

Dynamism beats dynasties in Indonesia's local elections

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On 27 June 2018 Indonesians were asked to [elect](#)^[1] governors, district heads and mayors in 17 provinces, 115 districts and 39 municipalities.



Elections for local government heads in Indonesia are largely [performative](#)^[2] events that do not deliver much to [ordinary citizens](#)^[3] in terms of [improved public services](#)^[4] or genuinely progressive politicians. In fact, direct elections for local government heads have facilitated the rise of [political dynasties](#)^[5] to such a degree that BBC Indonesia felt compelled to create an [online tool](#)^[6] for the 2018 local elections that allowed voters to identify the family links that candidates in their district have to incumbents.

Yet despite their shortcomings, Indonesia's local elections remain surprisingly [dynamic affairs](#)^[7]. Political dynasties have struggled to entrench themselves in Indonesian politics to the degree that their counterparts in the Philippines or even Thailand have managed.

A unique combination of economic and institutional factors explains why the outcomes of local government elections in Indonesia are hard to predict.

Local political monopolies usually emerge if incumbents manage to either dominate economic resources or political institutions. For example, enduring political systems appeared throughout history where the local topography allowed rulers to encage populations (like a fertile but narrow river bed, or a confined number of trade routes through mountainous terrain). The agricultural surplus that could be extracted from people under such circumstances was subsequently used to establish enduring political systems.

A modern day equivalent of such monopolies can be found in the Philippines. There, the most enduring political dynasties are those that establish monopolistic control over important [economic resources](#) ^[8] in their jurisdiction, which they subsequently use to 'lock-in' electorates.

Alternatively, incumbents and their offspring manage to capture the local state through the manipulation of institutions. In South America, for instance, many political dynasties survive across multiple election cycles because they successfully [control the boundaries](#) ^[9] to their jurisdictions from outside attacks. They do so by adopting electoral rules that work in their favour, by creating local tax codes that allow them to control revenue flows or by manipulating regulations for political parties.

In Indonesia, political dynasties struggle to entrench themselves in local politics because local economic conditions do not lend themselves to monopolisation. As a consequence the Indonesian electorate has high economic autonomy.

Land concentration is relatively low in Indonesia compared to other Southeast Asian countries. In areas where land concentration is high, land is often owned by national elites with no stake in local politics, making it difficult for local politicians to create economic dependencies. The proliferation of new employment opportunities in Indonesia's rural areas over past decades has added to the challenges of local incumbents to create and use economic dependencies to their advantage. Likewise, large-scale industrialisation is absent in Indonesia and the few sizeable industrial assets scattered across the archipelago are usually not under the control of local politicians. In short, Indonesian voters may be poor, but they are also relatively free.

At the same time, the institutional framework of Indonesia's decentralised unitary state makes it difficult for incumbents to rig institutions in their favour. For instance, re-writing electoral rules to one's advantage is difficult since they fall under the authority of the national election commission. The police and the army are also under national authority in Indonesia while the prosecutor's office reports to the national level. Unlike incumbents in South America's federal democracies, Indonesian local politicians cannot bring these political resources under their *formal* control. The manipulation of budget allocations is equally challenging for local politicians because Indonesian localities receive on average 90 per cent of their revenues from the national level through block grants.

This means that incumbents in Indonesia are relatively vulnerable to electoral attacks since they rarely control economic monopolies while institutional resources are not easily captured.

A case in point is the demise of the Limpo dynasty in South Sulawesi province. Numerous members of the Yasin Limpo family have managed to win executive and legislative elections. Syahrul Yasin Limpo, the oldest son of a locally known military general, became district head of Gowa (a suburb of the provincial capital Makassar) in 1994. His younger brother Ichsan Yasin Limpo became the first directly elected district head of Gowa in 2005, while Syahrul won the gubernatorial race for South Sulawesi in 2007 and was re-elected in 2013. Ichsan, meanwhile, was re-elected as district head of Gowa in 2010.

In 2018, with Syahrul having reached the end of his second term and unable to stand for

re-election, Ichsan ran as governor to replace him. But exit polls conducted across the province on 27 June placed Ichsan third, with only [19.30 per cent](#) ^[10] of total votes.

The difficulties that political dynasties face when trying to establish local political monopolies may seem like good news for Indonesia's democracy. But while predatory elites struggle to entrench themselves in local politics, so do progressive politicians. Successful [reform governments](#) ^[11] in other democracies have relied on monopolistic government arrangements as much as local dynasties.

Unfortunately, the most likely future scenario for local politics in Indonesia is one where different predatory networks compete for power and the support of the electorate without providing much in terms of policy agendas that address the country's many problems.

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A more extensive analysis of Indonesia's local government head elections by Michael Buehler titled 'The Ephemeral Nature of Local Political Monopolies' is available [here](#) ^[13].

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[1] elect:

author:%20This%20link%20has%20been%20added%20to%20provide%20further%20information%20on%20this%20topic%20for%20our%20readers.

[2] performative: <http://www.newmandala.org/the-reassertion-of-the-state/>

[3] ordinary citizens:

<https://blogs.wsj.com/indonesiarealtime/2014/10/01/qa-who-benefits-most-from-new-elections-law/>

[4] improved public services:

<http://michaelbuehler.asia/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/BuehlerOligarchy2014.pdf>

[5] political dynasties: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/married-with-children>

[6] online tool: <http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-44572596>

[7] dynamic affairs:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/11/30/indonesian-voting-behaviour-beyond-jakarta/>

[8] economic resources: <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=422>

[9] control the boundaries:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/boundary-control/FA0E9312CAB6FD68F3BF3C67E8CFAB42>

[10] 19.30 per cent:

<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2018/06/27/15425961/quick-count-lsi-pilkada-sulsel-dat-a-92-persen-nurdin-andi-raih-suara>

[11] reform governments:

<http://www.princeton.edu/news-and-events/news/item/jessica-trounstine-book-qa-political-monopolies-american-cities>

[12] The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamic Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/politics-of-sharia-law/DE8D25BFEFFD473EC882311D8023626F>

[13] here:

<http://michaelbuehler.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/BuehlerMonopolies2018.pdf>