

THE IRONIES OF INSTABILITY IN INDONESIA

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Hope Is When Army Officers Are Democrats.

— Louis de Bernières, *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord*

Indonesia seems perpetually condemned to “live in interesting times,” as the famous Chinese curse goes. The past decade has seen the country attract global notoriety as a land of recurrent economic shocks, ethnic conflicts, terrorist bombings, separatist rebellions, and natural catastrophes. Political authorities have appeared too corrupt and inept to respond effectively. Thus, when Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), a retired general, scored a landslide victory in Indonesia’s first-ever direct presidential election in September 2004, the political rise of a military man was widely portrayed as a small blow for stability in a highly unstable nation.

This essay ventures the argument that—at least at the level of elite politics—precisely the opposite is true. The recent behavior of Indonesia’s parties, parliaments, and presidents reveals that elite politics has been characterized by too much stability rather than too little. This is because the elite figures who belatedly connived in the toppling of former presidents Suharto in 1998 and Habibie in 1999 managed thereafter to construct something of a political cartel (Slater 2004). Like a cartel of private companies, this cartel of political elites has served to protect its leading members from outside competition. Indonesia’s pre-eminent political figures have remained practically irremovable through the electoral process, even though elections themselves have been commendably free and fair. Unafraid of being removed from power, political leaders have faced little impetus to govern. From this perspective, the government has failed to deal with Indonesia’s ongoing social and economic crises not because political elites could not get their act together, but because they *could*.

That elite stability has fostered Indonesia’s festering socio-economic instability is the first irony I explore here. The second is that the election of a much stronger individual figure as president has ironically destabilized, not stabilized,



elite politics. As we will see, the electoral campaign and victory of SBY significantly disrupted the cozy workings of the political cartel.

The big question is what kind of political arrangement is arising in the cartel's stead. Is SBY trying to reconstruct the cartel under his own leadership? Or is he trying to free himself from coalitional constraints, aiming to rule by fiat and ignore his fellow political elites entirely? Either of these outcomes would be deeply troubling for democratic accountability in Indonesia. A third, more hopeful possibility is that political groups shunned by SBY will provide the basis for a loyal opposition that can hold the new president and his closest allies accountable for their performance. Unfortunately, this currently seems to be the least likely of these three scenarios.

The next section explores how the rise of competitive elections failed to produce competitive elites upon the collapse of Suharto's New Order. I then examine how the 2004 presidential elections threw a wrench in the collusive works. I conclude with a preliminary assessment of the SBY presidency's implications for democratic accountability in Indonesia.

Competitive Elections, but Not Competitive Elites

Democratic elections are supposed to afford citizens the opportunity to replace underperforming politicians with alternatives of their choice. But leaders of major parties can shield themselves from electoral accountability by colluding to share power among all political groups (Katz and Mair 1995). Even when such leaders lose elections, they do not lose power. Contrary to the view that Indonesian politicians cannot manage the country's multiple crises because they are too busy fighting among themselves, I suggest that they have lacked the will to perform because they have not feared their own removal from power if they fail to do so.

How did Indonesia's democratic transition in 1998–1999 give rise to such an unaccountable cartel? The major point is that informal networks from the New Order era survived the changes in formal rules that accompanied the demise of authoritarianism. The so-called opposition parties of the Suharto era were in fact deeply infiltrated by regime supporters and apologists. Even the three elite figures most famously critical of Suharto's dictatorial rule—Abdurrahman Wahid, Amien Rais, and Megawati Sukarnoputri—were occasional rather than constant thorns in Suharto's side. As such, they developed working relationships with many elite figures in the military and the ruling party, Golkar. Their political rise in the *reformasi* era would find them working in tandem with those regime insiders who turned against Suharto as his collapse began to appear inevitable.

Student-led urban protests toppled Suharto and his narrow clique in May 1998, setting the stage for competitive national elections in June 1999. These would prove to be the two truly inspiring moments of mass public participation during Indonesia's democratic transition. Face-to-face elite interactions during this period lacked such drama but proved equally consequential. One could sense the beginnings of a wide-ranging political cartel as early as January 1999, when military commander Wiranto summoned Wahid, Amien, and Megawati,

among others, to his Jakarta home to discuss the upcoming parliamentary elections. By making it clear that the military would not actively support new president B. J. Habibie in particular, or Golkar in general, Wiranto helped set the stage for a free and fair vote.

