

## Weak Party Systems and Idiosyncratic Policies in Southeast Asia

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This paper examines the more or less weak institutionalization of parties and party systems in Indonesia, Thailand, and Philippines—countries with a long tradition of electoral politics that were or have been democracies.<sup>1</sup> Weak institutionalization is connected to personalism, clientelism, executive aggrandizement, and idiosyncratic policies by executive heads. “Continuity among party alternatives”<sup>2</sup> or “stability of inter-party competition”<sup>3</sup> is characteristic of well-institutionalized party systems. This also involves real competition: a system dominated by one party like in Vietnam, Laos, or Singapore can hardly be seen as well-institutionalized. Continuity is more likely if party identification and party membership are on average high because this usually means that parties survive for a long time and represent social groups on the basis of programmatic incentives.

### Party and Party System Institutionalization

More institutionalized party systems tend to be more stable if parties have strong roots in society. In these systems, parties accept each other as legitimate and they represent certain voter groups with distinct programmatic offers. They also feature low electoral volatility and party identification tends to be high. A weak institutionalization of parties usually results in a fluctuating competition between parties. Then, the party system does not develop a structured form of inter-party relations. The more voters identify with a party,

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Ufen, “Political Party and Party System Institutionalisation in Southeast Asia: Lessons for Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand,” *Pacific Review* 21, no. 3 (2008): 327–355; Allen Hicken and Erik Kuhonta, *Party and Party System Institutionalization in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Aurel Croissant and Philip Völkel, “Party System Types and Party System Institutionalization. Comparing New Democracies in East and Southeast Asia,” *Party Politics* 18, no. 2 (2012): 235–62.

<sup>2</sup> Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, “Institutionalization in New Democracies,” *Party Politics* 8, no. 1 (2002): 5–29.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Mainwaring and Mariano Torcal, “Party System Institutionalization and Party System Theory after the Third Wave of Democratization,” in *Handbook of Party Politics*, ed. Richard S. Katz and William J. Crotty (London: SAGE Publishing, 2006), 204–27.

the more dedicated members the party has, and the more concrete the party platform is, the more can a party be seen as well-institutionalized. However, it is conceivable that a party fulfills these criteria, but is totally dependent on a few people, maybe only on one charismatic and/or populist leader. In that case, the institutionalization is shallow because the party can easily fall apart after the fall of the leader.

A well-institutionalized party system has to be flexible enough to absorb both new political ideas and political movements. Party organization needs to be capable of employing new forms of campaigning, for example, via new social media, and to address demands for new forms of intra-party decision-making. Only then will parties be able to prevent their own ossification and/or decline.

A party system based on personalistic parties fighting each other is less institutionalized than one based on programmatic parties, especially when the platforms are not ready-made in accordance with voter survey data but are consistent and generated through long-term and systematic communication with members and supporters.<sup>4</sup> Continuities of party competition tend to produce continuities at the level of platforms and policies. In contrast, idiosyncratic policies thrive in an environment of weakly institutionalized party systems.

### **Party Systems in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines**

In Thailand, parties from the onset were programmatically weak and factionalized; social cleavages did structure the party system only superficially.<sup>5</sup> Most of the time, authoritarian regimes, often led by the military, prevented substantial party competition. Beginning in the 1970s, a slow democratization began. In the 1980s, Thailand had a hybrid political system, with parliament-backed General Prem Tinsulanond as Prime Minister (1980–88) heading a cabinet mixing technocrats and politicians. After a coup in 1991 and a popular uprising in 1992, a form of electoral democracy was established. Within the weakly institutionalized party system a newly created business-firm party, Thai Rak Thai (“Thais love Thais”) or TRT,<sup>6</sup> gained a hegemonic position profiting from

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<sup>4</sup> This does not indicate that socially rooted and highly organized parties are immune against radicalization and personalization. The party system of the Weimar Republic in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s was well-institutionalized according to different criteria, but it was extremely polarized. Some parties had their own paramilitary groups and openly fought against democracy. To improve democratic quality, a party system should allow for peaceful competition between contenders that perceive each other as well as the political system at large as legitimate.

<sup>5</sup> Erik Kuhonta, “Thailand’s Feckless Parties and Party System: A Path-Dependent Analysis,” in *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past*, ed. Allen Hicken and Erik Kuhonta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 280–306; Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, “Faction Politics in an Interrupted Democracy: The Case of Thailand,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020): 144–166. James Ockey, “Variations on a theme: societal cleavages and party orientations through multiple transitions in Thailand,” *Party Politics* 11, no. 6 (2005): 728–47.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005); Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books, 2009).

