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Reconnecting the Missing Link: SBY and the Democratic Party

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Synopsis

President Yudhoyono's decision to assume the chairmanship of the Democratic Party should not lead to a grimmer future for it and his administration. The personality-oriented mindset of the electorate should provide the impetus to save his party in the 2014 national elections.

Commentary

THE DEMOCRATIC Party (PD) elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) on 30 March 2013 as its new chairman. In keeping with Javanese political culture, the president accepted the "unanimous nomination". He replaced Anas Urbaningrum who stepped down as chairman after the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) named him a suspect in the Hambalang Sports Centre corruption case.

There are three main views regarding this development. Firstly, the president could lose his focus on his duties as the country's leader because he now has to divide his time and attention to deal with party matters. Secondly, there will be a clash of interests relating to Yudhoyono's position as the country's president and as party leader. Thirdly, the president's new position would reinforce the party's image as a dynastic outfit.

Reconnecting the missing link

How should we interpret the party's changing fortunes and assess the current dynamics in Indonesia's political landscape? Should we be concerned whether the president is able to do two demanding jobs – as the president and as party chairman - at the same time?

PD is and will always be associated with President Yudhoyono and his family name will always be a permanent fixture of the party. The fact that PD is a "personality-oriented" party was evident since its inception. The party was established to support Yudhoyono's nomination in the 2004 presidential elections, following his defeat in the Vice Presidential Election in 2001.

In the 2009 general elections, the party was able to secure 21 percent of the total votes, primarily because of the "SBY factor". President Yudhoyono's accomplishments were translated into a bigger trust and support for the party by the Indonesian electorate.

However, the connection between the party and Yudhoyono has weakened in the past two years. It was

primarily because a number of PD's key figures were implicated in several corruption cases. Besides Anas Urbaningrum, the anti-corruption authority KPK also named Andi Mallarangeng (former Minister for Youth and Sports) as the latest suspect in the Hambalang case. Previously, Angelina Sondakh (PD legislator) and Muhammad Nazaruddin (PD's former treasurer) were found guilty in the same case. In the past two years, SBY had to "share" the media spotlight with the negative coverage of the party.

Public support for the president was, however, not aligned with the party's electability. According to one survey, the party's electability has plunged from 21 percent in April 2009 to eight percent in December 2012, yet the public satisfaction towards the president's performance was relatively good at 56 percent. This means the president's popularity is incapable of boosting the party's electability.

It contradicts a tendency evident prior to the 2009 elections where SBY's performance was correlated with the party's good achievement. This paradox shows that there is a missing link between SBY's image and popular support for PD. This is normal for a situation where the electorate is more concerned with the personal qualities of the leaders and has relatively low identification with the party.

Dynastic party?

That is why this time Yudhoyono needs to repair the party's battered image by reinforcing it with his own. This is an understandable political strategy to generate votes while consolidating political control. It is true that the party has taken on a dynastic image as Yudhoyono's son and several other family members hold key positions within the party's structure. This is contrary to Yudhoyono's commitment to democracy.

However, one must also remember that PD's experiment to establish an internal democratic mechanism has placed the party in a vulnerable position. It has exposed deep factionalism within the party and as a consequence, indirectly contributes to a decline in support for it. The Cikeas family - as they are sometimes referred to collectively after the president's residence in West Java - do not want the party to vanish after the 2014 elections. For the time being, leveraging on the president's name is the less-risky option for the family to ensure the party's continued existence after the next election.

Consequently, he is now fully responsible for the success or failure of the party, particularly in regard to the 2014 general election. He has full control over the party's strategic decisions, particularly to finalise PD's legislative candidates. In this sense, the party's cadres who want to run in the next legislative elections will need to show their loyalty to Yudhoyono. It also means that Yudhoyono will have more room to manoeuvre and reconcile internal disputes within the party's structure. His new position is also important to prevent other key figures in the party from further tarnishing its image.

Between now and 2014: should we be worried?

Will all these developments affect Yudhoyono's focus as president? If Anas was still at the helm, Yudhoyono might be even further distracted because he would have had to deal with the negative media coverage while having limited room to manoeuvre to prevent further fragmentation of the party. Additionally, to improve PD's electability, the most crucial issue for Yudhoyono is how to improve his performance to win the hearts and minds of the electorate. It means he has to give extra attention to his presidential agenda, while delegating the day-to-day operations of PD to the acting chairman.

If Yudhoyono performs well in the remainder of his presidency, there is significant potential for PD to re-emerge as one of the major parties in the next elections. Certainly, to reclaim its position as the number one party in Indonesia now seems impossible. Most likely, the party will try to become a determining force in nominating a presidential candidate. Any presidential candidate will have to factor in Yudhoyono's and PD's support in the next election.

The key now is whether the president can maintain and improve his performance in the face of the demanding political challenges - not only from the opposition and other members of the coalition but also from within his own party.

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