

## From Representation to Cartelization: The Role of Political Parties in Indonesia

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### Abstrak

Kehadiran partai politik sangat penting untuk menyalurkan aspirasi rakyat, dan keberadaan kartel partai politik menunjukkan melemahnya demokrasi. Oleh karena itu, penelitian tentang kartelisasi partai politik di Indonesia sangat penting untuk memahami mengapa partai-partai membentuk kartel politik. Studi ini menggambarkan dan menganalisis penyebab kartelisasi partai politik dalam pemilihan lokal. Penelitian ini mengumpulkan data kualitatif secara kolaboratif melalui wawancara terstruktur. Pengambilan sampel secara purposive digunakan untuk memilih informan. Prosedur analisis data yang digunakan adalah model interaktif yang melibatkan pengumpulan data, reduksi data, penyajian data, penarikan kesimpulan, dan validasi data melalui tahap triangulasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kartelisasi partai politik memperpetuasi politik dinasti. Selain itu, keberadaan kartel politik menunjukkan adanya kekuasaan oligarki. Karena dibatasi oleh kekuasaan oligarki, partai politik gagal memberikan alternatif yang lebih baik untuk reformasi kepemimpinan dan membiarkan kepemimpinan dipegang oleh keluarga incumbent.

**kata kunci:** *demokrasi lokal, kartelisasi, partai politik, petahana*

### Abstract

The presence of political parties is essential for channelling the people's aspirations, and the cartel of political parties shows the weakening of democracy. Therefore, research on the cartelization of political parties in Indonesia is essential to determine why parties create political cartels. This study describes and analyzes the causes of political party cartelization in local election. This research collected qualitative data gathered

collaboratively using structured interviews. Purposeful sampling was used to select the informants. The data analysis procedures employed interactive models and involved data collection, data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and validating the data utilizing triangulation stages. Findings suggested that the cartelization of political parties perpetuated the dynastic politics. Moreover, the presence of a political cartel indicates the existence of oligarchy power. Being restrained by the oligarchy power, political parties failed to give better alternatives for leadership reform and allowed leadership to be held by incumbent families.

**Keywords:** *cartelization, political parties, incumbent, local democracy.*

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## Introduction

Political parties are the face of electoral democracy (Arrasuli, 2019; Papada et al., 2023). Political parties must be complemented by effective institutionalization to foster future leaders (Romli, 2011; Bader, 2014; Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019). The political parties must adhere to popular sovereignty ideals to produce high-integrity cadres (Lesmana et al., 2021; Mietzner, 2021; Pasaribu, 2017; Sulaeman, 2015). However, the Indicator Survey identified political parties as the institution with the highest and declining level of mistrust, with a 54 per cent degree of confidence. Worse yet, Charta Politica found that 45.8 per cent of the public lacked confidence in political parties. Ironically, only 32.5% of the population believes in political parties (Cnn Indonesia, 2018). The cartelization of political parties is the primary issue that diminishes the influence of political parties and traps them in pragmatism (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022; Katz & Mair, 2018; Lestari, 2017; Noor, 2018; Widodojoko, 2017; Yanuarti, 2019). Cartel parties have become a source of political corruption and a lack of checks and balances (Ambardi, 2009; Noor, 2018; Pratama et al., 2019). The public's skepticism of political parties cannot be separated from society's increasingly distant attitudes toward political parties (Krašovec & Haughton, 2011; Noor, 2018).

Historically, research on the cartelization of political parties has focused chiefly on three themes. First is the forms of political party competition. The presence of a new political party will increase competition for power and the probability of party mergers during elections (Aminuddin & Ramadlan, 2022; Barokah et al., 2022). Second is the relationship between political parties and representative democracy (democratic representation) (Asshiddiqie, 2006; Aliksan Rauf et al., 2018; Syahrin & Sapitri, 2020). Third is the relationship between the incumbent and the voters with respect to political party positions

(Dahlberg, 2013; Gould & Klor, 2019; Ariga, 2020; Carroll & Kubo, 2021). Despite these three tendencies, studies on political party remain very normative. The public's in political parties is at an all-time low. Political parties no longer compete against one another since they conspire in favor of accommodating the elite's interests (Ekawati & Sweinstani, 2020; Koho, 2021). Without regard for the values fought for, the coalition formed by the political parties is oversized (koalisi turah) (Ekowati, 2019; Fakhruzy, 2020; Aminuddin & Ramadlan, 2022). Ultimately, this system threatens democracy and is unhealthy for governance as the political elites focus more on their individual benefits and ambitions than the public interest (Lupia, 2006; Syarif & Faisal, 2019; Warburton et al., 2021).

