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Political opinion polling in post-authoritarian Indonesia

Catalyst or obstacle to democratic consolidation?

The introduction of democratic elections in Indonesia after the downfall of Soeharto's authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 has triggered intensive scholarly debate about the competitiveness, credibility, and representativeness of these elections. Understandably, discussion has focused mainly on the primary actors in the elections – parties, individual candidates, and voters. In particular, authors have analysed the linkage between leadership, politico-religious cleavages, and voting patterns (Liddle and Mujani 2007), or the extent to which voters are influenced by financial incentives when casting their ballots (Hadiz 2008b). But this concentration on voting behaviour and electoral outcomes has shifted attention away from another development that is at least as significant in shaping Indonesia's new democracy: the remarkable proliferation of opinion pollsters and political consultants. Ten years after the resignation of long-time autocrat Soeharto, a whole army of advisers informs the political elite about the electorate's expectations, hopes, and demands. Indeed, public opinion polling has acquired such importance that no candidate running for public office can afford to ignore it, and voters have consistently punished those who thought they could.

The central role of opinion polls in post-Soeharto politics – and the diversity of views expressed in them – have challenged much of the conventional wisdom about the Indonesian electorate. Most of these previous judgements have been unflattering, with analysts describing voters in Indonesia either as a 'floating mass' willing to be directed by state authorities (Lane 2004), opportunists supporting anybody who offers them a free meal (Choi 2005), or loyal followers of religious, social, and ethnic leaders (Brown and Diprose

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2007). However, the picture that emerges from the rapid spread of opinion polls in recent years, and from their profound impact on the political elite, points to a much more sophisticated (and diversified) electorate. Apparently, most voters have very concrete wishes when it comes to the profile of their ideal candidate for public office and the policies he or she should pursue. These expectations are considerably more performance-based than primordially defined, making it worthwhile for politicians to study them in detail and design their political platform and image accordingly.

In fact, the rise of opinion polls as a key element in electoral politics has been so fast and so consequential that Indonesia now faces the same dilemmas typically associated with the dominance of pollsters in consolidated Western democracies. There, a rich body of literature has for decades highlighted two major risks arising from the ubiquitous influence of polling experts in modern democracies: first, 'polls encourage elected officials to abandon their responsibility for independent leadership' (Jacobs and Shapiro 2005:636), meaning that they encourage populism over rational policy-making and political institution-building; and second, polls can be inaccurate, biased, and manipulated instruments in intra-elite contests. Ironically, these drawbacks of contemporary electoral politics are currently as relevant for Indonesia as the traditional problems of vote-buying and patrimonialism.

This article discusses the implications of the rising importance of opinion polling for Indonesia's consolidating democracy. It shows that political actors are now increasingly forced to take the wishes of voters into account, much more so than at any prior stage of Indonesia's history. This anticipation of the electorate's wishes has improved the responsiveness of Indonesia's political institutions and leaders, and has introduced an unprecedented level of competition among the political elite for support from the previously neglected grassroots voters. On the other hand, the mushrooming of polling bodies has created a new set of problems. For example, candidates for political office are now tempted to accommodate any popular demand reflected in opinion polls, regardless of its rationality or monetary consequences. In addition, politicians have quickly discovered that by employing professional image experts and strategy consultants, they can artificially boost their popularity levels. This, in turn, has triggered an explosion in the costs of political activity, effectively barring the majority of Indonesians from running for office and aggravating politically motivated corruption.

In developing these arguments, I begin with an overview of electoral politics in Indonesia's various regimes, before describing the liberalization of the political system after 1998 and the corresponding rise in pollsters' activity. Focusing on the 2004 presidential elections and the direct local ballots held since 2005, I show that the majority of political parties in Indonesia today select their candidates for public office based on popularity ratings in

opinion polls. The conclusion discusses the repercussions of this trend for the accountability, stability, and institutionalization of the political system.

The emergence of opinion polling in post-authoritarian Indonesia

Professional opinion polling for political purposes typically occurs in states that fulfil two fundamental requirements: first, citizens must enjoy substantial political and civic freedom (Spangenberg 2002). Authoritarian, totalitarian, or pseudo-democratic states tend to disallow or restrict the publication of professionally conducted opinion surveys because they might reflect – and exacerbate – discontent among the populace. Paradoxically, however, it is often the lack of accurate information about the grievances of their citizens that leads to the downfall of autocratic regimes. Supplied with manipulated reports from their own intelligence agencies, authoritarian rulers often fatally misjudge the situation in their own country until the dissent erupts in open opposition towards the regime. In contrast, as Roderic Camp (1996) has demonstrated in the case of Mexico, the careful introduction of opinion polls often accompanies and supports the liberalization of autocratic or one-party states. If conducted and published by non-partisan and widely respected groups, public opinion polls can lend credibility to previously manipulated electoral processes, and can help voters gain trust in the newly emerging democratic system. After democratic procedures have become firmly established, opinion polling frequently moves beyond its initial mission of monitoring elections; more often than not, it turns into a strategic instrument for politicians to design their platforms and images. In consolidated liberal democracies, psephology has developed into a complicated science through which political actors advance their knowledge of the electorate and identify electoral strategies and themes.

In addition to political freedom, the second precondition for a reliable network of opinion pollsters is the availability of funds. Professional polling requires a carefully designed methodology, experienced researchers, and a large sample of respondents (Crespi 1989). Accordingly, survey institutions need significant amounts of money to pay their staff and finance their operations, particularly in geographically challenging areas. In many developing countries, funds for such activities are not easily available, even if the government is committed to political reform. As a result, foreign donors like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) often provide funding for pollsters in emerging democracies that would otherwise find it difficult to raise money (McMahon 2001). Through organizations like IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) or NDI (National Democratic Institute), USAID typically pays pollsters to predict the outcome

of elections, gather information about the motivations and expectations of voters, and characterize the attitude of citizens towards the government or the political system as a whole. Such foreign support is especially important in transitional countries, where the conduct and results of the first two post-authoritarian elections tends to decide the outcome of the democratization process. Once the democratic polity has stabilized, pollsters can offer their services to political parties and government agencies, which are usually glad to provide generous funding to pollsters that promise to help them retain or gain power.

Given these two requirements for effective opinion polling, it seems obvious why no such tradition existed in Indonesia before 1998. In early post-independence Indonesia (1950-1957), a parliamentary democracy was established, but the political parties operating in it lacked the expertise and funds to carry out any meaningful surveys of the electorate.[1] Polling had only emerged as a credible instrument of predicting electoral outcomes in the mid-1930s, when Robert Gallup in the United States replaced the previous method of direct surveys with the much more reliable approach of representative sampling. Consequently, the expertise for such polling techniques was not yet widespread, and even if it had reached Indonesia, political parties would not have been able to afford it. In addition, most Indonesian parties in the 1950s appealed to narrowly defined religious, class-based, or social constituencies, and they claimed to know exactly what their voters wanted (Mietzner 2008). The parties made little effort to break out of their core constituencies and attract voters from across the ideological spectrum; therefore, party leaders did not deem it important to inquire what these voters' wishes were. Partly because of the lack of opinion polling, political parties also failed to notice that the mood among voters was turning against the democratic system, and that support for authoritarian rule was growing accordingly. While the parties quarrelled about a new constitution, access to state resources, and participation in government, the military and President Soekarno prepared their own rise to power (Feith 1962). In 1959, the democratic experiment was terminated, and Soekarno declared the establishment of his Guided Democracy.

Between 1959 and 1998, Indonesia was ruled by authoritarian regimes that left little room for opinion polling or, for that matter, any other public presentation of divergent societal views. Under Soekarno, no elections were held, and most of the political parties were heavily controlled and restricted. Only the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, Partai Komunis Indonesia) enjoyed considerable freedom in its grassroots activities, but its leaders put more trust in the historical inevitability of the Marxist world revolution than

[1] In the available studies on the political parties of the 1950s, no trace of polling activity can be found. See Rocamora 1975; Fealy 1998; Feith 1962; and Hindley 1966.

in voter surveys. Although the party had attracted remarkable support in the 1955 national elections and in the 1957 ballots at the local level, by the early 1960s it had refocused its struggle on taking power with Soekarno's assistance rather than through the ballot box.

