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Indonesian Regional Elections in Praxis

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THIS year Indonesia carried out 226 elections of local headships for the provincial, municipal and regency levels. Since the middle of June till late August 2005, no less than 181 regional elections have taken place. The remaining 45 regions will carry out their elections from September to December.

Ideally, the goal behind the implementation of regional elections is to speed up the process of democratic consolidation in the Republic. It should also accelerate the process of good governance so that the people can be directly involved in the process of policy-making via the ballot box.

But observation of some 90 regions (4 provinces, 86 municipalities/regencies) indicates that the ongoing regional elections are no more than just arenas for the pursuit of power. Because of that, the dominant streak in the regional elections is the practice of money politics and the violations of political ethics by the candidates.

Based on surveys in 90 regions done by the Centre for Political Studies, four tendencies can be detected in the regional elections. They are the high rate of abstentions (*golongan putih* or *golput*); incumbents winning and returning to office; conflicts; and the formation of party coalitions (political factions).

Abstentions (*Golput*)

The number of abstentions in the regional elections is quite high, averaging around 30% to 40%. Several regencies in Java like Banyumas, Pekalongan, Kebumen and Cilegon, among others, chalked up an average abstention rate of around 32.4%. Even the well-populated city of Surabaya chalked up 50.4%. Generally, this is also the same tendency outside Java.

The large number of abstentions is caused by several factors. Many of the voters were not registered. The voters already knew the candidates' performance and had made up their minds about them. As such, many voters would rather go to work than to vote. Besides, there was poor dissemination of information on the regional election process.

Of the four factors, the most significant is voter registration, or non-registration. The usage of demographic data from the Population Office is the primary cause of these unregistered voters losing their right to vote. The Population Office's demographic data were either poorly

inventorised or outdated. Many of the voters in the 2004 general elections were not registered by the Population Office. In fact, the truly representative data for this year's regional elections is from the list of voters for the second round presidential elections that was held on 20 September 2004. In short, poor data management is the primary cause of the high abstention rate.

Incumbents and Bureaucrats

Around 87% of total regional elections so far were won by the incumbents and local bureaucrats who were, generally, paired with businessmen. It was difficult for political newcomers, including active-service military personnel, to win in the regional elections. This is because of the combined political resources possessed by the local incumbents, bureaucrats and businessmen. They generally had enough funding to fight their rival candidates. With lavish funding, they could conduct unlimited political manoeuvres against their opponents.

At the provincial level, for example, the elected pair of governor and deputy governor generally spent 'campaign' funds averaging Rp 100 billion (US\$10 million). Whereas at the municipality/regency levels, the pair of elected local heads generally spent between Rp 1.8 billion – Rp 16 billion (US\$180,000 – US\$1.6 million).

Apart from campaign expenses (determined by the local election commission), the funds were also used to pay the political vehicles, namely, the political parties which canvassed them and to influence voters (money politics). For the usage of political vehicles, the candidates must pay an average of 20% of their campaign funds.

Apart from funding, other factors that helped the incumbents and local bureaucrats to win are their control over the bureaucratic network, good relations with the military and other local social networks favouring them. Besides, they also employed non-ethical political practices like "importing" voters from other regions, manipulating voter data (fictitious and phantom voters), intimidating the voters and pressuring the local election commission to use voter data from the 5 April 2004 legislative elections. With such old data, many people with voting rights were not registered. These were the young voters who did not yet have voting rights in the 2004 legislative elections.

Conflicts

Before the regional elections began, many parties predicted that these elections at the local level would lead to bloodshed or communal conflicts. Thus far, the prediction has not been borne out. Although conflicts did happen in 23 regions (from a total of 181 regional elections) these were neither communal in nature nor leading to bloodshed. Generally, the conflicts broke out between rival camps where one camp was accused of being in league with the local election commission. Tana Toraja, Pangkep, Kepulauan Sula, Bima and Korawa Selatan, among others, were regions where such conflicts took place.

But it is clear that such conflicts in the regional elections were not caused by primordial factors like religion and local birthright issues. Indeed, the conflicts were more the result of duplication in the leadership boards, rejection by local government of regional election results and also manipulation of voter data by the electoral commissions.

Coalition Parties (Political Factions)

There is one interesting tendency in the regional elections. Political parties found that the directives or political lines of their central governing boards tended to be ignored in the regions. This is reflected in the high numbers of coalitions forged between political parties just for the sake of winning the regional elections. From 90 regions observed, as many as 46 regions were won by candidates shouldered by coalition parties. Those won without coalitions were by Golkar Party (in 23 regions), the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P (12 regions), the Nation Awakening party, PKB (2 regions), Crescent and Star Party, PBB (2 regions), United Development Party, PPP (1 region), National Mandate Party, PAN (1 region) and Justice and Welfare Party, PKS (1 region).

The high number of victories through coalition arrangements indicates that at the local level, politicians do not care about the centre's political party lines. For example, while the PDI-P is the government's opposition at the central level, it formed local coalitions with the parties in power, the Democrat Party and Golkar. Even in Maluku, the Islamic PKS and the Christian-oriented Peace and Welfare Party (PDS) formed coalitions between themselves, despite their contrasting ideologies, to win some seats in the regional elections.

Conclusion

Given these general tendencies in the regional elections, the pessimistic camp argued that the hope of regional elections becoming an accelerator of democratic consolidation and good governance has so far been largely unrealised. Much of the funds spent by the candidates may have only buttressed corrupt practices at the local level. Making this possible is the small salary received by the local heads compared to the campaign funds that they spent. At the same time, the elected incumbents and bureaucrats were predicted to only fortify oligarchic political practices at the local level.

On the other hand, the optimistic camp asserted that democracy in Indonesia has been boosted by the successful implementation of the regional elections. The optimists pointed to several indicators to strengthen their argument: the high number of abstentions; defeat of active military candidates; no serious communal conflicts; the high number of mass protests against electoral commissions for not being neutral; and the strengthening of pluralism, such as seen in the case of the coalition between the PKS and PDS in Maluku. For the optimistic camp, all these indicators only point to one thing: mass political consciousness is increasingly on the rise. Democracy is emerging in Indonesia.

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