That was the good news for democratic accountability. The bad news was that Indonesia's party and military leaders were cementing relations of back-room co-operation before being forced to engage in public competition. This was especially important because Indonesia's next president would be selected by parliament rather than the populace. While each party's share of parliament would be determined by popular will, the composition of the political executive would be a matter of elite compromise.

A special parliamentary session in October 1999 delivered the presidency to Wahid and the vice-presidency to Megawati, even though Megawati's PDI-P dramatically outperformed Wahid's PKB in the June balloting.¹ Wahid then offered cabinet seats to all major and minor political parties alike, while Wiranto maintained his grip on the Indonesian military. Amien Rais and new Golkar leader Akbar Tandjung were appeased with the top positions in the Indonesian parliament. The upshot was that Habibie had been removed, but that was basically it. No parties emerged from the 1999 elections as losers, and there was no viable political opposition in place to check the government's malfeasance and unresponsiveness.

The key to this power-sharing arrangement was the cabinet. Wahid managed to secure the presidency only by promising to share the cabinet among all political factions. When he reneged on that quid pro quo, reshuffling the cabinet to the benefit of his loyalists and at the expense of the party cartel between April and August 2000, the cartel responded with parliamentary impeachment proceedings. His removal in July 2001 delivered the presidency to Megawati, who rewarded Wahid's vanquishers by replacing the former leader's 'all-the-president's-men' cabinet with a 'rainbow' cabinet that included all significant political parties.

From August 2001 to March 2004, this collusive arrangement produced impressive stability—dare I say sclerosis—at the elite level. Golkar's Akbar proudly called this a "political moratorium." The passivity of Megawati's government is typically ascribed to her lack of individual vigor and leadership. But the broader point is that no one in her administration was under pressure to perform because no one perceived a viable opposition that might replace him or her in the 2004 elections. When considering whether SBY's victory will reinvigorate public governance in Indonesia, we need to consider not just whether he is a more vigorous individual than his predecessor, but whether and how his political rise has reshaped the ruling coalition.

Disrupting the Political Moratorium: The Campaign and Victory of SBY

The Megawati moratorium was an extremely sleepy political time, but it did produce one major shift that helped set the stage for the story to follow. Under

pressure from civil society organizations condemning the government's unresponsiveness, the ruling parliamentary cartel agreed to hold direct presidential elections in 2004. The next president would be chosen by ordinary people, not by party elites.

This did not necessarily mean that elite politics would become more competitive and less collusive, however. The two largest parties, Golkar and PDI-P, had become increasingly chummy during the moratorium years. It was highly probable that candidates representing those two increasingly indistinguishable parties would face off in the presidential election. If so, it would not much matter who won. Golkar and PDI-P would continue to rule co-operatively, sharing scraps of power with smaller parties to prevent them from assuming an oppositional stance.

This was no doubt the outcome that Megawati and Akbar most fondly desired. However, their hopes for a continued moratorium were dashed when the ruling cartel suddenly snapped. Less than a month before the April 2004 parliamentary elections, SBY resigned from his cabinet post as co-ordinating minister for security affairs, bitterly condemning Megawati's inactivity in the face of ongoing political and economic crises. The charismatic former general announced that he would pursue the presidency under the banner of the little-known Partai Demokrat (PD).

Whereas a Golkar victory in the presidential election would have meant merely a political demotion for Megawati and her PDI-P, an SBY victory seemed to threaten outright defeat. A Golkar president would not have excluded the PDI-P from prestigious and lucrative cabinet posts, but SBY very well might. The April parliamentary vote gave Megawati's party more reason for concern, as the PDI-P's vote share plummeted from around 34 percent to around 19 percent. More importantly for the discussion here, Indonesian voters punished all five major parties in the ruling cartel with lower vote totals than they received in 1999. The two major gainers were the PD and the PKS,² an Islamist upstart that attracted voters with its calls for cleaner and more responsive governance.