After the military's take-over and the destruction of the PKI in 1965-66, party politics was regulated even further, with only three parties allowed to operate after 1973. There were six elections held between 1971 and 1997, all of them heavily manipulated by Soeharto and his regime. In such a repressive environment, political opinion polling was either nonexistent or engineered by the government.[2] But even in manipulated polls, the political risks were high. In October 1990, the tabloid *Monitor* ran a popularity poll in which Soeharto, as expected, finished first. Unfortunately for its Christian editor, however, the Prophet Muhammad came only 11th, one rank behind the editor himself. Muslim organizations were outraged, and the government subsequently revoked the publication's license and had its editor jailed for blasphemy (Schwarz 1999).

Soeharto's downfall in 1998, after an economic meltdown and massive student demonstrations, gave rise to the first experiments with semi-professional political opinion polling in Indonesia's history. The Jakarta-based Institute for Social and Economic Research, Education, and Information (LP3ES, Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Sosial dan Ekonomi) quickly emerged as a major actor in this field. As one of the few well-established nongovernmental organizations in Indonesia, LP3ES had organized a quick count for the Jakarta area in the last elections held by the New Order regime in 1997, and thus had some experience with statistical sampling methods.[3] Whereas the government had engineered the 1997 elections so extensively that an alternative count could not help to make them more transparent, the radical liberalization of the political system initiated by Soeharto's successor B.J. Habibie changed the political landscape dramatically. Most significantly, the reforms allowed LP3ES to conduct meaningful opinion surveys ahead of the 1999 parliamentary elections, the first free and democratic elections in Indonesia since 1955. While still lacking expertise, staff, and funds, LP3ES managed to hold a series of opinion polls on Java, where around 60% of Indonesia's voters reside (Mangahas 2000).

Interestingly, the outcome of these surveys benefited both Soeharto's former government party Golkar and the newly emerging parties. Then Golkar chair-

[2] Consumer-focused market research and polling was possible in the New Order, however. The Survey Research Group conducted polls on the popularity of products, media programmes, and advertisements in Indonesia since 1976. In 1994, it was taken over by ACNielsen, which then became the most prominent commercial survey institute in Indonesia.

[3] 'Pisau bermata "quick count"', *Pikiran Rakyat*, 14-2-2008.

man Akbar Tandjung reported that 'the LP3ES poll was the first that showed us that our party would not completely disappear – that was a big relief for us'.[4] On the other hand, it also demonstrated that Megawati Soekarnoputri's party PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) was the clear front-runner, creating strong public expectations of its victory and making it much more difficult for elements of the old regime to undermine the electoral process.

Table 1: LP3ES poll in 1999 and actual election results[5]

	LP3ES Poll (Java)	Result (Java)	Result (national)
PDI-P	20	37	33.74
PKB	18	20.82	12.61
Golkar	17	15.32	22.44
PPP	6	9.87	10.71
PAN	6	6.84	7.21
PK	1	1.23	1.4
PBB	1	1.45	1.9

Despite its important role in raising public confidence in the 1999 elections, the practice of opinion polling in Indonesia was still at a very early stage. The LP3ES poll only reflected the situation on Java, thus missing important dynamics on the other Indonesian islands (see Table 1). Even on Java, the survey failed to capture the extent of PDI-P's popularity and consequently did not predict the large margin of its victory. International organizations, for their part, still kept a relatively low profile. IFES conducted a poll between December 1998 and February 1999, which accurately mirrored the eventual ranking of the parties in the June 1999 elections, but gave inflated predictions for the share of the Muslim-based parties. In its presentation of the results, IFES focused primarily on the attitudes of voters towards the elections and democracy in general, and only in passing published its figures on the individual parties.[6] This approach was representative of a general trend in the early period of post-authoritarian politics in Indonesia. Opinion polling at that time was largely an instrument to monitor and control the electoral process and, on the other hand, to detect the level of public support for democratic procedures. At that stage of the post-Soeharto transition, polling had not yet developed into a tool for political actors to build their electoral platforms or acquire a vote-boosting image. Apparently, most political parties were confident that their traditional campaign methods were more effective than in-depth studies

4 Interview with Akbar Tandjung, Jakarta, 17-11-2006.
5 The LP3ES figures are based on Mangahas 1999.
6 'Survei IFES: Pemilu akan jujur dan adil', *Kompas*, 3-4-1999.

of voting behaviour. As one key strategist of the traditionalist Muslim party PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, National Awakening Party) told a meeting of party functionaries in April 1999, 'we'll just have a few *kiai* [Islamic scholars] get up on the podium, they'll say "vote PKB", and that's it'.[7]

In the period between the two election years of 1999 and 2004, political opinion polling made some progress in terms of methodological sophistication, but Indonesia's political elite remained sceptical of its strategic significance. While there were regular polls about the performance of presidents Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Soekarnoputri,[8] few political parties employed pollsters on a regular basis to explore their own strengths and weaknesses. One of the reasons for this continued reluctance of key political actors to use polling data for their electoral strategizing was their persistent belief that the most important legislative and executive decisions and appointments were not made at the ballot box, but brokered by intra-elite negotiations.

To be sure, the electoral system that was in place between 1999 and 2004 supported this impression. In 1999, the president was still elected by the MPR (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, People's Consultative Assembly), which included a considerable number of non-elected members. Similarly, when President Wahid was impeached in July 2001, he was succeeded by his deputy without another general election. Furthermore, governors, *bupati* (district heads), and mayors were elected by their respective local parliaments, with parties typically settling on affluent rather than popular candidates (Malley 2003). In combination, these trends convinced most politicians that intra-elite bargaining was more important than researching the attitudes of voters, which was seen as a time-consuming, expensive, and not particularly useful exercise. However, the elections of 2004 would fundamentally change this perception. The year 2004 not only marked the advent of a new electoral system in Indonesia, but also facilitated the breakthrough of opinion polling as a major element of political interaction.

The 2004 elections: victory of the pollsters?

The dramatic increase in the frequency and relevance of opinion polling in Indonesia after 2004 was due largely to a change in the country's institutional framework. Based on constitutional amendments adopted in 2002, the presi-

7 Personal notes by the author, Jakarta, 18-4-1999.

8 The most regular of these polls appeared in the daily *Kompas*. However, the *Kompas* surveys focused largely on voters in urban centres, and the paper interviewed its respondents by phone. This led to a significant bias in favour of well-off and well-educated respondents.

dent was to be directly elected by the people from 2004 onwards.[9] Simultaneously, the MPR lost many of its rights in policy-making, and local government heads were also to be selected by popular vote rather than through politicking in the regional parliaments (Webber 2006). This expansion of electoral rights for ordinary citizens changed the traditional voting patterns of Indonesians tremendously – although very few politicians immediately recognized this. The majority of party strategists believed that voters would automatically support the presidential candidate nominated by the party they had chosen in the parliamentary ballot.

Consequently, the political elite thought it could afford to brush aside opinion polls that showed huge discrepancies in the popularity of presidential nominees and the parties that supported them. Most importantly, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono emerged as the leading candidate in most opinion surveys from early 2004 onwards, including a regular tracking survey conducted by IFES.[10] By contrast, the party founded by Yudhoyono, Partai Demokrat (PD, Democratic Party), had only marginal support in the polls.[11] Because of this 'unrealistic' gap in the surveys, leaders of Golkar and PDI-P dismissed the opinion polls on presidential candidates as methodologically flawed snapshots of a temporary phenomenon, and expected that once their dominant party machines began campaigning for their nominees, the tide would turn in their favour. Ultimately, however, Yudhoyono won the election in a landslide, shocking the political establishment which had put such unshakable trust in the organizational capacities of its parties.

Yudhoyono's victory forced the political elite to accept two inconvenient facts that would significantly alter the formulation of electoral strategies in post-authoritarian Indonesia. First, popular candidates without institutional support from powerful parties were able to overcome Indonesia's entrenched socio-political and religious divisions and appeal to a broad cross-constituency electorate (Liddle and Mujani 2005, 2007). This new trend undermined the traditional practices of intra-elite bargaining between rival groups, who believed that they had almost complete control over their own voting blocks. Second, the political elite had to concede that the pollsters, both domestic

9 As a consequence of the new regulations, Indonesia held three elections in 2004: a parliamentary ballot in April, after which parties or coalitions that had received more than 3% of the votes could nominate presidential candidates; and two rounds of presidential ballots, which were conducted in July and September 2004.

