

The Problem of Political Parties as Pillars of Democracy in Indonesia



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ABSTRACT

Political parties are an inseparable part of a democratic country. They act as pillars of democracy, particularly in terms of political representation, political accountability, the distribution of authority, oversight and control of government administration, honesty and transparency to the public, and the existence of objection mechanisms accessible to the people. Despite the crucial role of political parties, a survey by Indikator Politik Indonesia showed that political parties had the lowest level of trust among institutions in Indonesia in 2022. This situation warrants further examination of the problems faced by political parties that lead to low public trust and the impact on democracy. This study is a normative juridical research with a conceptual and legislative approach. The analysis relies on primary and secondary legal materials, processed using qualitative descriptive methods. The results of this study are twofold: first, political parties still face issues such as noise in political communication, obstacles to political socialization, poor recruitment, and political consolidation that destroys the opposition system. Second, these problems lead to a decline in the quality of democracy in terms of conveying aspirations, fostering political maturity among the public, and the quality of candidates for representatives and leaders.

Keywords: Political parties, democracy, check and balances

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INTRODUCTION

Political parties are an inseparable part of a democratic country. Mahfud MD explained that a country can be said to have a democratic political configuration when it meets three indicators. First, political parties and parliament must play an active and effective role in determining state policy. Second, there must be a free press institution. Third, the Executive Agency should not be interventionist and must be committed to implementing the decisions of the legislative and judicial institutions. (Mahfud, 2010:15)

Political parties also act as pillars in implementing democratic principles. These principles include political representation, political accountability, the distribution of authority, supervision and control of government administration, honesty and openness to the public, and the existence of an objection mechanism accessible to the people. (Muntoha, 2013:5)

The importance of political parties in a democratic country is evident in the principle of political representation, where political parties play a central role in general elections to determine political representation. Ramlan Surbakti explained that general elections have three main objectives. First, they serve as a mechanism for selecting government leaders and people's representatives, as well as determining alternative general policies. Therefore, it can be concluded that general elections are not merely contests but are a means of selecting and delegating the people's sovereignty. Second, general elections are a mechanism for transferring conflicts of interest from the community to representative bodies through elected representatives. Third, general elections are a means of mobilizing and/or gathering public support for the state and government by encouraging participation in the political

process. (Surbakti, 1992:181-182) Given these three objectives, political parties are at the heart of creating meaningful general elections. Before candidates for leadership and representation are directly elected by the people, political parties play a crucial role in determining who will be nominated.

In line with this, Abdul Mukhtie explained that political parties play a role in political education and serve as a source of recruitment for national leaders to fill various positions in state life. Furthermore, political parties act as institutions that represent the interests of society and serve as a liaison between the authorities and the people. (Fadjar, 2012:18)

However, in reality, even though the role of political parties is crucial, the results of the survey by Indikator Politik Indonesia show that among twelve institutions, including the Indonesian National Army, the Supreme Court, the Indonesian National Police, and others, political parties receive the lowest level of trust, with only 54 percent. This is even lower than the People's Representative Council, which has a 61 percent trust level. (Kamil and Asril, 2022) This indicates a serious problem with political parties. Therefore, it is important to study further the issues affecting political parties that result in such low public trust.

METHODS

The research method employed in this writing is normative juridical research. This approach incorporates both a statutory and conceptual framework. The analysis relies on primary and secondary legal materials. These legal materials and data are processed utilizing qualitative descriptive methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Problems Facing Political Parties

Despite their crucial role in a democracy, political parties in Indonesia face several significant challenges that undermine public trust and their effectiveness in fulfilling democratic principles. This problem actually arises from the functions of political parties. In the introduction, the role and function of political parties have been explained. Beyond the roles and functions mentioned by Ramlan Surbakti and Abdul Mukhtie, Muchammad Ali Safa'at summarized expert opinions regarding the functions of political parties into four main functions: means of political communication, means of political socialization, political recruitment, and conflict management. (Safa'at, 2011:66)

As a means of political communication, parties must be able to formulate and channel the interests of the community to advocate for within the government. Additionally, political parties must explain and disseminate government policies to the public. Therefore, political parties are often called brokers of people's ideas. They serve as intermediaries between social ideology and government institutions, linking them to political action in society. (Budiardjo, 2009:406)

As a means of political socialization, political parties play a role in shaping the views, orientations, and values of society wherever they are located. This function also involves efforts to create an image of political parties as advocates for the public interest.

