

IDSS Seminar Notes

“Direct Regional Elections in Indonesia: Continuity or Change”

by Dr Sukardi Rinakit & Dr Nankyung Choi

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The chairperson of the seminar began by highlighting the process of democratization in the post Suharto era which has led to the policy of decentralization and consequently to the first-ever direct regional elections in Indonesia. While these elections have been going on, the question is whether the results so far have shown continuity or change in politics and policies.

Dr Sukardi Rinakit

Dr Sukardi Rinakit began his presentation by highlighting the recent political tension in Indonesia. The common question now being asked by some elites is whether and when attempts should be made to topple the current administration. Such a political climate, according to him, is generated by the weak and indecisive nature of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in governance and the fact that the real center of power lies with the vice president, Jusuf Kalla.

Going to his presentation proper, he explained that his research survey on the processes and impact of the direct regional elections in Indonesia revealed that there was a high abstention rate (*golongan putih* or *golput*) amongst the voters; high incumbent or bureaucratic domination and winning rates; sporadic conflicts as well as high party coalition forming rates. According to him, the election funds expended varied from between 4 billion to 100 billion rupiah. Explaining the reason for the high abstention rate, he suggested that it was due to many voters not being registered. Other reasons were the fact that many voters already knew the candidates and had assessed that the standards of living were unlikely to improve even with the election of these candidates; many voters preferred to go to work rather than travel far to return to their hometown to vote; there was poor dissemination of information of the election processes as well as the use of old census data by bureaucrats that rendered many voters ineligible age-wise. He further noted that Indonesian voters showed more enthusiasm in the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Explaining the high rate of incumbents or bureaucrats being elected, he attributed this to money politics; incumbents and bureaucrats exploiting the bureaucratic networks; the use of fraudulent election officials at voting booths; the entry of voters from other regions, not to mention that of non-existent voters in the election lists, and also outdated census data. He further noted that the military tended to support bureaucrat candidates.

On the issue of conflicts, he highlighted factors such as the use of intimidation against voters; regional election commissions defending the incumbents/bureaucrats; local parliaments rejecting the electoral results because the winner was not from the

party dominating the parliament; and candidates requesting the postponement of elections. He noted that in some cases where the gap between the winner and the runner up was not big, some parties tried to dispute the results by demanding either a second round of elections or challenging the processes in the constitutional court.

In ending his presentation, Dr Sukardi maintained that despite the shortcomings in the direct regional elections, he was optimistic about the democratization process in Indonesia.

Dr Nankyung Choi

Dr Nankyung Choi began with a background to the direct regional election processes in Indonesia. Since 2001, she said, there had been a wave of sweeping decentralization in Indonesia and the direct elections of local government heads was a turning point in Indonesian local politics. She noted that while since 1999 authority had been systematically devolved to the regional local parliaments, there had been numerous allegations of pervasive vote-buying. This prompted international as well as domestic civil organizations to call for changes in the electoral system, leading to the direct election of local government heads. In particular, she noted that the recent direct gubernatorial election in June 2005 for Riau should be of interest to Singapore since it is the closest of all Indonesian islands to Singapore, with significant economic interests to the latter in terms of investments and tourism on Batam and Bintan.

From her research, Dr Choi found that the roles political parties in the electoral process were relatively insignificant as campaigning was based largely on personalities. In most cases, candidates also funded themselves. Moreover, many of the voters were really migrant workers and the personality-based campaigns appealed to them. The local media was also very partisan in the whole process.

Like Dr Sukardi, Dr Choi's research showed that there was relatively low turnout for the voting – around 60% in the Riau Island or Kepri and 51.96% in Batam. The turnout for the industrial areas were especially low – 28% in Muka Kuning, Batam.

Wrapping up her presentation, Dr Choi highlighted the need to clarify the complex and vague laws and regulations concerning the electoral process. She warned of a sense of growing disillusionment with democratic institutions and the democratic processes. Her research showed that there is no inherent relation between political decentralization and democracy.

Q&A

1. One participant voiced disagreement with Dr Sukardi's assertion that it was difficult for 'new politicians' to emerge unless they were well connected to the old patronage system. That this was not so was shown in the last presidential election when Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono emerged as winner despite not resorting to money politics. Dr Sukardi remarked that while President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono lacked resources to engage in money politics, his business supporters did. He alluded to an experience whereby voters were promised monetary rewards

in return for voting particular candidates. Dr Sukardi also highlighted that it was really the vice president Yusuf Kalla who was running the country and who on occasions rejected programmes approved by the president himself, such as over the proposed cabinet reshuffle which could lead to the ouster of his allies in the economic cabinet.

2. Dr Choi was asked why parties with similar ideological outlooks failed to establish coalitions with like-minded partners, opting instead for those with dissimilar orientations. Dr Choi explained that much of the coalition building was really shaped by the political configurations at the ground based mainly on personality with winning formulas than ideological outlooks.
3. Dr Sukardi was asked what he intended to do with all the data about corrupt leaders and officials that he had obtained. He revealed that he had actually provided the names to the President and the Anti-Corruption Commission. He however disclosed that the problem was that the Commission had no staff to conduct the investigations but instead had to leave the job to the local officials. Very often, when the President pushes for action to be taken, the initiative would fizzle out by the time it reaches the local officials.

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About the Speakers:

Dr **SUKARDI RINAKIT** received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. He is currently Executive Director, Centre of Political Studies, Soengeng Sarjadi Syndicate, Jakarta. Dr Rinakit is a former ghostwriter at the Indonesian Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence, and over the course of the year has conducted surveys on the first phase of the direct regional election. Dr. Rinakit has written considerably on Indonesian politics and his latest book in English is *Indonesian Military after the New Order* published in 2005 by ISEAS and NIAS.

Dr **NANKYUNG CHOI** specializes in local government politics in Indonesia, having successfully completed a Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Democratisation, Decentralization and Local Party Politics in Post-Soeharto Indonesia” at the Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, in 2004. She has a M.A. degree in Political Science from Sung-Kyun-Kwan University, Seoul, Korea (1996) and a M.A. degree in Anthropology from Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (1999). At IDSS, her research focuses on direct regional elections in the Riau province and Riau Archipelago.