10 IFES conducted a total of 18 tracking surveys between December 2003 and October 2004. The last poll asked voters about their perceptions of the fairness of the electoral process.

11 In the IFES tracking survey of late March 2004, Partai Demokrat attracted 4.1% support, while Yudhoyono stood at 18.4%. After the parliamentary elections, which were held in June and in which PD obtained 7.5% of the votes, Yudhoyono's popularity rating in the IFES poll jumped to 30.6%.

and international, had accurately captured the rise of Yudhoyono as the near-certain winner of Indonesia's first direct presidential elections. Amien Rais, the chairman and presidential nominee of the Muslim-based party PAN (Partai Amanat Nasional, National Mandate Party), was among the most prominent converts in this regard. One of his closest advisers recalled that Amien had angrily refused to recognize the accuracy of the polling results: 'He said that one can't trust the polls, and even expressed his suspicion that the survey institutes had deliberately interviewed only respondents who didn't like him.'[12] After the elections, however, his scepticism made way for a newly found respect for the significance of opinion polling and the credibility of its methods: 'After the elections, everything changed – suddenly it became obvious to Amien that the polls had been right all along.' For Amien personally, the outcome of the elections and the fact that the polls had correctly predicted his fourth-place finish signalled the end of his political career. In 2005, he announced his resignation as PAN chairman and pledged never again to run for the presidency.[13]

Another initial unbeliever in the importance of survey data on presidential candidates was Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung. Despite a clear trend for Yudhoyono, Tandjung threw Golkar's support in the second round of the ballot behind incumbent president Megawati: 'I thought that the combined strength of Golkar and PDI-P would be enough to win this, especially since Megawati had Hasyim Muzadi as her running mate.'[14] Hasyim was the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, a traditionalist Muslim organization that claims a membership of over 40 million. While there were fierce conflicts within the group about which pair to support (ex-president Wahid, also a former NU chair, opposed Hasyim's nomination), Akbar believed that backing by the NU constituency would be sufficient to ensure Megawati's victory over Yudhoyono. However, opinion polls taken both before and after the elections showed that the majority of NU-affiliated voters supported Yudhoyono, spelling defeat for Megawati and Hasyim.[15] Some of Akbar's advisers had in fact told the Golkar chairman that, in their view, the opinion polls predicting Yudhoyono's triumph were accurate, and that the party should therefore support him rather than Megawati. In hindsight, Akbar acknowledged that 'we didn't have much experience with opinion polling at that time, and Hasyim promised that he would win Central and East Java for us, the strongholds of NU – so it was my judgement that we would have a good chance of

12 Confidential interview, Jakarta, 1-2-2008.

13 'Lima alasan Amien Rais mundur', *Kompas*, 7-4-2005.

14 Interview with Akbar Tandjung, Jakarta, 20-12-2006.

15 According to one poll published before the election, 58% of NU-affiliated voters intended to back Yudhoyono, while only 30% intended to vote for the Megawati-Hasyim ticket.

winning.'[16] After the elections, Akbar – and Golkar with him – dramatically changed their views on opinion polling, and adopted it as a central element of their strategic planning.

The reluctance with which many political actors came to terms with the new circumstances pointed to the importance of the ongoing paradigmatic shift. In the past, Indonesia's electorate had been a rather predictable element in the calculations of the political elite. Parties could feel confident that certain socio-religious constituencies would vote for them, and that all key decisions would subsequently be made in negotiations with leaders of other important groups. This paternalistic understanding of democratic representation was so deeply engrained in the thinking of Indonesia's elite that its members had agreed to direct presidential elections without contemplating the possibility that voters would go against the instructions of 'their' parties.[17] Hence the outcome of the ballot came as a complete shock to party elites, and it elevated the electorate to the centre of political decision-making. Discovering voters as independent entities whose wishes, preferences, and fluctuating views needed to be studied and addressed, political elites finally accepted opinion polling as an integral component of political life.

This discovery was accelerated by a concrete sense of urgency: in contrast to 1999, party leaderships did not have another five years to prepare for the next elections. Due to changes in the electoral laws, Indonesia was scheduled to hold around 500 direct elections for governors, district heads, and mayors between June 2005 and December 2008.[18] This meant that Indonesia's parties faced an average of 12 elections per month, requiring constant strategizing, planning, and research. After the 2004 presidential elections had helped political opinion polling to achieve a stunning breakthrough, it was the frequency of local elections that would entrench it as a political routine.

Popularity and pragmatism: Indonesia's local elections

The introduction of direct elections for local government heads in 2004 reflected the deep dissatisfaction in Indonesian society with previous electoral mechanisms. Under the authoritarian Soeharto regime, the heads of

16 Interview with Akbar Tandjung, Jakarta, 20-12-2006.

17 One newspaper commentator remarked that the political elite seemed to find it very 'easy to define the shape and orientation of coalitions'. He reminded party leaders, however, that it was much more difficult 'to direct the political choices of tens of millions of people'. See 'Mengukur Koalisi Kebangsaan', *Suara Merdeka*, 26-8-2004.

18 The government and parliament decided that because of 2009 being an election year, all direct local elections should be completed by late 2008. This led to an even tighter electoral schedule than would usually have been the case.

regional administrations had been nominally elected by their respective local parliaments, but the outcome of these ballots was typically prearranged. The dominance of the New Order's electoral machine, Golkar, over almost all local parliaments was so strong that the emergence of a candidate not endorsed by the central regime was virtually impossible. In addition, the Ministry of Home Affairs held an effective veto right against nominees it deemed unqualified. As a result, Soeharto was able to hand-pick candidates for local government offices, rewarding loyalists and making sure that the various groups invested in his regime received enough positions to maintain their support.

Accordingly, the composition of local governments during the New Order mirrored the changing power constellations at the national level: at the beginning of its rule, the Soeharto government filled around 80% of province and district head positions with military officers (Sundhaussen 1978). Towards the end of Soeharto's reign, however, he shifted more and more of these posts to bureaucrats, Golkar politicians, and technocrats, leaving the armed forces with 'only' 40% of all local positions. As the popularity of a candidate in the region to be governed was irrelevant, Soeharto often sent ethnic Javanese to rule regions in the Outer Islands.[19] Combined with the regime's tight political and social controls, this led to significant levels of discontent towards the Jakarta government in general and the centralist obsession of the New Order regime in particular (Crouch 2000).

After Soeharto's fall, local parliaments were largely free to elect their heads of government in open inter-party competition. The central government no longer had the right to veto candidates, and it mostly refrained from trying to influence the outcome of the ballots.[20] It quickly turned out, however, that the majority of elections were won not by representatives of those parties holding the most parliamentary seats, but by independent candidates who offered parliamentarians financial incentives to obtain their votes. Mostly these candidates were affluent bureaucrats who had enough money to build coalitions across the political spectrum (Malley 2003). Party elites in Jakarta often watched with frustration how their local parliamentarians ignored the candidates endorsed by the central leadership – simply because wealthier candidates had offered better compensation packages.

[19] Soeharto apparently believed that Javanese bureaucrats had a greater interest in containing localist and regionalist sentiments than would indigenous appointees. From the late 1980s onwards, however, Soeharto allowed more local politicians to hold key government posts in their areas, including in the troubled provinces of Aceh, Irian Jaya, and East Timor.

[20] The most prominent exception was the gubernatorial election of Lampung in 2003, the result of which was overturned by the Megawati government. Later, the Supreme Court declared this annulment illegal, creating a political and legal quagmire in Lampung that persisted until the direct elections in 2008.