Regarding political recruitment, political parties are responsible for attracting members and inviting "talented" individuals to participate in the political process. This ensures the continuity of the party itself and helps identify future leaders of the nation. (Fadjar, 2012:19) Political parties are involved in preparing political leadership cadres, selecting these cadres, and ultimately placing them in positions of influence. (Sirajuddin, 2009:90)

As a means of conflict management, political parties play a crucial role in minimizing conflicts. (Fadjar, 2012:19) Given their task of advocating for the aspirations of the people

and serving as intermediaries between authorities and citizens, political parties leverage these roles to mitigate conflicts. They facilitate discussions and negotiations to address differences in ideology and interests brought by various societal groups, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts. In simpler terms, political parties can be seen as both a psychological and organizational bridge between citizens and their government. Additionally, political parties consolidate and articulate the diverse demands that arise within different segments of society. (Budiardjo, 2009:69-70)

Despite the multifaceted roles and functions of political parties, various challenges persist. Some of these issues include:

a. Noise in Political Communication

Before delving into the concept of noise in political communication, it's essential to understand the meaning of noise itself. In communication science, Philip Kotler identifies three key elements of communication: the sender (communicator), the receiver (communicant), and noise (interference). (Uchjana, 1994:18) In the context of political parties serving as a means of communication, these three elements are embodied by the government, society, and political parties. The roles of these elements in communication can vary and interchange. For instance, the government and society may both act as communicators and communicants simultaneously. Conversely, political parties, the government, and society can also serve as sources of noise in political communication.

Noise in political communication often arises, as exemplified by the passing of three laws concerning the Expansion of the New Autonomous Region in Papua. This disruption in communication occurred during the discussion process when legislators invoked Article 76, paragraph (2) of Law Number 2 of 2021, which pertains to the Second Amendment to the Special Autonomy Law for Papua Province. The article states,

"The government and the People's Representative Council can expand provinces and districts/cities into autonomous regions to accelerate equitable development, improve public services and community welfare, as well as elevate the dignity of Indigenous Papuans by considering political, administrative, and legal aspects, socio-cultural unity, human resource readiness, basic infrastructure, economic capacity, future development, and/or aspirations of the Papuan people."

The expansion proposed by the legislators garnered support from various community organizations and local regional heads.

Meanwhile, the Majelis Rakyat Papua (Papuan People's Assembly) responded to the process of drafting this law by holding hearings, which unfortunately resulted in attacks by unknown assailants. Following an investigation conducted by the Papuan People's Council, the expansion was ultimately rejected. The rejection by the Papuan People's Assembly stemmed from several reasons. Firstly, legislators disregarded Article 76, paragraph (1) of the Papua Special Autonomy Law, which stipulates that "The expansion of provinces and districts/cities into provinces and districts/cities can be carried out with the approval of the MRP and DPRP after serious consideration of socio-cultural unity, human resource readiness, economic capacity, and future development." Secondly, the policy to enact this law conflicts with the government's own policy, which includes implementing a moratorium on regional expansion. Consequently, it is understandable that both the Papuan People's Assembly and the Papuan people harbor suspicions about the process of drafting this law, especially considering the persistent invitation process despite numerous rejections from the Papuan people.

From this case, it becomes evident that there is significant noise in political communication among the Government (in the broadest sense) as legislators, political parties, and society. The desires of the people are not effectively communicated to the government. Lawmakers overlook the societal unrest and continue with the legislative process. Both regional and central political parties fail to effectively communicate with both sides. Moreover, the role of political parties in communication is scarcely visible. There is a lack of assertiveness from political parties in conveying the messages of the community to parliament. In fact, political party cadres sitting in parliament often deny the realities occurring at the grassroots level, as exemplified by Syamsurizal's dialogue with the Papuan People's Assembly.

b. Barriers to Socialization

Sirajuddin explained that regarding the function of political parties, they encounter difficulty in increasing public participation. (Kristina, 2015:55) Firstly, in Indonesian society, political education is not instilled in children from an early age within the family structure. Secondly, the level of politicization among the majority of society is remarkably low. Political awareness among marginalized groups such as poor families, farmers, and workers is particularly low, if not nonexistent, as their focus is primarily on economic livelihoods rather than political matters. In their view, engaging in political discourse is not a priority. Thirdly, individuals directly associated with the state have little choice but to align with state preferences, including in terms of political education.