the 1997 constitutional reforms. Although the reforms were designed to strengthen parties and the multi-party system, they unintendedly paved the way for undermining genuine competition.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire and media czar, used his empire to craft intricate electoral campaigns and to expand his party by co-opting other party leaders down to the provincial level. He led the TRT like a firm, engaged employees from his own corporation in the party, and used surveys to set up a platform with innovative policies such as a universal healthcare scheme, a debt moratorium for farmers, cheap credits for more than two million households, support for small- and medium-sized enterprises, etc.<sup>7</sup> These policies helped to establish some programmatic linkages in rural areas combined with clientelist ties.<sup>8</sup> After winning the 2001 elections with a simple majority, the TRT restricted political competition, weakened or even absorbed rival parties, and attained a hegemonic position until the military staged a coup in 2006. Arguably, the democratic backsliding under Thaksin, the polarization in the streets, and the two military coups in 2006 and 2014 could possibly have been avoided if strong parties in a well-institutionalized multi-party system would have been able to represent voters in a way that would have hindered extra-parliamentary groups from dominating politics.

The TRT has been replaced by a range of successor parties such as Phuea Thai (“For Thais”), now the major main opposition party in the country. If Phuea Thai with its chief patron Thaksin Shinawatra succeeds in the coming elections, Thaksin may end his self-imposed exile overseas.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Thailand, democratic breakdown has been avoided in Indonesia despite the steady democratic backsliding since the 2010s<sup>10</sup> and the rise of the populist Prabowo Subianto.<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons has been a multi-party system strong enough to withstand the rise of a hegemonic party. Moreover, the practice of forming pre-electoral coalitions and parliamentary grand or rainbow coalitions is a barrier against executive aggrandizement.

The party system was shaped by strong cleavages in the 1950s and dominated by four big parties rooted in a multi-religious, partly secular, and nationalist; a communist; a

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Brown and Kevin Hewison, “‘Economics is the Deciding Factor’: Labour Politics in Thaksin’s Thailand,” *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2005): 353–75.

<sup>8</sup> Illan Nam and Viengrat Nethipo, “Building Programmatic Linkages in the Periphery: The Case of the TRT Party in Thailand,” *Politics & Society* (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Termsak Chalermpananupap, “Thailand’s Main Opposition Party Hopes for a Landslide Election Victory: A Realistic Goal or Just a Dream?” *ISEAS Perspective* 2021/161, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_161.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_161.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Power and Eve Warburton (ed.), *Democracy in Indonesia: From Stagnation to Regression?* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Aspinall, “Oligarchic Populism and Economic Nationalism: Prabowo Subianto’s Challenge to Indonesian Democracy,” *Indonesia* 99 (2015): 1–28.

traditionalist Islamic; and a modernist Islamic social milieu, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Under President Suharto during the authoritarian New Order era (1966–98), the Communist Party was banned, its members persecuted, and party politics generally strongly restricted. With re-democratization in 1998/99, the party system of the 1950s re-emerged, but without the still banned Communist Party, with the former regime party Golkar, and with a much more splintered scenery of Islamic and Islamist parties. Subsequent reforms, especially the introduction of a full presidential system complemented by direct local elections, engendered the emergence of a range of parties serving as vehicles for potential presidential candidates.

The Indonesian party system is less institutionalized today than it was in the early 2000s because of the presidentialization of political parties<sup>13</sup> and the still growing commercialization of politics,<sup>14</sup> but the defeat of presidential candidate Prabowo in 2014 and 2019 by Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) is testimony to a certain resilience of the polity against anti-liberal assaults.

In the Philippines a politician comparable to Prabowo, Rodrigo Duterte, is scarcely hindered by coalition partners, that is other parties than his own, to search for compromises for his policies. Duterte was backed by the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino—Lakas ng Bayan (Democratic Party of the Philippines—Strength of the Nation) or PDP-LABAN,<sup>15</sup> but parties are not very important. Parties are so weak that many MPs defect to the camp of the President in order to get better access to patronage.

The weak institutionalization of political parties goes back to the time when under U.S. colonialism highly restricted elections were allowed. This resulted in the emergence of parties controlled by a tiny elite and without mass membership. Such elitist parties also predominated during the first democracy that started after the Second World War and ended in 1972. During this period, the Nacionalista Party (NP) and the Liberal Party (LP) competed in a two-party system but were programmatically scarcely different from each other.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1986, after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos, a multi-party system has emerged. Generally, parties are factionalized, candidate-centered, have no meaningful platforms

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<sup>12</sup> Andreas Ufen, “From Aliran to Dealignment. Political Parties in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *South East Asia Research* 1 (2008): 5–41.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Ufen, “Party presidentialization in post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 3 (2018): 306–324; David J. Samuels and Matthew S. Shugart, *Presidents, Parties and Prime Ministers: How Separation of Powers Affects Party Organization and Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Claudio Lisandro, “Philippines: Has Duterte Changed the Rules Ahead of Midterm Elections?” *The News Lens*, 30 January 2019, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/112820>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul D. Hutchcroft and Joel Rocamora, “Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003): 259–292.

and do not dispose of an active and nationwide party apparatus.<sup>17</sup> Voters elect candidates without taking notice of the party membership of these candidates. Therefore, a strong orientation towards personalities, often coming from one of the old families or clans that have ruled the country for decades, is characteristic for the Philippines.