As a result, local administrations came under the control of politically unaffiliated power brokers, who were no longer puppets of the central government, but did not feel any responsibility towards local citizens either. When regional parliaments demanded accountability reports from their governors, district heads, or mayors, these local government officials dealt with the obligation quietly by paying more bribes (Holloway 2001). This situation was highly unsatisfactory not only for local voters but also for leaders of political parties and other elite groups. With political power increasingly shifting from the parties to influential bureaucrats, many politicians felt that they had a better chance of regaining control over the electoral process by introducing popular ballots than by maintaining the existing indirect voting mechanism. Therefore, the national parliament passed a bill in September 2004 that created the legal framework for direct local elections from June 2005 onwards.[21]

These changes to the electoral system had a profound impact on Indonesia's political culture and norms. For the first time in the country's history, the popularity of candidates became a decisive factor in the election of local government officials. Previously, candidates got elected because of their good relationship with authoritarian rulers, their seniority in the military, their influence in Golkar or, most recently, their ability to hand out gifts to parliamentarians. By contrast, under the new electoral system, candidates had to convince thousands, in some cases millions, of voters that their election would improve citizens' daily lives (Gross 2007). This change shifted the focus of electoral competition from intra-elite bargaining to image politics.

However, for many political parties and their leaders, popularity contests were still largely unknown terrain. Yudhoyono's victory in the presidential elections of 2004 had driven home the point that direct elections have completely different dynamics than parliamentary ballots, but the majority of party functionaries found it difficult to draw concrete conclusions from this insight. While acknowledging that presidential polls had changed the way national leaders were selected, most parties hoped that local elections would continue to follow the established patterns of constituency mobilization, patronage relations, and party loyalties.[22] But as in the case of Yudhoyono's election, they were in for a big surprise. When the first wave of local elections

[21] According to the new law, candidates for the direct elections in provinces and districts could be nominated by those political parties (or coalitions of parties) which in that particular area had received more than 15% of the votes or seats in the 2004 parliamentary elections.

[22] This hope was reflected in the calculations of many politicians who simply added up the results of the various participating parties to predict the outcome of direct local elections. See 'Ramai-ramai salurkan dukungan', *Suara Merdeka*, 24-6-2005; 'Pasangan Ismet-"Si Doel" targetkan 70 Persen suara', *Antara*, 29-10-2007.

was over in July 2005, it emerged that the direct local elections had followed the same political logic as the presidential elections. Party machines and their standardized campaign methods counted for little; instead, individual reputations, charisma, personal networks, and familiarity with local contexts became the most crucial assets for nominees (Buehler and Johnson Tan 2007).

The triumph of popularity over traditional party politics lifted political polling institutions onto the centre stage of local elections. Like their counterparts at the national level, regional party leaders had to accept that they could not control the voting behaviour of their constituencies in personality-based elections. Consequently, they arrived at the conclusion that in order to win direct elections in provinces and districts, there were only two options: first, at a very early stage, the party elite had to identify the most popular candidate in that territory and convince him or her to run for the party, regardless of whether he or she was a member; alternatively, local party politicians who intended to participate in the elections themselves had to hire professional consultants to help them improve their popularity ratings. In both cases, the services of pollsters were imperative, and they soon became an indispensable element of the electoral process. By early 2006, there was almost no major party that did not rely on opinion surveys to select its candidates for gubernatorial and district-level elections.

Concurrently, individual candidates paid pollsters to conduct surveys for their own purposes, trying to find out if they had a chance of winning and if it was worth investing in the effort. If the result was positive, these candidates made the rounds among the political parties, offering the polling reports as evidence that they were viable candidates the parties should consider endorsing. As a result, locally based opinion pollsters emerged all over the country, while 'veterans' like LP3ES expanded their operations into the regions. Less than one year after the first local elections, opinion pollsters had established themselves as the makers or breakers of political campaigns (Suwastoyo 2007).

In no other party was the debate over the new importance of opinion polling for electoral strategizing as pronounced as in Golkar. Akbar Tandjung had learnt through bitter defeats in 2004 that his doubts about the accuracy of personality-focused polling had been disastrously mistaken, and he had changed his mind as a result. However, before Akbar could translate his newly found appreciation for opinion surveys into a fresh Golkar approach to local elections, he was replaced as party chairman in December 2004. In a tight contest, Akbar lost his position to Jusuf Kalla, who had just been sworn in as Yudhoyono's vice-president (Tomsa 2006).

In contrast to Akbar, Kalla had very early on grasped the new trends in electoral politics, which saw the prominence of parties in direct elections declining and the role of charismatic individuals rising. Accordingly, Kalla

had withdrawn from the race to become Golkar's presidential nominee, and had formed a team with Yudhoyono, who was the clear front-runner in the polls. A businessman and well-known pragmatist, Kalla believed in Yudhoyono's formidable popularity figures when many within the political elite still hoped that they were a statistical aberration.[23] After becoming chairman of Golkar, Kalla intended to use the same pragmatic approach to his party's preparations for the direct local elections. Insisting that only persons popular enough to win elections should be endorsed by Golkar, Kalla asked LSI (Lembaga Survei Indonesia, Indonesian Survey Institute) in early 2005, a few months before the elections, to assess the chances of the party's likely candidates in the various provinces.[24] The results were an eye-opener for many senior Golkar officials: while some potential Golkar candidates seemed to be on track for clear victories, others were predicted to face crushing defeats.[25]

The survey results confronted the Golkar leadership with a serious political dilemma. Caught between its intention to nominate popular candidates on the one hand and the personal interests of its cadres on the other, the Golkar leadership decided to approach candidates with negative polling results and try to convince them to withdraw their candidacy.[26] However, many of the candidates were concurrently chairmen of the Golkar branches in their respective provinces, and had secured their candidacy through pressure, political patronage, and bribes. Worse still, some of them were incumbent governors, who felt that they had an automatic right to run for re-election.

One of the most prominent cases in this regard was the candidacy of Adolf Sondakh, the governor of North Sulawesi. Crippled by allegations of corruption and nepotism, Sondakh had – according to Golkar's opinion survey in the province – no chance of winning against his popular challenger, Sinyo H. Sarundayang.[27] For that reason, Kalla sent the central board's coordinator for North Sulawesi, Theo Sambuaga, to the provincial capital Manado in order to talk Sondakh out of running for another term. Sondakh was unwilling to surrender, however. Sambuaga recalled: 'I tried everything, I told him that he was going to lose, and that this would damage Golkar's reputation. But he didn't want to hear any of that.'[28] In his resistance, Sondakh pointed to internal party regulations that gave Golkar's regional chapters wide-ranging

23 Interview with Andi Mattalata, senior Golkar politician, Jakarta, 21-11-2006.

24 The emergence of LSI as Indonesia's leading polling institution will be discussed in detail below.

25 'Partai Golkar akan menangi pilkada di lima daerah', *Media Indonesia*, 14-4-2005.

26 Interview with Rully Chairul Azwar, Golkar deputy secretary-general, Jakarta, 18-9-2006.

27 Based on that survey, Sondakh trailed Sarundayang by 20.8 to 30.6%. See 'Partai Golkar akan menangi pilkada di lima daerah', *Media Indonesia*, 14-4-2005.

28 Interview with Theo Sambuaga, Jakarta, 28-11-2006.

authority to select their own candidates. Powerless to intervene, Kalla and Golkar had to look on as Sondakh suffered a humiliating defeat in the June 2005 elections. He finished third, not even coming close to successfully defending his position. Bitterly disappointed, Sondakh fell ill and died in March 2007.

The defeat in North Sulawesi – and similar ones in other provinces – convinced the Golkar leadership that the party's internal selection mechanism for candidates in local elections needed to be changed. Therefore, Kalla and the central board issued a new regulation in February 2006, called 'Juklak 5' (Petunjuk Pelaksanaan Nomor 5, Implementation Guideline Number 5). According to this new directive, all decisions on candidates for local elections, without exception, had to be based on opinion surveys. In order to ensure that local branches heeded the results of such mandatory polls, the central board reserved for itself a voting block of 40% of the ballots in provincial nominating conventions.[29] Moreover, Golkar's regional coordinators were instructed to make sure that only candidates with high popularity ratings were endorsed at such conventions, thus preventing ambitious but unpopular chairpersons of local chapters from claiming the nomination.

