

Restrictions sought on electoral participation in Indonesia

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Although still three years away, citing the need to prevent Indonesia's 2009 general elections from becoming "overly fragmented" by a plethora of new political parties, legislators are seeking to limit the number of parties that can participate.

The move is part of a draft amendment to the 2003 electoral law, initiated by the large, established parties, to increase the electoral threshold from 3% to 5%.

The electoral threshold system was enacted after the 1999 elections so that only parties that garnered 2% of the seats in the House of Representatives (DPR) were eligible to contest the 2004 election. A 2003 law passed to serve as the foundation for the 2004 legislative elections raised the bar to 3% for the 2009 elections.

This means that parties with less than 3% of DPR seats must either merge with other parties or reapply from scratch under a new name.

Under the current law, to gain electoral registration, a party must show it has branches in more than 50% of the country's 33 provinces, and in each of the provinces where it has members it must show it has branches in more than 50% of the districts, and in each district more than 30% of the sub-districts.

These requirements are aimed at making it difficult for new parties, especially those whose social base is among the poor and do not have the money to "buy" branches.

Golkar Party legislator Ferry Mursyidan Baldan and Tjahyo Kumolo from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) said the electoral threshold is needed to prevent elections from becoming overly fragmented by the growing number of political parties. Golkar and the PDI-P hold the largest number of seats in the DPR.

"The more parties participating in elections, the more democratic the country will be, but it will be ineffective and inefficient. It's better for minority parties to form a coalition with other parties if they want to take part in elections", Baldan was quoted as saying by the September 23 Jakarta Post. Kumolo even proposed a threshold of at least 15% to allow only major parties to contest elections.

They have good reason to be worried. While President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration still enjoys a relatively high level of support, legislators and the parties they represent are seen by most people as lazy, incompetent, corrupt and self-serving. This has resulted in a growing apathy or outright hostility towards the traditional parties, demonstrated by numerous surveys and large numbers of people not bothering to vote in the recent round of regional elections.

This has also triggered a mushrooming of new parties representing local and issue-based politics or others seeking to challenge International Monetary Fund and World Bank-driven neoliberal policies

that have resulted in soaring unemployment and poverty.

On September 25 for example, Detik.com reported that 27 new political parties have recently registered with the justice and human rights department.

Some are those that failed to reach the electoral threshold and are reapplying under a new name, such as the Star Crescent Party, which has been rebadged as the Crescent Star Party. The New Order Party is perhaps hoping to exploit nostalgia for the relative economic prosperity middle-class Indonesians enjoyed under Suharto's New Order dictatorship, while the Indonesia Women's Christian Party is based on a Christian sect comprising only of women members.

According to a report by the Liputan 6 news service, the Satria Piningit Party has established its executive boards at the thousands of small public phone centres that dot Indonesia's towns and city centres. Still others, like the Defence of the State Party and the My Republic Party, may reflect a growing concern over a perceived "disintegration of the nation", spurred on by regional autonomy processes and divisive sharia-inspired local bylaws.

Activist-based groups with an explicitly anti-neoliberal platform such as the National Liberation Party of Unity (Papernas), which has its basis among workers, farmers, students and the urban poor, have already come under attack as they attempt to consolidate local branches.

On September 17, some 40 armed thugs from a militia group calling themselves the "Tauhid anti-communist movement" (Gertak — meaning to threaten) intimidated participants and tore down banners during a launch of Papernas's East Java branch. Gertak claimed Papernas was a communist organisation for supporting victims of the anti-communist purges that took place when Suharto seized power in 1965.

Responding to the moves to increase the electoral threshold, a September 14 Papernas press release said that the "simplification" of the electoral system is intended by the traditional parties to maintain their domination and positions of power despite the fact that their performance has been far from satisfying.

The general secretary of Papernas's Preparatory Committee, Dominggus Oktavianus Kiik, told Green Left Weekly that it also represents an explicit admission by the big political parties that they have failed to win the people's hearts and that they are worried about the emergence of new political forces that are genuinely fighting for the interests of the people. "This totally contradicts the spirit of democracy that is the basis for the creation of people's political, economic, social and cultural sovereignty", he said.

Papernas, which was launched on July 23, is a new electoral party initiative by the People's Democratic Party (PRD), a radical left activist party whose current chairperson is well-known labour rights activist Dita Sari. It is also aimed at starting the process of overcoming the extreme fragmentation that has been characteristic of social protest and the progressive movement since Suharto's fall.

The party, which will be campaigning around a program based on three banners of nationalism — the abolition of the foreign debt, the nationalisation of mining companies and the development of the national industry for the welfare of the people — will hold its first national congress on November 26-29.

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