Indonesian Parties in a Deep Dilemma: The Case of Golkar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Known as the obsolete New Order’s electoral vehicle, the Golkar Party (Partai Golkar) has defied the odds to maintain its position as a major party in Indonesia.

- The 2014 elections have proven most testing. Although it secured second place, the party has since suffered leadership splits. The party may have had numerous splinters and spin-offs in its long history, but recent struggles forced it to hold an Extraordinary National Congress (Musyawarah Nasional Luar Biasa/Munaslub) in May 2016.

- In short, Golkar has failed to regenerate its top ranks since the departure of Suharto. This problem has culminated in the election of former House Speaker Setya Novanto as party chairman. Novanto is one of Indonesia’s most controversial politicians who has eluded various allegations of involvement in high-profile corruption cases.

- Golkar’s current problems are set to worsen the growing anti-party sentiments in Indonesia, which if left unattended may lead to popular scepticism towards the democracy in general.

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INTRODUCTION: NEW LEADERSHIP CONTROVERSY

Following the 2014 general elections, Partai Golkar went through a tumultuous period that saw leadership and loyalty splits. In fact, the party had to hold an Extraordinary National Convention (Musyawarah Nasional Luar Biasa/Munaslub) in a bid to solve its leadership problems. Yet, despite calls to start afresh with a clean and credible leader, it elected a controversial political figure, Setya Novanto, on 17 May 2016.

Well-known for his financial power, Novanto had to step down as the House Speaker in December 2015 after the House’s ethics council found him guilty of violating ethical standards by soliciting kickbacks. A report filed by Energy Minister Sudirman Said had alleged that Novanto was engaged in a conspiracy to demand Freeport mining company to give him shares in exchange for a promise to extend the company’s contract to operate in Papua. Although Novanto eluded prosecution for his alleged involvement in the Freeport shares case, observers and popular opinion have condemned Golkar’s subsequent decision to elect him as chairman, particularly after what promised to be an open contest for leadership overseen by an ethics body that was to ensure fair play and prevent money politics.¹

On a larger scale, the party’s problems are a reflection of the growing difficulty faced by many Indonesian parties in finding popular leaders. Golkar’s choice also demonstrates its disregard for widespread resentment against Novanto and for voters’ overall disenchantment with the party. Political parties continue to fall well short of popular expectations and their leaders remain corrupt in their control of the bureaucracy and state enterprises. Many party leaders essentially buy positions by spreading money among party branches, and legislators are paid exorbitantly despite poor work ethics and productivity.²

This paper seeks to place Golkar’s problems in the context of these broader anti-party sentiments in Indonesia. Focusing on leadership, it discusses the party’s efforts to maintain popularity after losing Suharto and after increasingly being abandoned by prominent cadres who have decided to build separate political vehicles for their individual aspirations.

HISTORY AND TRAJECTORY: GOLKAR’S RISE AND ‘FALL’

Established as an agglomeration of professional associations which exponentially grew in the 1960s, Golkar (Golongan Karya/Functional Group) evolved into the New Order regime’s (1966-1998) electoral machine. While the party system may have been heavily controlled and manipulated, Golkar nevertheless received various favours from the government to ensure the endurance of the New Order’s rule. As a simple example, whereas

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funding and campaign activities for the only two other parties allowed during the Suharto era (United Development Party/PPP and Indonesian Democratic Party/PDI) were limited, Golkar received an abundance of government support on both counts.\(^3\) Unsurprisingly, as soft coercion to vote Golkar was implemented, it dominated elections in the New Order era (1971, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992 and 1997) with around 60-75 percent of the votes each time.

When Suharto stepped down as president in 1998, Golkar was also predicted to decline, falling out of favour as it was, with reform-minded Indonesians. Yet, contrary to predictions, Golkar has remained a major party in Indonesia. One reason for this was that while its solid organisation – funded by Suharto regime – may have been crucial to its longevity, the party also had well-known leaders to thank. Renamed as Partai Golkar (Golkar Party) in 1998 with big names such as Akbar Tanjung and former General Wiranto leading it, the party remained strong in the 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014 elections with 22.4 percent (2\(^{\text{nd}}\) place), 21.6 percent (1\(^{\text{st}}\) place), 14.4 percent (2\(^{\text{nd}}\) place), 14.8 percent (2\(^{\text{nd}}\) place) respectively – despite stronger competition from a string of new as well as incumbent parties.

The 2014 general elections proved a turning point for Golkar. Although it came second overall in the parliamentary round, it was the first time the party had failed to nominate either a presidential or vice-presidential candidate. As the leader who took the party into those elections, Aburizal Bakrie was blamed. Another leader emerged in the figure of loyal cadre Agung Laksono who had also long harboured leadership aspirations. Subsequently, the party had to manage leadership splits and corruption scandals. The faction led by Aburizal was chosen by the national congress (Munas) in Bali, while the splinter led by Agung was elected at a rival congress held in Jakarta – both congresses were held in late 2014. The internal conflict was particularly damning since the two leaders clearly stated their allegiance to opposing sides of government – Aburizal was a strong Prabowo (the losing presidential candidate in 2014) supporter, whereas Agung leaned towards President Jokowi.