This new policy, while creating a significant extent of dissatisfaction in the Golkar rank and file, had a big impact on the party's success rate in local elections. While up until February 2006 Golkar had won only 37% of all elections held at the provincial and district level, that figure jumped to 47% for the elections held between March 2006 and November 2007 (see Table 2).[30] Although most of those who had won election were no longer senior Golkar leaders in their regions, but rather independent bureaucrats or businesspeople loosely affiliated with the party, this did not reduce Kalla's conviction that the survey-based strategy was the only viable option for Golkar. Proudly presenting the statistical records during a party event in November 2006, Kalla shrugged off all complaints from party cadres who felt marginalized by the new approach: 'In politics, all that counts is success – and the policy works, doesn't it?'[31]

[29] 'Juklak 5/DPP/Golkar/IX/2005 tentang perubahan Juklak- 01/DPP/Golkar/II/2005 tentang tata cara pemilihan kepala daerah dari partai Golkar.'

[30] Between March and September 2006, the success rate had temporarily reached 58%. The subsequent drop presumably reflected the fact that other parties by then had adopted a similar approach to the use of opinion polls for the selection of candidates. Interview with Rully Chairul Azwar, Golkar deputy secretary-general, Jakarta, 18-9-2006.

[31] Personal notes by the author, Jakarta, 14-11-2006.

Table 2: Election results for Golkar before and after 'Juklak 5'[32]

	Before Juklak 5: June 2005-February 2006			After Juklak 5: March 2006-November 2007			All local elections: June 2005-November 2007		
	Elections	Win	%	Elections	Win	%	Elections	Win	%
Province	8	2	25.00	11	5	45.45	19	7	36.84
District	217	81	37.33	87	41	47.13	304	122	40.13
Total	225	83	36.89	98	46	46.94	323	129	39.94

Golkar wasn't the only party that chose its candidates based on opinion polls, however. Megawati Soekarnoputri's PDI-P also discovered the benefits of identifying popular persons and asking them to represent the party in elections. In fact, PDI-P's secretary-general, Pramono Anung Wibowo, claimed in October 2006 that Golkar was 'simply copying our system because they kept losing one ballot after the other'.[33] According to Pramono, his party had not only hired LSI and other external pollsters to conduct surveys for the central board, but had begun to set up its own polling institution. In selecting its candidates, PDI-P prioritized poll ratings over everything else, including party membership. This led to some bizarre constellations: in Banten, PDI-P nominated the deputy treasurer of Golkar for the governorship, who was subsequently backed by Kalla's party as well. In Papua, PDI-P supported the candidacy of Barnabas Suebu, a former Golkar governor and active member of that party's advisory board (Mietzner 2007). Explaining that PDI-P 'doesn't have many qualified cadres yet because it has been marginalized for such a long time', Pramono justified this approach as the best strategy to entrench the party in Indonesia's electoral politics.[34]

Not to be outsmarted, other parties followed suit. In some provinces, the race for the nomination of the most popular person produced candidates that were backed by a dozen parties or more. In Jakarta, for example, no less than 19 parties supported Fauzi Bowo, the former vice-governor, who was the clear leader in the polls and went on to win the election in a landslide (Gross 2007). But in the midst of the competition to acquire popular candidates, party cadres at the grassroots level began to voice their resentment of persons who clinched nominations without having 'earned' them through long service to the party. Similarly, many observers and pro-democracy activists started to ask probing questions: was the ambition to select the candidate with the best poll ratings a genuine attempt to follow the wishes of the voters, or was it an expression of the weak institutionalization of Indonesia's young democracy?

32 This data is based on Azwar 2007.
33 Interview with Pramono Anung Wibowo, Jakarta, 18-10-2006.
34 Interview with Pramono Anung Wibowo, Jakarta, 18-10-2006.

Indonesian democracy revisited: parties, candidates, and the polls

At first sight, the new tendency of parties to nominate the most popular political leaders as their candidates in local elections seemed to be a major leap in Indonesia's process of democratic consolidation. After decades of intra-elite bargaining and political engineering behind the scenes, it was finally the popularity of individual candidates that emerged as the most powerful weapon in electoral contests. In this context, it was of secondary importance whether a candidate's popularity was based on a clean track record, clever pork barrelling, ethnic and religious affiliations, or simply a successful public relations strategy. Even if voters liked candidates for the wrong reasons, it mattered tremendously for the advancement of democratic politics that voters' wishes were researched and taken into consideration. The fact that potential contenders for local government offices now had to find out what the electorate was interested in, and which policy proposals or character traits could increase their popularity, was a paradigmatic shift of great significance.

This was particularly true for the internal machinations of political parties. Having previously selected candidates based on their political influence or monetary capacity, parties entered uncharted territory when popularity became the main criterion for choosing candidates. And the new policy produced the intended results: after voters in 2005 and 2006 rejected countless candidates for their lack of attention to the electorate (including almost 40% of incumbents), most parties began to exclude particularly unpopular politicians from their pool of possible nominees. Among them were incumbents in large provinces: in 2008, the sitting governors of North Sumatra and Central Java were not nominated for re-election because surveys had indicated that they would lose.[35] In the early period of local elections, such snubs would have been unthinkable.

Despite this undeniable increase in elite responsiveness to grassroots wishes, the new obsession of party leaders with the popularity of their candidates had several drawbacks. To begin with, the prioritization of external, popular nominees over long-serving party cadres created motivational and organizational problems for Indonesia's political parties. Many local party officials complained that they were the ones who had served on the ground for many years under difficult circumstances, only to watch non-party contenders snatch away the biggest prizes in party politics: nominations for political office. Noor Ahmad, the deputy chair of Golkar's Central Java branch, pointed out that 'it is important for the internal consolidation of

[35] 'DPP PDI-P abaikan Rudolf M. Pardede', *Seputar Indonesia*, 6-2-2008; 'Bibit-Rustri dianggap solid dan berpengalaman', *Suara Merdeka*, 21-2-2008.

parties that their cadres participate in local elections'.[36] Even if such internal candidates lost, he continued, 'it doesn't really matter, we can then use the time until the next election to improve their electability'. Instead of hastily endorsing the most popular candidate regardless of his or her party membership, Noor demanded that Golkar's central board provide its own cadres in the regions with the necessary resources to increase their popularity. 'This may take two years, but this is what we need to do for the sake of the internal coherence and motivation within our party.'

Noor has a valid point – if political parties continue to hand out their nominations for public office to non-party persons, then there will be little incentive for politically interested activists to join parties. Ambitious politicians can then develop their own political profile without having to go through a lengthy career as a party cadre, a development which is certain to damage the very party system upon which the post-Soeharto polity is based.

Political parties' concentration on popularity rankings has also undermined their own efforts to re-establish control over local politics. After 1999, affluent bureaucrats and businesspeople had won most of the available top posts in local government, smoothing their way to office with payments to parliamentarians and party leaders. The introduction of direct elections in 2004 had been a response to that trend, with most parties convinced that they could regain the initiative if allowed to mobilize grassroots support for their candidates. The outcome of the first wave of elections in 2005 was a huge disappointment for party elites, however. It turned out that their cadres had lost most of the contests against popular independents, who had simply purchased their nominations from cash-strapped party boards.[37] By switching tactics and recruiting well-liked candidates, political parties avoided defeats in the short term, but did not manage to capture long-term control over local governments. As Noor Ahmad remarked, 'Who says that these independents will work after the election for the party that nominated them? How are we going to evaluate that?'[38]

Indeed, the post-election attitudes of the popularly elected governors, district heads, and mayors towards their nominating parties did not differ significantly from those of the indirectly selected incumbents in the 1999-2004 period. Most felt no obligation towards their electoral vehicles,[39] a stance that

36 Interview with Noor Achmad, Jakarta, 4-11-2006.

37 Statistics on the socio-economic background of nominees show that only 22% of the candidates for direct local elections were party politicians. 36% of them were bureaucrats and 28% entrepreneurs (Mietzner 2006).

38 Interview with Noor Achmad, Jakarta, 4-11-2006.

39 One of the most remarkable cases in this context was that of the governor of Bengkulu, Agusrin Maryono Najamuddin, who only one month after his election in October 2005 turned his back on his nominating party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Prosperous Justice Party) and became the head of the local branch of Yudhoyono's PD.

was strengthened by the fact that the majority of the campaigns had not been financed by the parties, but by the candidates and their sponsors. From this perspective, the 'success' of the parties in enlisting popular candidates only served as a decorative façade for their inability to win elections with their own cadres; furthermore, it masked the parties' lack of control over 'their' nominees after elections. Evidently, the direct local elections had not consolidated the position of political parties, but instead had further weakened it (Buehler 2007).