This research was intended to address the shortcomings of current studies, which fail to examine the conduct of political parties in the arena of political rivalry. In the fight for power, political parties might alter their conduct to attain their objectives (Antunes, 2010; Slomczynski & Shabad, 2012; Friese et al., 2016). This research intends to address the shortcomings of previous studies which had failed to examine the conduct of political parties in the arena of political rivalry. In the fight for power, political parties might alter their conduct to attain their objectives. Variations in political party behavior are attributable to survival issues. In light of this, this study aims to explain why political parties create cartels and examine why cartelization of political parties might occur. Previous studies suggested that cartel politics was strongly related to the dominance of the party chairpersons. Political parties failed to propose their new cadre figures and entrench the incumbent's support. The current study findings may enable an in-depth understanding of coalition party cartelization. This information may widen the perspectives of academics and practitioners researching political parties.

In addition to the oversized coalition (koalisi turah), the regional politics in Probolinggo Regency was plagued with the political dynasty system which is difficult to avoid due to the constitutional court ruling (Hady, 2018). The joining of the Golkar, PDIP, Gerindra, and PPP parties can be said as a form of cartelization of political parties due to the merger between conflicting ideologies and the fading of political competition. Cartelization practices have the potential to kill the competition because of unequal support. Political parties set aside ideological principles, which are values in fighting (Strøm & Müller, 1999; Alwi & Erowati, 2019; Kurniasih & Turtiantoro, 2019; Fakhruzy, 2020). In this scenario, Tantriana Sari's win as incumbent Regent of Probolinggo, East

Java, cannot be detached from the involvement of political parties as contenders. The incumbent regent might reach all voters through the coalition parties' contribution (Migdal, 1988; Sidel, 2005; Damaledo, 2018; Fadli et al., 2018; Sobari, 2020). The merging of the four parties with the incumbent NasDem (the National Democratic) Party enhanced their position in controlling the majority of the regional government (Nurhasim, 2018; Nuryanti, 2018; Putri, 2018; Randall & Svåsand, 2002). Consequently, the current study is necessary to explain why a coalition of political parties formed a cartel following the incumbent Probolinggo Regent's triumph. Following the rational choice institutionalism theory (Hall, P. y Taylor, 1996; Hall & Taylor, 1996), the researchers viewed voters' behavior as a result of profit and loss calculation and how an institution acts rationally when making decisions.

### ***Political party cartelization concept***

Cartelization is an economics term referring to the effort of many enterprises to establish prices, control production and sales, as well as engage in other monopolistic actions. Over time, the phrase shifted from an economic idea to a political one. Cartelization in politics refers to group collusion to reduce existing competition to gain state power and resources and to benefit individuals and groups (Ambardi, 2009; Widodojoko, 2017; Efriza, 2019;). The parties agree not to compete with one another (Farhansyah, 2018; Nugroho, 2018; Alwi & Erowati, 2019; Pratama et al., 2019). Typically, political parties form cartels to reduce risk. However, cartelized political parties lead competition to become uncompetitive and power to be uneven in competition (Widojoko, 2017; Alwi & Erowati, 2019; Efriza, 2019; Pratama et al., 2019).