Yet the cartel had suffered only a flesh wound, not a death blow. Golkar and PDI-P remained the top two parties. As presidential elections approached, elite collusion rather than competition remained the order of the day. Virtually every party leader pondered teaming up with virtually every other political grouping, including the military, in presidential-vice-presidential 'duets'. When the dust settled, all five presidential candidates were familiar faces from the political cartel.

If any of the four candidates besides SBY had prevailed, the cartel almost certainly would have survived unmolested. But it was SBY who carried the day, trouncing Megawati with over 60 percent of the vote.³ The president-elect proclaimed his desire to rule through a 'limited' coalition rather than Megawati's 'rainbow' variety. Speculation erupted over which parties would be invited to share executive power in the cabinet, and which, if any, would be left out. Party leaders were suddenly forced to contemplate the possibility of political defeat. Elite politics was thus destabilized, not stabilized, by SBY's win.

What Kind of Democracy? Political Accountability under SBY

During the month-long intermission between SBY's victory and inauguration, there was reason for optimism that the cartel was indeed dead and that political opposition was at last emerging. None of the four largest parties had backed SBY in his race for the Istana (the presidential palace). Hence, none of them felt confident that SBY would try to coax them into the ruling coalition with cabinet seats. Smarting from their failure to keep Megawati in power, PDI-P and Golkar leaders announced the formation of a self-styled 'Nationhood Coalition' to serve as a formidable opposition bloc in parliament.

Constructing an opposition coalition would quickly prove to be the political equivalent of herding cats. Co-operation was not only elusive *between* parties, but *within* them. Indonesia's third-largest party, the PKB, quickly shifted into the pro-SBY camp despite the objections of its founder, former President Wahid. Nor could PPP⁴ leader Hamzah Haz make good on his threat to deny his party's support to SBY, given the considerable leadership challenges he faced within his own ranks. Anti-Wahid and anti-Hamzah figures in the PKB and PPP were subsequently rewarded with cabinet posts. The limits of SBY's 'limited' coalition expanded accordingly.

Even Golkar was too debilitated by internal dissent to present a united opposition force. SBY encouraged such dissension even before the presidential election, choosing Golkar bigwig Jusuf Kalla as his running mate. This naturally elevated Kalla vis-à-vis Akbar as an object of Golkar members' affections. SBY favored Kalla further by giving him unusual leeway as vice-president in shaping the cabinet to his own liking. Two anti-Akbar figures in Golkar received plum cabinet slots, and SBY chose a judge who had once argued for Akbar's conviction on corruption charges as attorney-general. Golkar members evidently got the message. They ousted Akbar at the party's annual congress in December 2004, choosing Jusuf Kalla as their new champion.

Anyone with a keen memory of the New Order might detect a familiar pattern here. Suharto used the powers of an authoritarian presidency to intervene in the affairs of 'opposition' parties, ensuring their control by political allies and amateurs. Although it is too early to say so definitively, SBY already seems to be using the power of his popular mandate to undermine Indonesia's party system before it has a chance to congeal.

Weakened parties would mean a weakened parliament and an empowered presidency. Thus, the clearest danger of the SBY presidency to Indonesian democracy is not an outright return to a military dictatorship. Rather, it is the kind of executive domineering that is currently destabilizing democracies in Thailand, the Philippines, and Venezuela—and that did so for a time in Indonesia under Wahid in 2000–2001.

Nevertheless, this discussion has hopefully convinced the reader that there are also dangers in continuity. When parties share power too widely, they choke off political opposition, denying voters the chance to replace their most unrepresentative representatives. This malady defined Indonesian democracy from 2001 to 2004, and might yet come to characterize the SBY years as well. PDI-P is the

only opposition party left, and it has been cast into that role more by default than by design. The party might be lured into a newly encompassing party cartel if SBY can engineer a leadership change in the PDI-P as he has in Golkar.

Such a full-blown restoration of the political cartel would certainly enhance stability at the elite level. But by choking off political opposition, it would also protect elites from popular pressures to address far more important forms of instability: those that continue to afflict public life beyond the halls of power in Jakarta.

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Notes

1. PDI-P stands for Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), PKB for Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party).
2. Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party).
3. The other three candidates (Amien Rais, Wiranto, and Vice-President Hamzah Haz) were eliminated in the first round of voting in July.
4. Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (United Development Party).

References

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