This weakening link between political parties and elected officials has serious implications for the workability of Indonesia's consolidating democracy. In functioning democracies, political parties aggregate the diverse viewpoints of the electorate into a variety of coherent platforms, among which voters can choose at general elections (Katz 1997). Representatives of the winning party (or parties) are then given the opportunity to implement their platform during a clearly defined term of government, with voters critically reviewing their performance. Based on the track record of party representatives at all levels of government (local, regional, national), voters form an opinion about the consistency, effectiveness, capability, and trustworthiness of the various political parties, and use this evaluation to make an informed choice at the next general election.

In Indonesia, however, voters are often denied such a chance. In most cases, local government officials do not represent their nominating parties during their term in office; in fact, some incumbents have switched parties before the next election, pointing to the insignificance of party affiliation for their political agenda.[40] While voters can punish individual office-holders by voting them out at the ballot box, they can no longer assume a connection between the performance of politicians in government and their nominating parties. This connection, however, forms the basis of an effective party system, in which voters support parties and their candidates based on their success or failure in government or opposition; if incumbents no longer claim membership of any party, the electorate is deprived of its main opportunity to develop a long-term view of the identity and credibility of the existing parties.

Even the key achievement of the new direct elections, namely the empowerment of popular candidates over despised incumbents, warrants a critical assessment of its democratic content. To be sure, the new electoral mechanism allowed some previously disadvantaged civil society leaders to challenge and eventually replace corrupt governors, district heads, and mayors. Using their popularity as their only asset, they were able to overcome their opponents' huge political and financial power. From the governor of West Sumatra to the

[40] Sjachriel Darham, for instance, the governor of South Kalimantan between 2000 and 2005, had been nominated by PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) in the 2000 elections. In 2005, Sjachriel ran for PDI-P, but lost.

deputy mayor of Ambon, there is evidence from across Indonesia that well qualified and capable activists did in fact take office through direct elections. However, there is equally compelling evidence that bureaucratic and oligarchic power brokers have adapted successfully to the new popularity-driven environment (Hadiz 2008a). After initial confusion about how to deal with their popular rivals, they soon discovered that popularity is not – in most cases at least – a natural phenomenon. As political consultants were quick to point out, popularity can be superficially created, whether through media campaigns, image management, or policy changes.

In the run-up to Jakarta's gubernatorial elections in 2007, for example, an adviser to one of the candidates estimated that it costs 60 billion rupiahs (6.6 million US dollars) to raise a publicly unknown nominee to 'electable' popularity levels. The consultant said that 'about 70% of the money should go towards TV ads, which would allow the candidate to run 30-second ads about 4,200 times in total'.[41] Equipped with such detailed advice – and with the money to follow up on it – many wealthy but otherwise unknown candidates began to purchase name recognition and, by implication, electability. As a result, many nominees were able to overcome their apparent popularity deficit and win elections. Jakarta's Fauzi Bowo and Banten's Ratu Atut Chosiyah are prominent examples of this.

The possibility to purchase electoral popularity also points to another structural weakness in Indonesia's political system that direct elections have not overcome, but in fact compounded. Just as under the previous electoral mechanism, money remained an indispensable element in each candidate's campaign. Whether popular or not, candidates had to build up campaign networks, pay monitors to observe the voting process, compensate political parties for their support, hand out goodies to voters, and run advertisements in the media.[42] The costs of such a direct campaign were obviously higher than those incurred under the previous system, where candidates could get elected simply by paying parliamentarians.

Consequently, contenders in direct local elections after 2005 consisted of two types of candidates: first, those who according to opinion polls had a good chance of winning, and were thus able to attract large donations from external sponsors (such as entrepreneurs, contractors, or wealthy individuals with a strong interest in good relations with the next head of government); and second, politically influential bureaucrats or other power brokers who had the cash to hire professional polling institutions or other consultants to make them popular and electable. In both cases, successful candidates entered their new office under pressure to pay off electoral debts to their

41 'Opening for Jakarta governor: only the wealthy need apply', *Jakarta Post*, 12-6-2007.
42 'Money politics pada pilkada hancurkan masa depan rakyat', *Waspada*, 1-9-2007.

sponsors or recover their personal investment.[43] While the issue of political financing is a common problem even in developed democracies (Berlusconi has dominated Italian politics for the last ten years through his wealth and control of the media, and the 2008 primaries in the United States featured self-financing candidates as well as candidates who attracted donations because of their popularity), Indonesia's notoriously corrupt political culture makes the country particularly vulnerable to the influence of 'money politics'.

Finally, despite its apparent effectiveness and convenience, the practice of supporting popular candidates has confronted political parties with unexpected complications. First of all, after most parties adopted the popularity approach, there was a rush to endorse the one person leading opinion polls in his or her area. With dozens of parties nominating the same candidate – as in Jakarta, for instance – the idea of handing the nomination to the most popular person seems to have run into an unsolvable problem inherent in its structural logic. As a result, some parties have returned to selling the nomination to other interested persons if the most popular candidate shows no interest in running for the party or has already made a commitment to a different party.

Such arrangements are particularly popular at the local level; even if unable to win elections, party officials nevertheless welcome the opportunity to refill their coffers with payments from electoral hopefuls who can't boast good survey results but have the cash to buy themselves a nomination.[44] Fully aware that their candidate won't succeed, some local party branches have viewed electoral contests therefore not so much as a quest for political influence but as a method of financial consolidation. Similarly, a handful of autocratic party leaders have come to reject survey results as the basis for selecting candidates as they are unwilling to surrender this crucial element of their authority to pollsters. For example, the supreme chairman of PKB, Abdurrahman Wahid, has been notorious for arbitrarily choosing unknown and unsuccessful nominees. As one senior PKB leader explained, 'We have no idea how [Wahid] selects his candidates; but unfortunately it is not based on polls.'[45]

But even those parties that continue to use the popularity approach have faced a host of technical and micro-political difficulties in the implementation

[43] 'Balas budi politik, ujian pertama Fauzi Bowo', *Suara Pembaruan*, 27-8-2007.

[44] In the run-up to the gubernatorial elections in Jakarta, functionaries of PDI-P collected billions of rupiahs from candidates who had hoped to be nominated as vice-governor to Fauzi Bowo. When somebody else was nominated, some of the unsuccessful candidates – mostly retired military officers – sent debt collectors to reclaim their payments. Several people ended up in hospital. See 'Ongkos politik para Jenderal', *Tempo*, 25 June 2007.

[45] Confidential interview, Jakarta, 23-1-2008. Officially, PKB selects its candidates through a democratic selection process at the grassroots level. In reality, however, Wahid has the final word on all nominees, and he frequently picks candidates that were not on the list of recommendations submitted by local branches.

of the concept. During an internal meeting in November 2007, the Golkar central board presented an analysis of the party's 52 electoral defeats since March 2006, when the conduct of opinion surveys was made mandatory for all branches selecting candidates. The reasons for these losses, which stood against 46 victories in the same period, were manifold (see Table 3). For example, the local branch did not follow the recommendation of the pollsters and the central board (6 cases); the stipulations of 'Juklak 5' [the regulation requiring branches to conduct surveys] were not adhered to (8 cases); the opinion surveys were inaccurate (15 cases); the candidate identified by the poll could not be convinced to run for Golkar, or negotiations over his or her candidacy failed (11 cases); the central board decided to nominate another candidate although he or she was not the strongest in the survey (2 cases); or the eventual winner was not even included in the initial opinion poll (10 cases). More specifically on the problem of the accuracy of polls, Golkar noted three major issues: at times, the survey was done too early, thus failing to incorporate developments closer to the date of the election; the sample was too small; and interested candidates had manipulated polls in their favour.

In short, the Golkar report highlighted the increasingly complex role of opinion polling in the internal decision-making process of political parties. Most importantly, it confirmed that polling institutions had become much more than just professional and politically neutral advisers to party elites; instead, pollsters had grown into an integral part of the political game, with their judgements deciding the fate of candidates and party leaders. Accordingly, the following section analyses the interests, methods, and internal dynamics of the survey institutes, and discusses their new role in post-Soeharto politics.