However, it is not uncommon for the socialization function of political parties to operate unilaterally. Party-led socialization often reflects the government's agenda, as evidenced by the case of Papua's expansion. This situation is exacerbated by the absence of opposition parties within the current government. Consequently, although Indonesia embraces a multi-party system, there are no distinct ideological poles forming to engage in ideological clashes. Thus, when a dominant coalition of parties echoes the government's stance, there should ideally be another robust coalition of parties actively socializing alternative viewpoints and promoting political maturity within society.

c. Poor Party Recruitment

Role of political parties in political recruitment is a central one. Based on this authority, political parties are empowered to determine the menu of choices in general elections. Lester G. Seligman even suggests that the recruitment role is a key function of political parties that sets them apart from other socio-political organizations.

Recruitment of leadership is among the fundamental functions of political parties, arguably one of their core functions. Numerous studies, particularly in the postwar years, have highlighted the diminishing capacity of parties in various other functions such as serving as ideological agencies, mobilizing the electorate, or acting as objects of social identification. However, the task of selecting candidates and facilitating political mobility remains one of the primary functions of parties.

In the Constitution, Article 6A, paragraph (2) states, "The presidential and vice-presidential candidates are proposed by political parties or coalitions of political parties participating in the general elections before the implementation of the general elections," while Article 22E, paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution states, "Participants in the general elections to elect members of the People's Representative Council and members of the Regional Representatives Council are political parties," thus reaffirming the role of political parties in recruitment.

This authority is further elaborated in Article 29 of Law Number 2 of 2011 concerning Amendments to the Political Parties Law. The article reads as follows:

- (1) Political parties recruit Indonesian citizens to become:
 - a. members of the political party;
 - b. prospective candidates for the People's Representative Council and Regional Representative Council;
 - c. prospective candidates for regional heads and deputy regional heads; and prospective candidates for President and Vice President.
- (1a) Recruitment as referred to in paragraph (1) letter b is carried out through democratic cadre selection in accordance with the party's Bylaws (AD) and Articles of Association (ART), with consideration given to a minimum of 30% representation of women.
- (2) Recruitment as referred to in paragraph (1) letters c and d is conducted democratically and openly in accordance with the party's Bylaws (AD) and Articles of Association (ART), as well as relevant laws and regulations.
- (3) Decisions regarding recruitment as referred to in paragraph (1), paragraph (1a), and paragraph (2) are made by the party's executive board in accordance with the party's Bylaws (AD) and Articles of Association (ART).

Although the authority for recruitment has been regulated in legislation to be conducted democratically, the subjective interpretation of the phrase "democratically" by political parties has led to problems. Yuniawan Nugroho and Irina Dayasih mention several methods used by parties in recruitment, including through special teams or committees, direct selection by party leaders at the central or local level, and the use of surveys. (Nugroho & Dayasih. Ed., 2006:80)

The issue arising from this diversity is the prevalence of parties opting for closed recruitment methods over open ones. Czudnowski explains that open recruitment is a method where the requirements and procedures for selecting a candidate are widely known, while closed methods entail criteria and nomination procedures that are not publicly accessible. (Putra, 2007:103)

The impact of closed methods is that the public remains unaware of the basis on which a party nominates a candidate or cadre. Additionally, practices such as political contributions become uncontrollable. Deals or agreements made by candidates endorsed by parties will influence the vision and mission that the candidate brings. Hegemony from political party leaders can also lead to situations of "wrong man in the wrong place." However, the recruitment process is crucial, as it determines who the people can choose. If the options offered by the party from the outset are poor or involve deals that do not align with the will of the people, the quality of the election process deteriorates.

d. Party Consolidation Leading to Imbalanced Opposition System

One of the crises that emerged after the 2019 general elections is the parliamentary opposition crisis. The political party consolidation measures taken by President Joko Widodo appear to reflect a passive stance. Passiveism is a viewpoint that rejects conflict. The success of the president in consolidating political parties has created a highly unbalanced situation between the opposition and government supporters.

