it important to express support for the party of their choice.

Many Muslim parties in Indonesia suspended their campaign for Sharia law following the failure to pass a constitutional amendement in 2002.

Another factor in the resilience of Indonesian party politics is the almost complete absence of extremist parties that reject the current democratic system. In contrast to the 1950s, when most parties wanted to remove or substantially alter parliamentary democracy (and replace it with either a communist regime, an Islamic state or authoritarian rule), the parties of the post-Suharto era have been strongly supportive of the democratic system. Even the more formalist Muslim parties have suspended their campaign for the introduction of *syariat*, or Islamic law, after their proposal for a constitutional amendment was voted down by an overwhelming majority in 2002. Since then, their politico-ideological orientation has been largely moderate and centripetal, further consolidating the core of the post-authoritarian polity.

Criticism

Despite these positive indicators for a healthy and functioning party system, Indonesians have not held back with their criticism of the parties and their leaders. In opinion polls, political parties have invariably ranked among the institutions considered most corrupt, ineffective and unresponsive, and academic observers have echoed this sentiment with their critiques in seminars, newspapers and booklets.

The disappointment of ordinary Indonesians with their parties is reflected in stunning and unambiguous statistics: more than 1,000 local legislators, almost ten percent of the total number of parliamentarians across Indonesia, have been investigated for corruption since 2004. At the same time, more than 75 percent of Indonesians do not feel a strong sense of emotional attachment to any of the existing parties. In local elections, voters have mostly opted for independent figures with only superficial ties to their nominating parties. In Aceh – the only province where non-party candidates have thus far been allowed to stand – nominees put forward by established parties suffered a series of crushing defeats.

To be sure, post-Suharto party politics have drawn a large number of rent-seekers, power brokers and opportunists into the centre of Indonesia's new democracy. This is hardly surprising, given that the political parties today hold much more power than at any other time since the 1950s. Through their parliamentarians, the parties have authority over legislation, and through their participation in government, they dominate the executive as well. These extensive powers are too tempting for political and oligarchic operators to ignore.

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However, the problems of Indonesian party politics are not only about the failing morals of politicians. Structural deficiencies and unrealistic societal expectations also play a role. Most importantly, Indonesia has no coherent system of party financing in place. The vast majority of party members pay no membership fees; the small state subsidies to parties were cut by almost 90 percent in 2005; and contributions to parties by entrepreneurs are typically slammed by the media and civil society groups. Accordingly, party boards force their representatives in legislative and executive institutions to come up with the money needed to run an efficient organisation. Squeezed by their parties, parliamentarians subsequently turn to corruption and rent-seeking to raise fresh funds.

This vicious cycle of political corruption has been aggravated by the populist attitudes in Indonesian society and some circles of the NGO scene. In recent years, it has become a cherished habit for political commentators to decry every attempt by political parties to obtain monetary or institutional resources from the state. In 2007, even the planned acquisition of fax machines and laptops for members of the national parliament created a huge uproar. Similarly, it took ten years of post-Suharto reforms for legislators to be allocated a single research assistant each. While such anti-party critics can be certain of thunderous applause from the public, they have rarely come forward with alternative concepts for proper and transparent funding mechanisms for Indonesia's parties.

Ultimately, the problem of corruption in Indonesian political parties can't be solved without ground-breaking reforms of the party financing system. It would be naïve to believe that parties can simultaneously engage in fund-raising activities, stay away from corrupt practices and be effective vehicles of political representation and aggregation. In the absence of membership contributions and public funding, Indonesia's parties have so far been forced to concentrate on raising money instead of carrying out their functional duties. Indonesian observers and the general public should acknowledge this issue as an institutional defect. In addition, they should recognise that for all their faults, the parties have played a significant role in stabilising the post-authoritarian polity. As Indonesia approaches the 2009 elections, the party system appears reasonably solid, and the introduction of a parliamentary threshold of 2.5 percent for the upcoming polls is likely to make it even more compact and cohesive. Given the vulnerability and ineffectiveness of party systems in other emerging democracies, this is more than Indonesians could have hoped for when they began their journey into an uncertain transition ten years ago.

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