### **Personalism and Idiosyncratic Policies**

If voters are predominantly mobilized via a populist discourse and/or material incentives, for example clientelistic ties or vote buying, it would be surprising to find politicians formulating policies built on consistent, calculable, and realistic programmatic premises. Elected executives tend, rather, to produce policies<sup>18</sup> marked by centralization, radicalization, and sudden shifts.

Indeed, Thaksin and Duterte centralized and personalized policymaking to a large extent. A good example for a radicalization of policies is Duterte's so-called war against drugs with thousands of killings.<sup>19</sup> To Duterte, drug consumption and pushing are the root causes for criminality and the allegedly disastrous state of the nation. Likewise, Thaksin's war on drugs in the early 2000s involved the extrajudicial killings of at least 2,800 people.<sup>20</sup>

The best example for a sudden policy shift has been Duterte's foreign policy as he turned to China and Russia at the expense of the traditionally very close ties to the U.S. When it turned out Duterte's massive infrastructure program did not really benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative, and that China pursued an aggressive posturing in the South China Sea,<sup>21</sup> Duterte reinstated security ties with the U.S. and confirmed agreements allowing US troops to operate from Philippine military bases. He even endorsed the AUKUS security pact. While supporters of Duterte's diplomacy see elements of a more independent Philippine foreign policy, critics point to the total lack of a grand

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<sup>17</sup> Julio Teehankee, "The Philippines," in *Political Parties and Democracy: Western Europe, East and Southeast Asia 1990-2010*, ed. Jean Blondel, Takashi Inoguchi and Ian Marsh (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 187–205; Julio Teehankee, "Factional Dynamics in Philippine Party Politics, 1900–2019," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no.1 (2020): 98–123; Allen Hicken, Edward Aspinall and Meredith Weiss (ed.), *Electoral Dynamics in the Philippines: Money Politics, Patronage, and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> According to Destradi and Plagemann foreign policymaking by populists is more centralized and personalized (see: Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, "Populism and International Relations: (Un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): 711–730.

<sup>19</sup> Nicole Curato, "Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1 (2017): 142–153; Mark R. Thompson, "Duterte's Violent Populism: Mass Murder, Political Legitimacy and the 'Death of Development' in the Philippines," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52, no. 3 (2022): 404.

<sup>20</sup> "Thailand: Prosecute Anti-Drugs Police Identified in Abuses. Authorities Need to Combat Chronic Lack of Oversight, Accountability in Police Work," February 7, 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/02/07/thailand-prosecute-anti-drugs-police-identified-abuses>.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Grossman "Duterte's Dalliance with China Is Over," last modified November 2, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/11/dutertes-dalliance-with-china-is-over.html>.

strategy and the weakening of the country as a regional promoter of democracy and human rights.<sup>22</sup>

In Indonesia, such sudden and fundamental policy shifts are improbable. So far, the country's foreign policy has been marked by continuities. President Joko Widodo not only needs support from his own party, the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan ("Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle") or PDI-P, that is still dominated by the former Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri, but also from a grand coalition that includes other political parties. Besides, he has had to co-opt his former rival Prabowo and conservative Muslims like his Vice President Ma'ruf Amin. Duterte, in contrast, is less constrained in this regard. He even directly attacked the pope and called him "son of a bitch"; an Indonesian president who says the same about a leading Islamic leader would immediately lose the backing by many allies.

In a party system where all or almost all parties are weakly institutionalized, new parties such as TRT can emerge and attain a hegemonic position in a short time. Arguably, such a meteoric ascent is easier to achieve in presidential systems where political parties are subject to the logic of very powerful presidents who need parties only to a small extent in order to mobilize electoral support. Yet, in the Philippines a hegemonic party did not evolve because of the subordinated role played by parties in general. In Indonesia, political parties are much more important, but also increasingly presidentialized; this is epitomized by new parties serving mostly as vehicles for presidential candidates, by the rise of outsiders relatively independent from political parties such as Jokowi, and the flattening of programmatic profiles. But in Indonesia legacies of parties ingrained in socio-cultural streams or milieus as well as the exigency for presidential candidates to attain stable party support ahead of and after elections have confined the process of presidentialization since the full presidential system was introduced ahead of the 2004 elections. President Jokowi needed to sustain continuities in essential policy areas, especially foreign politics. In Indonesia, executive aggrandizement and/or the rise of populism are still to an extent checked by a range of relatively well-institutionalized parties.

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<sup>22</sup> Rasti Delizio, "Duterte's Last SONA Only Magnifies His Reactionary Foreign Policy," last modified August 2, 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-duterte-last-sona-only-magnifies-reactionary-foreign-policy/>.