These parties get farther from their society and closer to the government (Mair, 2018), becoming intermediaries for the state and no longer representing the interests of society (Mair, 2018). Cartelized parties use state resources to restrict political competition and opposition powers and assure their electoral success (Mair, 2018). Political parties start to disregard their role as conduits for the interests of society. To determine the extent of cartelization in political parties, we may examine the dominance of party officials in the capital city over those in the regions in candidate selection and policymaking (Krašovec & Houghton, 2011; Mair, 2018). The cartelized parties have exploited state financial support to hinder competition among cartelized parties (Krasovec & Houghton, 2011; Yanuarti, 2019; Ennsjer-jedenastik et al., 2022). Thus, the political parties' dependency on public subsidies pictures the cartel party model,

where the party is part of the state/government, rather than fighting for and being a member of civil society (Mair, 2018).

### ***The concept of local democracy***

Local democracy can be defined as regional popular sovereignty (Phillips, 1996; Lay, 2012; Pratchett, 2004). Provinces and municipalities have the right to build their territory independently. The democratic administration aims to get closer to the people and address the community's issues directly. Power distribution will increase political engagement and decrease inequality in the area so that communities may gain access and institutions can get involved more directly. Local democratic institutions may also become more accessible to residents and facilitate more participation (Gerring et al., 2022). People's level of trust will substantially influence the local government (Pratchett, 2004). Local democracy is essential for securing opportunities for centralized government. Leaving all choices to the elites will create a risk of power abuse and a chance of dictatorship and corruption (Phillips, 1996). Such behaviors may damage democracy's stability.

Important questions of democracy no longer concern whether individuals should have equal voting rights in determining the makeup of their government (Pratchett, 2004). The function of local democracy extends beyond local administration (Phillips, 1996), especially because representativeness and participation in local democracy is considered a hallmark of democratic political symbols (Pratchett, 2004). Local democracy is a component of real participatory democracy and it has implications for our comprehension and implementation of regional autonomy (Pratchett, 2004). Everyone has the same potential to influence social decisions, even though society may never reach this point (Stoker, 1996). The existence of local democracy will encourage more public engagement in political affairs (Beetham, 1999). Without society's involvement, democracy would seem hollow and unable to grow. Local participation will inspire the public's trust in the distribution of political power, which eventually adds to the democratic culture of society as a whole (Beetham, 1999).

This study employs a qualitative research method to comprehend in-depth phenomena such as behaviors, perceptions, motives, and actions via the use of language-based descriptions. The researchers collected primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected directly via interviews with informants, while the secondary data were derived from earlier research, such as journals, books, archives, news articles, and documents utilized to supplement the

primary data. The data were collected using structured interviews so that informant interviews could concentrate on predetermined questions. The tools consist of smartphones (recording devices), questionnaires, and other interview-related instruments.

*Table 1: Informant list*

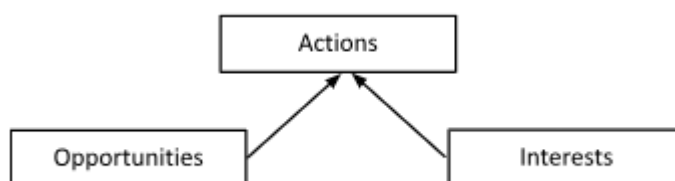
<b>No</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Agency</b>
1.	AR	Branch Executive Board (DPC)	NasDem party
2.	JJ	Branch Executive Board (DPC)	Gerinda Party
3.	TEST	Branch Executive Board (DPC)	PDIP Party
4.	SQ	Branch Executive Board (DPC)	PPP Party
5.	OM	Branch Executive Board (DPC)	Golkar Party

The researchers used a purposive sampling technique by identifying and selecting informants based on the researchers' predetermined criteria. The informants comprised the Branch Executive Board (DPC) chairpersons of NasDem, Gerindra, PDIP, PPP, and Golkar parties, who represent a coalition of the incumbent and possess important information related to the study. A DPC chairperson is primarily responsible for making decisions. The data were analyzed using interactive model data analysis procedures consisting of (1) data collection, (2) data reduction, (3) data display, and (4) conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The researchers triangulated the data to verify the accuracy of data collected from various perspectives, minimize as much bias as possible during data collection and analysis, and gather reliable data and a high degree of trust for better conclusion drawing.