Since then, the struggle has proven difficult to manage and was even brought to the Supreme Court to be resolved. The court declared the Agung camp illegitimate and legalised Aburizal’s leadership. However, tensions continued, threatening the party’s ability to nominate candidates in the 2015 local elections. In the end, the warring parties decided to hold an extraordinary convention (Musyawarah Nasional Luar Biasa/Munaslub) in May 2016 to sort things out.

**GOLKAR AND BROADER ANTI-PARTY SENTIMENTS**

Indonesian parties continue to disappoint voters, and enthusiasm over the mushrooming of new parties in the post-Suharto era dissipated in time as they proved themselves to be unable to function. Put simply: parties are much disliked in Indonesia.\(^4\)

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3 For details see Ulla Fionna, *The Institutionalisation of Political Parties in Post-authoritarian Indonesia: From the Grass-roots up* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 56-60.

This has implications for electoral competition, as can be seen in the appearance of a number of trends in voting results: First, no winning party has been able to repeat its victory in the subsequent election. Second, support for the party that came first decreased from election to election (from 33.74 percent in 1999, 21.58 percent in 2004, 20.85 percent in 2009, and 18.95 percent in 2014). Third, the proportion of non-voters rose continuously until 2009 and remained high, if somewhat lower than in 2009 in the last election in 2014 (from 6.7 percent in 1999 to 15.93 percent in 2004, to 29 percent in 2009, and to about 25 percent in 2014). Apart from election results, public opinion surveys have also indicated that trust of parties and parliament is low. For example, in early 2015, trust in the national parliament was only around 50 percent (compared to that in the Corruption Eradication Commission/KPK at 81 percent and in the president at 83 percent). No doubt, though low, this had risen somewhat compared to the trust recorded just after the 2014 elections, which was at 40 percent.

The low level of trust is symptomatic of a more serious problem. While Indonesia has been praised for the success of its initial democratic transition, more recently its democratisation has idled and in some ways declined. In what scholars have called democratic rollback or stagnation, party politicians are one of the elements that have strongly demonstrated the tendency to protect their power. Some of this rollback could be seen in the efforts to reduce the powers of the Election Commission (KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum) that was widely credited for the success of the direct presidential election in 2004; the attempted weakening of the anti-corruption commission; or in efforts to reverse direct local elections in October 2014. All in all, anti-reform elements have clearly been aggressive in furthering their interests, and this has had the effect of further fuelling public resentment towards political parties.

While scepticism concerns all parties, some are facing greater challenges than others in improving their popularity among voters. For Partai Golkar, the recurring leadership tussles observed since 1998 seem to stem from the inability of party leaders to maintain unity the way Suharto once did. While this seems an over-simplification and unfair comparison as Suharto had all the means to maintain unity, it nevertheless provides one explanation for what has happened to Golkar since he left the scene. Evidently, Suharto’s departure was followed by splinter and spin-off parties – established by Golkar cadres with ambitions that could not be advanced within the party.

While names such as Akbar Tanjung, Jusuf Kalla, and Luhut Pandjaitan are still considered the main power holders, the party’s dominance during Suharto’s rule has nurtured the political careers of many others. With the internal friction and as the limited seats of leadership within the party proved too restricting, these individuals decided to found their own political vehicles instead. For starters, right after 1998 small parties were formed by

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former Golkar politicians – among others, Partai Keadilan Persatuan (PKP/Justice and Unity Party) led by Edi Sudrajat which then was renamed into Partai Keadilan Persatuan Indonesia (PKPI/Indonesian Justice and Unity Party); Partai Karya Peduli Bangsa (PKPB/Care for the Nation Functional Party) led by Suharto’s daughter Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana (Tutut) and Suharto loyalist general Hartono; and the Musyawarah Kekeluargaan Gotong Royong (MKGR/Colloquy Familial and Mutual Cooperation) led by Mien Sugandhi. These parties were short-lived and were unable to cross the electoral threshold. However, there were other relatively successful ones such as Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat (Hanura Party/People’s Conscience Party) led by Wiranto; Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra Party, Greater Indonesia Movement Party) led by Prabowo Subianto; and Partai Nasional Demokrat (Partai Nasdem/National Democratic Party) led by Surya Paloh. These splinters and spin-offs have clearly lost Golkar many of its influential cadres. While cadres such as Paloh and Wiranto did not have added significantly to the party’s popularity, Novanto’s notoriety is particularly damaging for the party.

