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Democratisation & new voter mobilisation in Southeast Asia: moderation and the stagnation of the PKS in the 2009 legislative election

Report

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Moderation and the stagnation of the PKS in the 2009 legislative election

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A Mixed Outcome

The Indonesian election in 2009 has revealed two different results for the PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera or Prosperous Justice Party). On the one hand, the party benefited from the personality of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) PD (Partai Demokrat or Democrat Party), who helped to boost support from just 7.5 percent to 21 percent: by contrast, other parties suffered from declining support. Accordingly, the PKS was able to maintain its percentage of the vote from the previous election, making it the fourth largest party in the Indonesian parliament as well as the biggest Islamic party. On the other hand, in urban areas the party did not perform as well as it had in 2004, slipping into second or third place in the election table in the five biggest cities: especially Jakarta and Depok. The PKS owed much to provinces in Central and East Java as well as Sumatra and Kalimantan where it gained more votes as the loss of votes in urban areas was compensated by votes gained in other areas.

In order to understand why the party performed badly in big cities, it is necessary to consider voting patterns in urban areas as a distinctive phenomenon rather than looking at the party's performance more generally. This is a relevant concern since urban voters have traditionally favoured the party. Therefore, this essay offers an understanding of why support for the party has stagnated in cities by focusing on the urban context. For that purpose I make use of a moderation framework, which can be applied to an ideological party such as the PKS in democratic processes.

Moderation Analysis

In *Parties and Party System: A Framework for Analysis* (1976), Giovanni Sartori argues that the existence of ideological parties is not impossible since they can accept and follow the general rules of democratic processes. Parties can either preserve or reduce their ideological standpoints in order to initiate centrifugal or centripetal tendencies. The former occurs if a party maintains its ideological stance, which has the effect of limiting its opportunities to gain popular support, while the latter occurs if a party moves toward the centre of the political spectrum.

Centripetal parties (which is to say ideological parties that work within democratic systems) need to sacrifice their ideological stance in order to integrate themselves into the system. In this way, they shift toward the centre for the purposes of winning elections. In this centripetal process of political moderation a political party with a radical position, platform or ideology, involved in an electoral process, moves to a median position.

The motivations behind this shift may be pragmatic-strategic or ideological or a mixture of both. The first is driven by a desire to win elections in pursuit of political office. Moderation, then, is seen as an effort to attract median voters and its achievement depends on whether it is convincing or not. The second reason for moderation is based on the development of new interpretations of a standing

ideology. Shifting a political stance may be seen as a consequence of new understandings of existing values. In the context of an Islamic society, new interpretations are necessary in order to develop moderate attitudes, which can be put into practice in political arena such as building democracy in an Islamic society. However, Jillian Schwedler's case studies in *Faith in Moderation* (2006) confirmed that interpretation on certain political situations can be developed through religious perspectives.

Despite the debates on what motivates moderation, sacrificing some aspects of an ideological standpoint is a necessary precondition. But this may not be an easy option as it could cause internal conflicts within parties that take this option. Occasionally this may cause splits and the establishment of splinter parties; in the wider context, this situation may confuse the party's potential supporters, especially in the electoral process.

Appealing to Voters

In the 2004 election, the PKS was thought to be a rising star alongside Partai Demokrat. Its support grew from 1.4 percent of the vote in 1999 to 7.34 percent in 2004, gaining it 45 parliamentary seats. It also became the most popular party in Jakarta, the capital, and other four major cities. One reason for this achievement was the image of the PKS as a party supporting good governance and morally grounded politics, which struck a chord with voters' demands for change. However, the party's use of the slogan 'clean and care' may have reflected an understanding that its Islamic-appeal did not necessarily guarantee its electability.

The PKS's main approach to improving its image during the election was through sporadic canvassing in urban districts. By contrast, it did not make great use of a media strategy. But the party benefited most from public demand for alternatives to the older parties, which were widely seen as corrupt.

Following upon its success in the 2004 election, the PKS adopted a strategy of using the mass media to promote itself in rural areas: this was influenced by the success of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, SBY-Kalla, who used similar strategies in the 2004 presidential election in order to compensate for their inability to penetrate rural areas through party networks. In fact, media promotion was the dominant campaign strategy, operated by all major political parties in the 2009 election. The ambition of the PKS to become a major party by gaining 20 percent of the vote in 2009 encouraged it to implement a more extensive campaign strategy, using a mixture of media, more traditional door-to-door campaigns, and its trademark social care activities.