However, one of the aims of holding simultaneous general elections in 2019 was to create a "coattail effect." The coattail effect occurs when general elections are held simultaneously, with the expectation that participating political parties will form two or three coalition axes based on the idealism of each party, thereby creating a more solid coalition not solely aimed at reaching the electoral threshold. (Kadek, 2019:12)

However, this theory appears to collapse due to political party consolidation. Most political parties tend to support the government or the election winner. Ironically, rivals of the elected president even join his cabinet instead of becoming part of the opposition.

Although this consolidation seems aimed at avoiding conflict, it actually leads to conflict. The near absence of opposition in parliament forces the public to confront the government as a non-parliamentary opposition. Conflicts arise due to the gap between political elites and their constituents. When the ruler is too powerful and supported by the majority of parties, the public loses a channel to voice their aspirations through parliament or political parties. Therefore, it is not surprising that the public loses trust in political parties and finds legislative products unresponsive.

2. Impact on Democracy

As explained above, political parties have quite complex problems. These issues can have detrimental effects on democracy. Regarding the emergence of noise, it affects the quality of representation in conveying public ideas or concerns. With significant noise caused by the parties' inability to adequately process public aspirations or external factors such as the interests of specific groups misaligned with the public, the policies formed by party cadres in parliament and government become disconnected from the people's needs.

In terms of obstacles to political socialization, it creates a situation where the public is easily influenced by stakeholders or, at the very least, becomes confused in responding to national issues. The role of political parties in conducting political socialization impacts the quality of ideas within the public. These ideas are then absorbed by party cadres in parliament. However, when public opinion is easily swayed or confused by national issues, the quality of ideas absorbed by the parliament becomes poor, making it difficult to uphold substantive democracy.

The issue of recruitment by political parties also affects the quality of elections. Although regulations grant the public the authority to choose their representatives and leaders, it is the parties that determine who is eligible for election. This negatively impacts the quality of democracy, particularly in elections, if the candidates presented by the political parties are not the ones desired by the people. For example, why vote for incompetent individuals? This often leads to situations where regional heads lose to a blank box, or the public is forced to vote for a candidate who has no track record in politics or the community, as seen in Solo.

Lastly, political consolidation dims the principle of deliberation. The dominance of one coalition deteriorates the culture of deliberation in parliament. The ideas brought forth by party cadres in parliament are no longer based on ideology and partisanship but merely on the interests desired by the ruling power.

The consolidation of political parties leading to an imbalance in the opposition system weakens the principle of checks and balances. This principle plays a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability in state administration. Without a strong opposition, the legislative process becomes merely a formality.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion presented above, two conclusions can be drawn. First, political parties play a very central role in realizing democracy, particularly in the electoral process. This role includes functioning as a means of political communication, political socialization, political recruitment, and conflict management. Unfortunately, there are still many problems that arise in fulfilling these roles by political parties. These problems include noise in political communication, obstacles to political socialization, poor recruitment, and political

consolidation that destroys the opposition system. Second, the aforementioned problems result in a decline in the quality of democracy, affecting the conveyance of aspirations, the political maturity of society, and the quality of candidates for representatives and leaders.

In light of the serious issues faced by political parties, the author offers the following recommendations for lawmakers and political parties: they should be bold in regulating open and democratic recruitment methods. Recruitment is crucial because it determines the options for representatives and leaders offered to the public. By improving the recruitment system, other aspects of the problem will be easier to address. With good recruitment practices, the public will know which candidates align with their aspirations. This will reduce the noise between the public, the parties, and the government, as the leaders chosen by the public will be in tune with the people's aspirations from the outset.

Regarding political consolidation that leads to imbalance, parties should avoid such steps in the future. Consolidation leads to a situation where parties no longer contest ideas and ideologies but merely engage in power struggles and negotiations among opportunistic party members seeking positions. Political consolidation should not be pursued by any party, as it undermines the principles of democratic deliberation and creates an imbalance in the system of checks and balances.

By addressing these issues, political parties can strengthen their role in democracy, ensuring that the electoral process is fair, transparent, and representative of the people's true interests and aspirations.

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