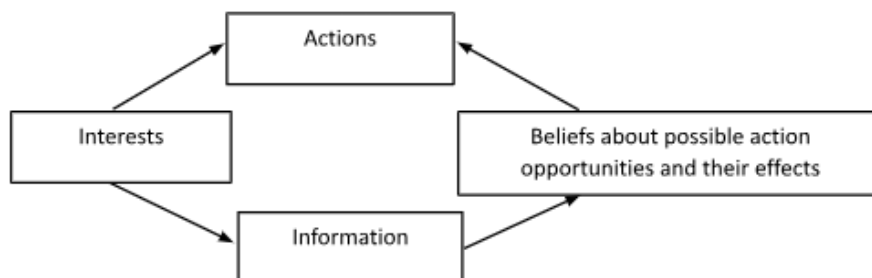
The researchers employed the rational choice framework as a tool to investigate the cartelization of political parties. In the beginning phase, interest and opportunity became determinants (see Figure 1). In this development stage, an actor will act based on his beliefs regarding potential opportunities for action and their consequences if the information is imperfect, although rare in real-world situations. Individual beliefs and the process of belief formation have become essential aspects of rational choice theory, and individual actions must be viewed as the result of three proximate causes: interest, belief, and

opportunity (see Figure 2) (Hedström & Stern, 2017; Hedström & Swedberg, 1996). At least three signs exist within this context. First, the individual is the main actor in the political process, and he/she behaves rationally to maximize his/her personal benefit/utility. Second, actors use institutions to suit their specific individual needs. Thirdly, the institution is a collection of rules with organization members. These measures help determine which circumstances led to the cartelization of political parties (Peters, 2005).

*Figure 1. The core elements of rational choice*



*Figure 2. Expanded elements of rational choice explanation*



### **Political party chairperson's domination: Loss of regional autonomy in decision-making**

For political parties, nominating regional leaders is a crucial decision-making process. The existence of political parties will be represented and determined by the competence of their candidates. However, the political parties' public interests often conflict with the party chairperson's personal interests. The political parties become secretive and undemocratic when the party's public interests shift for the chairperson's personal benefits. The decision-making process no longer disregards democratic ideals. Only the political party chairperson makes decisions as the party's central individual. The dominance of party chairperson's authority in decision-making process is

inseparable from their considerable influence. Such behavior diminishes the opportunity for party members to participate in the regional politics. Decentralization as a form of power-sharing and a precondition for democracy does not seem to apply to the structure of political parties. Frequently, the party chairperson's proposals contradict the desires of party members in the regions, resulting in counterproductive conflicts.

The overwhelming power of the party chairperson in decision-making is caused by the political party internal political orientation, which continues to prioritize the central figure as the dominant figure in the party. Therefore, the party chairperson's regeneration process does not align with the public interests. In the Indonesian democratic system, the party chairperson's role is irreplaceable; for example Megawati in PDIP Party, Susilo Bambang Yudoyono in Democrat Party, Wiranto in Hanura Party, Prabowo Subiyanto in Gerindra Party, and Surya Paloh in NasDem Party. The findings were consistent with the researchers' interview with the political parties' Branch Executive Board chairpersons, who all agreed that the party's chairperson made all final decisions. SQ, PPP Party Branch Executive Board (DPC) chairperson, stated that the regional leadership must follow and carry out the central board's directives.

*“When we decide, we will hold a consolidation meeting called the Rapimcab (Branch Executive Board Meeting) consisting of 24 sub-districts. We will listen to their aspirations and where to go, then submit a report to the center. It does not mean that the central (party leadership) will automatically grant what we have decided in the branches.”*

It demonstrates that the Branch Executive Board leadership lack decision-making authority. The central board may interfere in the regional branch's matters and make decisions on behalf of the regional branch based on the party chairperson's wishes. The final choice in selecting the regional leaders ultimately rests with the party chairperson. This trend demonstrates centralized power and diminishes local democracy.

