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Indonesia and the Philippines: Political dynasties in democratic states

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Synopsis

The growth of political dynasties poses a serious challenge to the democratic consolidation in the Philippines and Indonesia. However, the needed reforms to prevent political dynasties from monopolising electoral politics in both democracies remain elusive.

Commentary

Indonesia and the Philippines, the biggest democracies in Southeast Asia, have been facing a significant threat to the vibrancy of their respective political system, i.e., the rise of political dynasties. The Philippines' Supreme Court has recently dismissed a petition compelling the Commission of Elections to ban members of the political dynasties from running in the May 2013 mid-term elections, due to the absence of an anti-political dynasty law required by the Philippine Constitution.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's Ministry of Home Affairs has proposed an anti-political dynasty clause in the new Regional Elections Bill, forbidding direct succession of governors, district heads and mayors by their family members. Crucial to this issue of political dynasties in liberal democracies is how to prevent them from monopolising electoral politics.

Politics as a family affair

Since the American colonial rule (1899-1946), political dynasties have long been well-entrenched in Philippine politics. Dynastic politicians are returning to the campaign trail to safeguard turf or to re-capture old positions in the upcoming mid-term polls. 14 senatorial candidates from the two largest multiparty coalitions possess impeccable political pedigree, including the relatives of the country's top leaders. 70% of the members of the Philippine Congress belong to political dynasties. According to the Centre for People Empowerment in Governance, there are 178 political dynasties in 73 out of 80 provinces.

Although Indonesia's political dynasties are not yet as prevalent as in the Philippines, the rise of dynasties in some regional elections could become "the new normal" and threaten the country's young democracy. Since the introduction of direct local elections in 2005, many political families have been trying to build regional political dynasties, which include the Choisyiahs in Banten, the Yasin Limpos in South Sulawesi, and the Sjachroedins in Lampung. Some of their parents were also influential politicians during the New Order regime (1966-98). However, Suharto's centralisation policy had prevented them from directly transferring power to their family members.

Perpetuating political dynasties

A key factor which contributes to the perpetuation of dynastic politics in the Philippines is the weak political party system. Political dynasties are the building blocks of Philippine politics. Major political parties such as the ruling Liberal Party, United Nationalist Alliance and Nacionalista Party merely exist through alliances forged among powerful political families. Party leaders and candidates for public office are recruited not through a rigid process of selection within political parties but through traditional kinship network.

Similarly, in Indonesia, weak party institutionalisation has led to the emergence of several regional dynasties. Political families could easily capture the structural organisation of a political party branch in the region or use money politics to get the party's support. Thus, it is not surprising if a relative of an incumbent local official is chosen as a candidate of a political party despite the lack of an unquestionable track-record.

In the Philippines, several political clans utilise private armies to intimidate or grievously cripple rival dynasties. There are still at least 85 private armed groups throughout the country. Although the utilisation of private security forces in Indonesia is not as widespread as in the Philippines, in some regions such as Banten, the role of jawara (martial arts experts) becomes a forceful instrument to get the support of voters.

The prohibitive cost of running for public office in the Philippines allows affluent political families, which have access to mammoth political machineries and government resources, to have the upper-hand in both local and national polls. This phenomenon could also be observed in several regional elections in Indonesia. During elections, incumbent officials have the advantage to illegally mobilise civil servants and to reward or punish local government officials based on partisanship, which violate Indonesia's electoral laws.

In a nation where political pedigree is a crucial political asset, charisma-based or popularity driven elections influence the Filipinos to vote for "trusted brands" i.e., scions of well-known families. Philippine President Benigno Aquino's clan, for instance, has already produced two presidents and five senators since 1928. The family of Indonesia's former president Megawati Soekarnoputri, daughter of the country's first president Sukarno, remains a permanent fixture in national politics. At the local level, many Indonesian voters are still trapped in a 'personalistic democracy' mindset that invariably gives rise to 'popular' dynasties in some regions.

Anti-political dynasty reforms

In the Philippines, a bill defining the terms and scope of the constitutional ban on political dynasties has already been filed in both Chambers of the Congress. However, it has been effectively placed on the back burner because of the lack of support from many lawmakers. The failure of the Congress, dominated by legislators from political clans, to enact the anti-political dynasty bill, provides a glimpse of the extent of the influence of dynasties on legislation. The passage of Political Party Reform Bill which aims to strengthen political parties also remains uncertain. Meanwhile, government authorities have yet to dismantle all the remaining private armies before the mid-term polls.

In Indonesia, the government-proposed anti-dynastic clause in the new Local Elections Bill is still being discussed. Some lawmakers have raised concerns about the proposal, claiming it would violate a person's right to run for public office and could be challenged in the Constitutional Court. Additionally, the clause does not address the more fundamental issues in Indonesia's democratic consolidation, such as strengthening the party institutionalisation and implementation of electoral laws.

Since political dynasties in Indonesia are not yet as ubiquitous as in the Philippines, there are still ample opportunities for Indonesian authorities to reverse the trend of rising regional dynasties in order to avoid the messy track taken by the Philippine democracy.

An electoral competition dominated by moneyed political dynasties would indicate how 'illiberal' a democratic system a country has. The enactment of an anti-dynasty legislation and the enhancement of the political party system will not serve as a silver bullet to the proliferation of political clans. Voters should also scrutinise the platforms and track-record of candidates, rather than their family names. Changing the mindset of the electorate will certainly make a difference.

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