Table 3: Golkar's electoral losses, March 2006 to November 2007[46]

Reason	Number of cases
Local branch did not follow pollsters' recommendation	6
Local branch did not adhere to Juklak 5	8
Opinion surveys were inaccurate	15
Front-runner in polls could not or did not want to run for Golkar	11
Central board nominated another candidate	2
Election winner was not included in the survey	10
Total (defeats)	52
Victories	46
Total (elections)	98

46 This data is based on Azwar 2007.

The polling institutions: power, money, and rivalry

With opinion polling emerging as an indispensable electoral tool for Indonesia's politicians, it should come as no surprise that the survey institutions themselves were increasingly dragged into the intrigues, power struggles, and monetary temptations typically associated with elite politics. Before the presidential elections of 2004, pollsters had been driven largely by academic curiosity and a strong interest to prevent manipulation in the first post-authoritarian elections. Particularly in the 1999 parliamentary elections, the main goal of publishing survey data on the comparative strength of political parties was to convince the Habibie government that any attempt to rig the elections in its favour would be pointless. Accordingly, the main sponsors of pollsters at that time were not parties or candidates, but foreign donors such as USAID and similar institutions keen to advance Indonesia's democratization. With most survey institutions correctly predicting a victory of PDI-P, their foreign financiers were satisfied that they had added an urgently needed element of credibility to the first free and fair elections in Indonesia in 44 years (USAID 2001:27).

During the campaign for the 2004 presidential elections, however, a new kind of opinion polling began to emerge that significantly changed Indonesia's political landscape. For the first time, pollsters not only informed parties and candidates about their standing in the election campaign, but also advised them on how to increase their chances of being elected. From then on, Indonesia's pollsters were divided into two diametrically opposed camps: on one side stood the 'academic' camp, which believed that opinion polling should serve the needs of society for information and more political transparency. Members of this group were not opposed to providing politicians with information about their electoral strengths and weaknesses, nor would they refuse payment for such services. But they vehemently rejected the idea of advising political actors on how to run a campaign, create a particular image, or design a platform to help them beat their opponents. In the words of one leading representative of this group, 'I am like a doctor; I provide the diagnosis and tell the patient what illness he or she suffers from.' But, he continued, 'That's all. I am not a pharmacist who mixes the medicine and sells it to the sick.'[47]

In the other camp were the 'commercial' pollsters. They had no problem with 'selling the medicine'; in fact, they defined their core mission as helping politicians win elections. Prepared not only to conduct surveys, but also to organize the whole campaign for parties and nominees (including media

[47] Interview with Saiful Mujani, Jakarta, 9-11-2006.

work, image consulting, drafting of slogans and advertisements, and managing staff), this camp openly offered their services to paying clients. The leader of this group of opinion pollsters formulated his goal in a newspaper interview in February 2008: he wanted to achieve a historical record, he said – by 'putting 15 governors into their positions' by the end of 2009 (Suwastoyo 2007).

The paradigmatic clash between the two camps was reflected in the rivalry – and eventual hostility – between their main protagonists, Saiful Mujani and Denny JA. Before their estrangement the two men had been friends, and both had studied under the guidance of the senior Indonesianist William Liddle at Ohio State University. In 1999, Liddle, Mujani and others had received a grant from the US-based National Science Foundation (NSF) to conduct a survey of electoral behaviour in the parliamentary elections,[48] and ever since then Mujani had planned to establish a polling institute. In the following years, Mujani continued to organize small-scale surveys with other research institutions, but the opportunity to create his own polling body only presented itself in 2003. Together with Denny JA, who had previously collaborated with the activist and PDI-P politician Herri Akhmadi on mobilizing support and resources for such an initiative, Mujani established the Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) in August 2003. Mujani recalled that 'the mission of LSI was defined as researching the wishes of the population, so that the elite can effectively respond to them'.[49] Another Indonesianist with good connections to Mujani, Takashi Shiraishi of Japan, lobbied his country's development agency JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) to give LSI a grant for its initial operations. The request was approved, enabling LSI to conduct its surveys without having to raise other funds. 'This was very convenient since it allowed us to stay above partisan party politics', Mujani asserted.[50] When LSI published its first polling results comparing the strength of the various political parties in October 2003, this financial independence helped the new institution to fend off the unavoidable accusations of bias from those politicians who felt disadvantaged by the survey.

But Denny soon came to believe that LSI should do more than only deliver research reports to the political elite and society. Given the increasing interest in LSI's data, Denny insisted that it could (and should) become a political player in its own right. In his view, LSI was well positioned to identify potentially powerful candidates and enter into cooperation agreements with them. Accordingly, as LSI surveys showed an undeniable trend towards

48 'Hasil penelitian UI-Ohio State University: Mega paling populer di mata rakyat', *Kompas*, 14-8-1999.

49 Interview with Saiful Mujani, Jakarta, 9-11-2006.

50 Interview with Saiful Mujani, Jakarta, 9-11-2006.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono before the first round of presidential elections in July 2004, Denny began to approach the front-runner to offer him LSI's support. Against the advice of Mujani and the 'academic' faction in LSI, Denny became actively involved in Yudhoyono's electoral campaign. For example, he advised the candidate to appear at a hugely popular singing contest on television, giving him a platform during prime time in front of millions of viewers.[51] In media interviews, Denny already talked about the future structure of Yudhoyono's presidential office, in which he apparently planned to play a central role. Denny's manoeuvres not only irritated Mujani and his associates, but also JICA as LSI's main donor.[52]

As a result of JICA's concerns, which were openly conveyed to the LSI board, Denny agreed to 'step aside' from his position at the organization. Nevertheless, Denny continued to conduct surveys in LSI's name. When it emerged that Denny had run a poll in early 2005 for the minister of social affairs, in which Acehnese respondents allegedly expressed their satisfaction with Jakarta's handling of the post-tsunami relief effort (and at the same time overwhelmingly declared they were happy citizens of Indonesia), the LSI board lost its patience. Not only had the board not been informed about the poll, but Denny was also forced to admit that most of the respondents had not actually been from Aceh, but from North Sumatra.[53] Confronted with the choice of being sacked or resigning, Denny officially left LSI in May 2005.

From then on, the 'academics' around Mujani and the 'commercial' consultants associated with Denny went separate ways. Mujani continued to lead LSI, which he kept away from the temptations of partisan politics. Denny, on the other hand, launched his own political polling and consulting agency, provocatively also called LSI (Lingkaran Survei Indonesia, Indonesian Survey Circle). The direct local elections that began in June 2005 could not have come at a better time for Denny, who began to advise parties and candidates on how to win these elections. Selling his services for billions of rupiahs, Denny soon published advertisements in newspapers, proudly announcing how many of his clients had won elections, and how accurate his surveys had been. Denny worked for almost all the major parties, and the high frequency of direct local elections provided him with an endless stream of wealthy customers.

But Denny quickly discovered additional opportunities for his rapidly expanding business. In an increasing number of cases, his surveys identified popular candidates who were likely to win the upcoming elections but

51 'Menilai kemampuan kampanye capres', *Kompas*, 29-6-2004.

52 The JICA programme officer for LSI at that time was another prominent Japanese scholar who studied Indonesian politics, Jun Honna. According to Mujani, Honna was 'furious' about Denny's activities. Interview with Saiful Mujani, Jakarta, 9-11-2006.

53 'Perang dingin lembaga survei', *Tempo*, 25-11-2007.

did not possess the funds to run professional campaigns. To such nominees, Denny not only offered the services of his agency for free, but also found investors who promised to pay for the whole campaign. Of course this was done in the expectation that they would be suitably rewarded after the candidate's victory. In the gubernatorial elections of Aceh in December 2006, Denny approached one of the candidates with such a proposal: 'Denny came to me and said he and his businessmen friends were convinced that I would win; if I lost the election, I would have to return none of their donations, but if I won, they of course expected compensation.'[54] Denny's candidate lost the election, but that did not deter him from applying the same strategy to other regions.