### **The Degradation Of Political Parties And The Failure To Produce Cadre Figures**

The failure of political parties in Probolinggo Regency to nominate new candidates in the regional election was due to the stagnation of cadre regeneration/training. The political parties were too opportunistic and transactional, primarily seeing regional electoral contests as wins and losses. The parties calculated that working with the incumbent was the most profitable decision. However, the choice eliminates other fundamental problems, including

training cadres to ascend to regional leadership positions. To win the regional election, political parties often seek out candidates with a strong probability of victory even though the candidate was not their cadres. OM, the Branch Executive Board chairperson of Golkar Party, similarly stated,

*“So during the previous Pilkada (regional head election), we established a big coalition of several parties. Golkar party must support the candidate which we predict will win. The main principle of the Golkar party is that, if possible, we nominate our cadres in the 2018 local elections. Nevertheless, if the first principle does not work, the second option is to support a candidate with a greater chance of winning. Because in the 2018 Pilkada, there were no cadres from Golkar running, we support other candidates with great potential to win. Therefore, we, the Golkar party, conducted an internal survey about the regent’s election rate in 2018. The results of our internal survey from villages found that, on average, many villagers chose and believed that Ms. Tantriana Sari would be re-elected. Regarding decision-making, the process was not too difficult because we were loyal and our principles were clear. Ms. Tantriana Sari was dominating, and we also conveyed to the central board of Golkar Party that we agreed with Mrs. Tantriana Sari as the candidate of 2018 regional head.”*

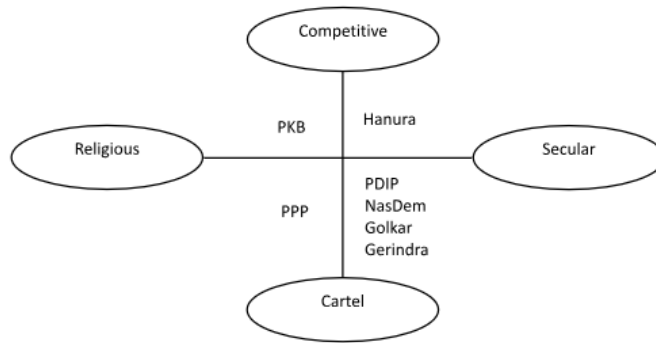
The failure of political parties to nominate their cadre figures in the Probolinggo regional election indicates that internal party regeneration was not going smoothly. The parties’ reluctance to compete and their preference for forming coalitions further reduce the chances for cadres to be nominated. JJ, Gerindra Branch Executive Board chairperson, also reported that all parties experienced similar dilemmas.

*“Firstly, there are still no cadres who are considered to be able to compete with this incumbent, which is common in political parties. You are not yet qualified to be a rival or enemy of the incumbent, so the consideration is that you have to form a coalition. The problem is that the political calculations win and lose. The first consideration is that the incumbent has a strong chance. Most political parties formed a coalition yesterday because maybe there are no cadres who can compete without being supported by a coalition party; even if supported by a party, they can still nominate themselves, while others cannot unless they have to form a coalition.”*

JJ’s answer reaffirmed that political parties had failed to nominate new figures and were undergoing a leadership crisis as they competed for Probolinggo regional head election. JJ noted that such a situation frequently occurs among the political parties. Among the main role of political parties was to prepare new leaders. The formulae utilized to carry out the internal cadre generation process is unclear. Therefore, when the party experienced a

leadership crisis, the party will propose non-cadre candidates with no prior links to the political part, such as artists, businesspeople, and influencers. These individuals were selected due to their fortunes and fame, yet they did not really understand the political party struggle. The alignment between the political party's and the candidate's philosophy, vision, and mission are no longer the most crucial consideration. It creates distrust in society, which will have future consequences for the political party (see Matrix 1).

Matrix 1 (M1):  
Standing position of political parties in the regional head election constellation



Matrix 1 demonstrates the political parties' major contrasts in the ideological viewpoints and political tactics, as shown by the competitive status of the PKB and Hanura Parties, as well as other parties (PDIP, Nasdem, Golkar, Gerindra, and PPP) which formed the party cartel. The joining of religious PPP party in the cartel showed that the coalition formed was an oversized, ineffective coalition (*koalisi turah*).