In this way, the PKS tried to advertise itself as an inclusive, but also nationalist party, ready to accept and recognise different groups within Indonesian society. In February 2008, the party held a National Summit in Bali, specifically because the island is dominated by Hindus and a favourite destination for tourists, in order to show its enthusiasm for recognising different identities. During the summit one of the MPs symbolically invited a Hindu preacher to join the party in order to express this eagerness. Furthermore, in order to show the nationalist spirit of the party, 'freedom' (*merdeka*) was shouted together with 'Allahu Akbar' during the party's meetings.

However, the party courted controversy when it declared the former president, Soeharto, who was accused of corruption and held by some to be responsible for political crimes, a national hero and guru. This move reflected the party's strategy to extend its support beyond its traditional basis. The party also made use of other significant figures in its advertising, designed to represent different segments of Indonesian society, including Soekarno, the first president who was known for his nationalistic and progressive ideas, as well as Ahmad Dahlan and Hasyim Asy'ari the founder of two Islamic social organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama.

Impact on the PKS

The media campaign operated by the PKS in 2009 raised confusion and controversy, not least because it clashed with the message of change promoted by the party in the previous election. For potential supporters in big cities, the new message might not have been understood quite so easily since it seemed to run contrary to the 'clean and care' slogan used by the party in 2004, as well as its more basic Islamic identity. For those who wanted to vote for change, as shown by the previous election, admiration of the former president could be seen as a betrayal of the spirit of reformasi. This mainly affected voters in big cities who were more critical and demanding and who tended to have better access to mass media. Therefore, when a party does not fit their demands, they are less likely to vote for it. The controversy raised by the messages delivered through the mass media was to some extent good for the party since it increased its public profile. However, this did not ensure support for it at the ballot box, as was demonstrated by the results of the election in urban areas.

This strategy caused difficulties for party cadres working at the grass-roots level in big cities, who frequently found themselves confronted by hostile questions from potential voters about the election strategy being operated by the party. This was not helped by the fact that the cadres themselves often could not account for the party line that they were supposed to represent.

The direction and behaviour of the party in politics, especially during the electoral campaign, became a serious concern for some of its members. Some members, mainly in Jakarta and its suburban cities, responded to criticisms of how the party had developed its image in the mass media by creating several forums to discuss this situation, especially before the election. The al Hikmah mosque in southern Jakarta hosted monthly open gatherings, attended by at least 300 party cadres, in order to discuss the direction of the party. This led some of the attendees to form a further discussion group, the Forum Kader Peduli (Forum of Concerned Cadres), in order to discuss the situation more intensively and to formulate action plans. Although limited in size, these groups were attended by a mixture of middle-ranking and senior party members who invited more junior members along in order to disperse the content discussed in the group more widely.

The general feeling of these groups was that the party campaign strategy had violated its identity by putting political success before religious considerations. Their members accused a number of the party's leaders of initiating a new campaign strategy without consulting or engaging with the concerns of its middle-ranking and junior members. Therefore there was a prevailing spirit of questioning the party's leadership, which spread from middle-ranking to more junior party members.

As a cadre party, with a strong training system based on certain values, uncontrollable discourses within the system can become quite influential. Although it has been estimated that only around ten percent of the party's cadres have been openly critical of it, this internal dissent can affect the morale of other cadres who are less inclined to openly criticise the party. Additionally, working for the party can be tiring for cadres; hence criticism of the party from within can make them feel disinclined to promote the party to the electorate. It has been found that the level of enthusiasm to work for the party varies according to how its members perceive its direction. While the majority of cadres continued working passionately for the party during the 2009 election, there were also members who were less enthusiastic about campaigning or even did not want to work at all. In an extreme case, one former cadre declared that he would campaign against the party.

Conclusion

The 2009 election showed the growing anxiety and suspicion of some cadres toward the PKS leadership and how this influenced their dedication towards the party's election strategy. This stands in stark contrast to the 2004 election, when almost all of cadres campaigned enthusiastically for the party. The more pragmatic direction of the party's 2009 election campaign left some of its members confused, concerned, and critical of its leaders. This also left potential voters in big cities confused as to what the party stood for. The efforts of the party leadership to moderate the image of the PKS resulted in internal tensions and a confused message, the outcome of which was stagnation in the 2009 election. ■

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