

Lessons from Aburizal's failed presidential bid

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Many did not expect that Golkar Party presidential hopeful Aburizal Bakrie, whose party came second in the legislative election, would fail in his efforts to secure a presidential ticket so he could compete with Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and Prabowo Subianto in the July presidential election.

The failure of Aburizal not only underlines the importance of a high approval rating, which eludes him, but also reveals the chronic problems of Indonesia's political party system, namely party financing and cartelization. There are two characteristics of post-Soeharto political parties in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2013).

The first is established grassroots parties with strong historical and ideological bases, such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Golkar, the United Development Party (PPP), the National Awakening Party (PKB), the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

The roots of the PDI-P can be traced back to the Indonesian National Party (PNI), founded by Sukarno in 1927. On some occasions these parties stand firmly for their ideological stances, which was partly evident in their debate on the anti-pornography bill a few years ago and the attempts to give an Islamic nuance to the Constitution in early 2000s. The second characteristic is presidentialist parties, mainly used "political vehicles" in the race for the presidency. These include the Democratic Party led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Hanura Party led by Wiranto, the Gerindra Party led by Prabowo and the NasDem Party led by Surya Paloh.

Presidentialist parties began to emerge after Yudhoyono failed in his bid for the vice presidency in 2001. In need of a political party, he formed the Democratic Party, which surprisingly catapulted him to the presidency in 2004 and then convincingly did so in 2009.

Yudhoyono's strategy has been duplicated by Prabowo, who formed Gerindra. After spending millions of dollars in an unsuccessful 2009 bid, he has now moved a step closer to the presidency. Meanwhile, Wiranto made an attempt of his own by forming Hanura, only to lose in 2004 and 2009.

Unlike Yudhoyono and Prabowo, Aburizal's strategy was to use Golkar for his presidential ambitions. After he won the party's top post in 2009, he secured Golkar's mandate in 2012 to contest the presidential election. Aburizal's takeover of Golkar was not surprising based on two reasons. First, the evolution of the law on political parties limited the opportunity for new parties to emerge and made it even harder for them to participate in the elections.

After realizing the electoral threshold was ineffective for limiting the number of parties in the 1999 and 2004 elections, the legislative threshold was introduced, increasing the bar to 2.5 percent in 2004 and 3.5 percent in 2009.

In 2014, only parties passing the threshold of 3.5 percent could be represented in provinces, regencies and municipalities. New parties also have to fulfil the requirement regarding branch offices, stipulated in both electoral and party laws, making it much harder than 10 years ago to form national parties.

The second reason is decreasing state subsidies for political parties. The state's financial aid has decreased considerably, which Mietzner (2013:73) describes as significant in early 2000 to marginal in 2005 and to entirely irrelevant from 2009 onward. In 2011, party subsidies were only 0.000008 percent of the state budget.

Those conditions have left parties with no other option but to turn to politicians with deep pockets, such as Aburizal for Golkar and Sutrisno Bachir for PAN. Parties with a shortlisted businessman have formed cartel-type political organizations, where resources are extracted from the state mostly through government projects. Therefore, many parties now prefer to build alliances with the ruling party. Another risky strategy is the corruption of state contracts and projects, a strategy that brought PKS and Democratic Party bosses Luthfi Hassan Ishaq and Anas Urbaningrum respectively, into conflict with the law.

For Aburizal, investing in Golkar is much more economical and less risky compared to setting up a new presidentialist party. He also hoped that Golkar's established networks and voters would boost his popularity.

However, apart from Golkar securing 14.75 percent of the vote in the April 9 legislative election, Aburizal's strategy to turn Golkar from an established party into a presidentialist one has not worked. First of all, unlike presidentialist parties, which can exclude those who are not in favor of the presidential candidate, Golkar has comprised different societal and military backgrounds since its inception. In presidentialist parties, those who join the party are those who want their patron to become president. In fact, Golkar has different characteristics. Therefore, internal conflicts and dissatisfaction have always arisen since Aburizal announced his presidential nomination.

The peak of the internal rift was the resignation of Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, Golkar's deputy advisor, and the rebellion of young party executives after Aburizal placed the party's support behind Prabowo.

Second, contrary to presidentialist parties, which rely on their presidential candidates' personality and charisma to attract voters, Aburizal's popularity in a series of polls has always fell behind that of Golkar's.

To voters, Aburizal is Golkar's liability, not asset. His link to the Lapindo mud disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java, damaged his popularity and has been exploited by his political opponents in the last six years. In addition, just weeks before the election, the "Maldives scandal" saw his popularity plunge further.

Aburizal reached his lowest ebb when no party invited Golkar into their coalition. They saw that he had no chance if pitted against Jokowi and Prabowo, even with the support of his media empire.

Meanwhile, Aburizal confidently proposed unrealistic deals to Jokowi and Prabowo based on Golkar's election performance. As a result, for the first time since 1972, not only has Golkar failed to propose a presidential candidate, but as a latecomer, it might also receive the worst deal in a potential Prabowo Cabinet.

Golkar's failure signals a yellow light for political parties and Indonesian democracy, especially when it comes to financial constraints. There are two tough paths to choose from. Either continue to rely on rich politicians or create a party financing system that guarantees funding from the state.

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