### **It is rooted on the incumbent' political ties**

People emerged as major political players in the disruption era. The re-emergence of Puput Tantriana Sari and Timbul Prihandjoko as the incumbent regent and vice-regent is an evidence of their popularity in Probolinggo Regency and their deep roots in the community. The incumbent's success was inextricably linked to how they constructed power relations from the bottom to the top using their resources to secure power. The ruling family was in power for almost 18 years. It indicates that Probolinggo regency was experiencing a leadership crisis because the center of power during the regional election concentrated solely around the incumbent's family. The rise of dynasties implies that oligarchy continues to influence the regional head election process

significantly, as shown by the incumbent’s ability to preserve power and prevent its transfer to others. The family rationalized whatever methods were necessary to maintain control. Moreover, it demonstrates the political parties’ incapacity to foster democracy and regeneration since a competitive municipal election represents the vitality of democracy at the local level. The rise of Tantriana Sari and Timbul Prihandjoko as the incumbent family demonstrates that the political parties in Probolinggo lack the courage to fight politically against the incumbent (see Matrix 2).

*Matrix 2 (M2):  
The assumption of an ideal coalition in the constellation of regional head elections*



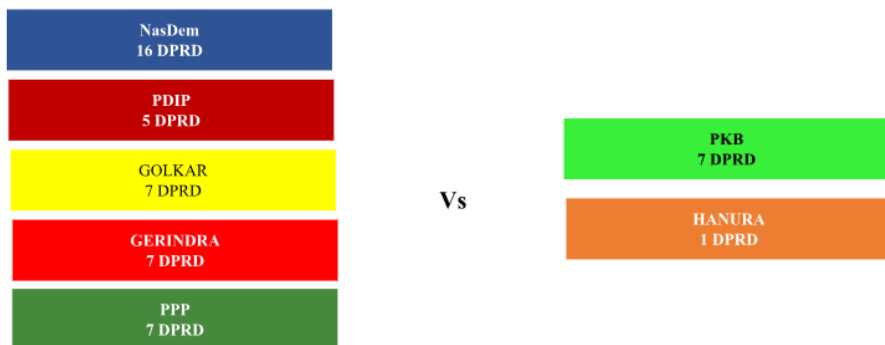
M2 Explanation: This matrix depicts the ideal coalition assumption map, in which the political party coalitions may be partitioned along three axes. Politically, the incumbent NasDem party may progress without forming a coalition with any other party; PDIP, Golkar, Gerindra, and Hanura parties can establish a new axis to oppose the incumbent; and PKB and PPP parties may establish a third axis as a coalition of religious parties in opposition to the first two axes.

The incumbent’s deliberate hegemony promotes dynastic political practices and poses a high risk of power abuse. By nature, many leaders preserve power by handing the leadership baton to their wives, children, or close relatives. The incumbent’s success cannot be isolated from how they acquire power by appointing several relatives and close associates to public offices. The incumbent started from the villages by appointing nominated individuals as village leaders and acting village leaders to rally people during elections. The mass base of supporters could be retained and remained loyal since they received power. Votes at the village level during the regent and Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD) election will be distributed

linearly. The incumbent further took advantage of village heads' retirement by giving the positions to state civil apparatus (ASN) approved by the sub-district head (Camat) and Hasan Aminuddin (Puput Tantriana Sari's husband). Acting village chief candidates were obliged to pay IDR 20 million in cash deposits and village treasury land rental tribute of IDR 5 million per hectare of land.

Hasan Aminudin instructed the village chief candidates not to meet him but to meet the local sub-district heads (Camat). The incumbent who engages in power struggles chooses to employ bureaucratic politicization as their strategy in the regional head election. As regional leaders, they have the power to manipulate ASN and government programs for their political objectives readily. This action harms ASN's neutrality, which ought to protect professional values and independence. Regional heads should have an honest and professional relationship with bureaucratic officials and prioritize the public interest over individual objectives. The incumbent regent's mobilization of ASN is a poor record and evidence of the faults in our democracy conducted by power-seeking parties. The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) discovered the incumbent regent's practice of political corruption by using money to obtain village chief positions and arrested Puput Tantriana Sari and her husband in a hand arrest operation (OTT) (CNBC Indonesia, 2021; Hendartyo, 2021; Kamil, 2021). The arrest was not surprising because the regent and her husband had engaged in numerous corrupt practices, shackled Probolinggo residents, silenced the critics, used violence and intimidation to settle political disputes, and involved ASN in politics like during the New Order era (see matrix 3).