While Mujani stayed clear of such entrepreneurial undertakings, he too began to conduct commissioned surveys for candidates and parties. In contrast to Denny, however, Mujani's LSI did not engage in the campaign itself; it only delivered the polling results to its clients and explained the implications for their electoral standing.[55] The conducting of surveys for paying politicians allowed Mujani's LSI to make the organization financially independent – which JICA had set as the primary goal when awarding the first grant in 2003. With both 'versions' of LSI advising Indonesia's elite, they not only represented very different approaches to political opinion polling, but they also became direct competitors in electoral contests. For instance, some parties asked both Mujani and Denny to evaluate the popularity of candidates in the same local election in order to increase the reliability of the results.[56] Mostly, however, the two LSIs worked for rival candidates.

Given the history of their split and the personal animosity of their leaders, it was only a matter of time until these latent tensions would escalate. Eventually, the gubernatorial elections of South Sulawesi triggered the long-expected eruption. Mujani had conducted polls for Golkar and its candidate, the incumbent governor Amin Syam. His surveys showed that Syam commanded almost 60% support, thwarting his major rival, vice-governor Syahrul Yasin Limpo. Syahrul's campaign was managed by Denny's LSI, however, and the gap between the two candidates narrowed substantially as voting day drew closer. After the polling stations had closed, Golkar announced that Mujani's LSI was predicting victory for its candidate; Denny, on the other hand, published a quick count that put his own client in front. Finally, Syahrul

54 Confidential interview, Banda Aceh, 8-10-2006.

55 Many politicians regretted Saiful's reluctance to be involved more deeply in their campaigns. According to Dewa Rai Budiasa, the deputy chair of the executive committee of Golkar's Bali branch, 'Denny's surveys are easier to understand, and he puts more effort into explaining the strengths and weaknesses of our candidates and our opponents; Saiful, on the other hand, only does the surveys, not more.' Interview with Dewa Rai Budiasa, Jakarta, 24-11-2007.

56 Interview with Rully Chairul Azwar, Jakarta, 18-9-2006.

was declared the winner of the election, leading Denny to happily dismiss Mujani's LSI as unprofessional and incompetent.[57] Mujani, for his part, could point to several other cases in which Denny's surveys had inflated the electoral chances of his clients – with Aceh being the most prominent example.

The public clash between Indonesia's two largest survey institutes demonstrated the crucial importance that political opinion polling had acquired in the post-Soeharto polity. Ten years after the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime, the rise and proliferation of pollsters embodied the depth of the changes that had occurred since 1998. From a military-backed state in which voters were viewed as a 'floating mass' waiting to be instructed by the government, Indonesia had turned into an electoral democracy with all its advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, the wishes of the electorate began to matter for the first time since the 1950s; in fact, the direct elections introduced in 2004 and 2005 made the voters in Indonesia's current democracy much more influential than their counterparts half a century earlier. On the other hand, the firm establishment of electoral competition has given rise to a powerful polling industry, bringing with it the same kind of manipulation, commercialization, and personalization of political campaigns that has already befallen other emerging and developed democracies (Hoy 1989). Weighing the benefits and downsides, the following conclusion discusses the repercussions of Indonesia's new obsession with opinion polling for its consolidating democracy.

Political opinion polling between responsiveness, commercialization and populism; The case of Indonesia

It is now time to revisit the two major risks inherent in public opinion polling that scholars have identified in both young and old democracies, and assess their relevance for the case of Indonesia. First, Jacobs and Shapiro (2005:636) assert that 'polls encourage elected officials to abandon their responsibility for independent leadership', suggesting that politicians feel forced to make decisions based on polls rather than on their own expertise and judgement. Second, many observers have pointed out that political opinion polling is vulnerable to manipulation, commercialization, and intra-elite intrigue.

On both counts, Indonesia's record is mixed. To begin with, the emergence of opinion polling as a central element of electoral politics in Indonesia has indeed tempted many party leaders to pick candidates and policies based on survey results, and not on their political platform. This has created tensions in political parties, has undermined their role as vehicles of representation and

[57] 'Perang dingin lembaga survei', *Tempo*, 25-11-2007.

aggregation, and has encouraged candidates to place image politics above substantive policy platforms. There is no doubt that elected officials in today's Indonesia are less inclined than their authoritarian predecessors to push through controversial policy decisions against overwhelming public opinion. Always considering the impact of their political moves on their standing in the polls, Indonesia's contemporary politicians have become reluctant to launch groundbreaking policy initiatives. While the excessive caution exercised by both Megawati and Yudhoyono in their respective presidencies has been widely blamed on their character traits,[58] they have also refrained from major reforms because they were afraid of negative effects on their chances for re-election.[59]

But the line between survey-obsessed populism and effectively implemented democracy is a fine one. After decades of elitist and centralist policy-making by unelected bureaucrats and military officers in Jakarta, the new populist attention to voters' wishes has been welcomed as a positive change. Muhammad Asfar, a pollster from Indonesia's second largest city Surabaya, has made a compelling case for the strong role of opinion polling in shaping the policies of the political elite: 'Is it really such a bad thing if a district head calls us up two years before the next election and wants to know what he has to do to get re-elected?' he asked in an interview.[60] 'The district head told us to find out what projects and policies the people wanted to see implemented before the next ballot; we went there, conducted a survey, and drafted a list of things that the voters wanted to see done.' Recommending that the district build water irrigation systems and begin other urgently needed infrastructure projects, Asfar felt that his polling institute had made a concrete contribution to the development of the area in which the survey was held. 'Without such pressure from opinion polls, the district head would never have addressed these crucial problems; now, you can call this populism, but I call it practical, real, and tangible democracy.'

Asfar's argument is also supported by the large percentage of incumbent defeats in Indonesia's local elections, with voters punishing numerous poorly performing and corrupt officials. Since 2005, the Indonesian electorate has removed from office just under 40% of all governors, mayors, and district heads, highlighting its increased self-confidence and expectations. Such phenomena are typically signs of a vibrant and functioning democracy, and are not necessarily indicative of excessive populism among voters or the political elite (Abramowitz, Alexander and Gunning 2006).

The second risk that confronts a society in which political opinion poll-

58 See Crouch 2003 and Forbes 2005.

59 Interview with an economic adviser to Yudhoyono, Jakarta, June 2008.

60 Phone interview with Muhammad Asfar, 20-10-2006.

ing plays a strong role is related to the manipulability, commercialization, and potential partisanship of the surveys. In this regard, Indonesia has been exposed to the full breadth of damaging and undesirable impacts. A flourishing polling industry has emerged, charging its clients billions of rupiahs and thus exponentially increasing the cost of political activity. The fees for consultants and pollsters add to the already exploding expenses of political parties and candidates, who have to build up campaign networks for a series of direct elections at the national, provincial, and district levels. It goes without saying that candidates have to recover these investments after their election, fuelling political corruption and distracting them from their duties in government. In addition, the pollsters themselves have become influential players with political, financial, and institutional interests. While some have stuck to their core mission of providing polling data to society and the political elite, others have engaged deeply in the machinations of post-authoritarian politics. Running campaigns for their clients and even funding campaigns of prospective candidates, some polling institutes have opted to become partisan participants rather than referees in the political game. Certainly, the reliability of polling data has suffered as a result. Accusations of manipulated surveys have been rampant, and pollsters have involved themselves in an ugly 'war' over clients, money, methodology, and the credibility of their institutions.

Despite these obvious complications and downsides of Indonesia's prospering polling business, one crucial finding of the scholarly literature on political opinion surveys should not be forgotten: the existence of open, competitive, and uncensored activity by pollsters is a strong indication of a dynamic democratic system. In authoritarian states, opinion polling is tightly regulated and effectively discouraged, with polls critical of the ruling regime regularly banned and its organizers imprisoned. In post-Soeharto Indonesia, in contrast, pollsters have enjoyed almost complete freedom to conduct their operations, and even a recent legislative initiative to regulate their work proved unsuccessful.

More importantly, opinion surveys and quick counts have significantly increased the credibility of all post-authoritarian elections since 1998, making a substantial contribution to the relative stability of Indonesia's young democracy. Just as Roderic Camp (1996) credits Mexican pollsters with pushing that country's liberalization forward, so have Indonesia's survey institutions played an important role in monitoring electoral contests, albeit in a sometimes controversial manner. In addition, they have also helped to turn voters' wishes from a negligible variable into the central element of political elite strategizing. Thus, for most Indonesians, having a commercialized, fragmented, and highly contested field of pollsters is preferable to returning to the repressive days of the New Order, when no such public opinion surveys were possible.

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