It must be noted that former leader Aburizal Bakrie was also unpopular. A successful businessman with strong ties to the Suharto regime, Bakrie’s status suffered a severe blow with the Lapindo disaster. While the case has certainly destroyed his prospects to run for president or vice-president, the public’s dislike of the Golkar Party culminated in the case against Setya Novanto. Novanto allegedly misused the President’s name to ask for shares in the Freeport mining company. After a hearing in December 2015, he caved in to popular pressure and stepped down from his speaker post. The lack of more severe punishment served as another demonstration of his immense influence in politics. After all, this latest case is another addition to a list of his alleged involvement in other graft and corruption cases: the Bank Bali case in 1999, rice smuggling from Vietnam in 2003, smuggling of toxic waste in Galang Island in 2006, National Sport Week (PON/Pekan Olahraga Nasional) corruption in 2012, and the electronic ID card in 2013.

With such a record, Novanto’s initial election as the house speaker in 2014 had already raised a lot of concerns. Yet, not only did he not face any sanctions from the party after his dismissal as the house speaker, he was allowed to run as a chairman candidate in the congress and even became the leader of Golkar Party’s faction in the House of Representatives. At the end of the congress, the only other candidate left was Ade Komarudin who, while initially vowing to fight for the position, withdrew from the final contest to give way for Novanto’s chairmanship. Citing his wish for greater party unity and that, as a younger candidate, he believed he would have another chance, Komarudin’s decision was also seen as a recognition of Novanto’s influence. Allegations were rife that president Jokowi himself and right-hand man Luhut Pandjaitan wanted Novanto at the

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8 The Lapindo mud disaster is the result of an erupting mud volcano in Sidoarjo (East Java) that started in 2006. Bakrie heads PT Lapindo Brantas, which was responsible for the disaster. Some scientists and company officials though, contend that it was caused by a distant earthquake. At its peak, up to 180,000 m³ of mud per day was spewed out of the ground.


party’s helm. This aside, Novanto’s leadership may prove to be the most challenging obstacle in Golkar’s attempt to regain popularity.

MORE ANTI-PARTY SENTIMENTS, LESS SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

Golkar under Novanto shows in the eyes of many that it is increasingly challenging for major parties to find leaders who are favourable to the public. The same problem can be seen in other parties – as evidenced by leadership splits in the United Development Party (PPP/Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) and to a lesser extent, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS/Partai Keadilan Sejahtera). There is also the pressure to move beyond the more established generation of leaders. The Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP/Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan) for instance, which has kept Megawati at the helm, will most likely face similar problems once she leaves that position.11 Yet, Novanto’s nomination and election are a clear demonstration of Golkar’s blatant disregard of popular aspirations, and of the public resentment against him. At the same time, it strongly signals that clientelism and patronage in party politics are alive and well. Indeed, the financing of the congress was already under scrutiny as it was reported that candidates needed to share the financing of the congress and pay a political dowry (uang mahar) of Rp. 1 billion (more than SGD 100,000) each – and with observers calling the amount ‘cheap’ or ‘normal’.12 While Indonesian parties do face serious limitations in raising funds,13 this report adds to the list of reasons for voter scepticism over the manner in which parties organise themselves.

As the conservative elite continues to undermine Indonesia’s democratic progress, the lack of progress for parties should receive more attention. Parties still need to garner popular support, and as no parties have clear platforms (Golkar under Novanto decided to leave the opposition and support the government’s coalition instead), one way to do this is to project a cleaner image and feature clean cadres. As this paper has discussed, such an approach is increasingly difficult to adopt. Patronage continues to be practiced, and party politicians are involved in various projects. As party cadres continue to be named in an increasing number of corruption cases, we can expect voters’ anti-party sentiments to continue to grow. Certainly, popular demand for more lenient requirements for non-party candidates to run in pilkada (direct local elections) is growing – as yet another sign of the extent of anti-party trends in Indonesia. Party politicians are understandably unimpressed, discussing instead ways to increase the requirement for a percentage of ID cards of eligible voters to be collected, which will make things more difficult for independent candidates.14 Independent

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11 At this point, it is hard to see Jokowi – who received limited support during presidential campaign from his own PDIP – to rise to leadership.
14 While the house have ruled that requirements for running as independents stay, independent candidates generally have serious disadvantage against party machinery in the campaigns. For some discussion on this please see Wisnu Prasetiyono, “DPR Sahkan Revisi UU Pilkada”, detikNews, 2 June 2016 (https://news.detik.com/berita/3223814/dpr-sahkan-revisi-uu-pilkada)
candidates are already at a disadvantage without a party machinery to run campaigns. However, new initiatives in the form of volunteerism may be an alternative for them. The growing fame of non-party leaders such as current Jakarta governor Ahok/Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and his Teman Ahok (Ahok’s Friends) team of volunteers who actively collect ID cards, could be emulated by other candidates. This new trend could present some limit on the ability of parties to exert their influence unchecked. At the moment however, popular support for this discourse seems to be the only potential rival to the current party system. However, rising distrust against the parties as an important democratic institution may soon translate into distrust against democracy as a whole – which would be cause for grave concern.