Matrix 3 (M3):  
Actual party coalitions in Probolinggo regional head election



M3 Explanation: This matrix describes the actual coalitions in Probolinggo regional election. PDIP, Gerindra, PPP, and Golkar parties joined the powerful NasDem Party. The disproportionate power gaps across the coalition axes might

cause the united coalitions to destroy the competitive contestation atmosphere and harm local democracy.

### **Hegemony and the Structural Foundations of Cartelization**

The party chairperson's hegemony had overtaken the party executives' decision-making authority at the regional level. The centralized power pushes the regional authorities to depend on the central board. The board tends to increase its influence and focus on it (Poguntke & Webb, 2007). This scenario will foster dependence and strip regional political party leaders of the power to determine their own destinies. The party may prioritize their personal benefits over public interests, grow apathetic, disengaged from society, and grow indifferent. The party chairpersons' magnitude of power has exacerbated the cartelization of political parties. Cartelization is an economics word that refers to the collaboration of many firms to set prices, control production and sales, and engage in other monopolistic activities (Ambardi, 2009; Ammelia & Kosandi, 2019). The terminology then transforms from economic notions to political concepts. Political cartelization is a group's conspiracy to diminish current competition to acquire power and resources in a country and reap benefits for their groups. What characterizes them as a cartel are their coordinated efforts to dominate and their agreement not to compete with each other. Typically, a cartel is established to minimize risks (Katz & Mair, 2018; Krašovec & Haughton, 2011).

A cartelized coalition is characterized by the unity of political parties with diverse ideologies and combining in the form of a grand coalition to avoid conflicts of interest and construct a powerful government for the efficient administration and their group's interests. The incumbent has a covert purpose of forming a cartel under the pretence of a coalition. A coalition considers its members' shared values or ideologies when deciding how to collaborate. Meanwhile, cartelized parties do not perceive an ideology to be fought for; they merely see a shared interest in exploiting the available resources for their group's survival. Cartelization happens because political parties rely more on the state/government to fund their financial needs. Therefore, the cartel system produces a regime that is detrimental to democracy. The cartelization dependency has altered the nature of political parties (Ambardi, 2009; Krašovec & Haughton, 2011; Katz & Mair, 2018; Romli, 2018). The researchers suggested that cartelization is not restricted to political parties dependent on the state for financial support, but also political parties imprisoned by the oligarchy,

exclusive leadership in decision-making, the overwhelming authority of the party chairperson, and Indonesian political culture that encourages cartels.

Political parties could not prepare new cadre figures due to cartelization inside the governing coalition. Regeneration has been disregarded, and cadres have no opportunity to compete. The oligarchs use political parties as tools to seize power. The political parties no longer consider ideological issues, and the distinctions between parties become fuzzy and vague. The political party's survival considerations, such as the distribution of power and economic resources, compel them to concern more with obtaining power distribution than addressing public interests. The parties become more focused on power and involvement in governance. The party's interests become more important than the competition process, as shown in the cartelization among political parties formed during the election of the incumbent Regent of Probolinggo Regency is an example of cartelization among political parties. PPP's involvement in the coalition accentuates the cartelization of the political parties. The party has distinct values from other parties in the coalition (PDIP, Golkar, Gerindra, NasDem). These five parties also maintained their closeness and solidity in the legislation by holding a major vote and important positions in regional people representative council (DPRD) chairperson and senior members. The group shared the power in managing the legislature, budget, and supervision to protect the group's interests.

Such interaction patterns have minimized rivalry between these parties. These political parties have opted to form cartels to restrict the establishment of opposition and competition. Rivalries between political parties is essential to attract the public's attention and support. A competitive party system is required to prevent political parties from collectively abusing and exploiting various state resources. Competition between parties can at least lower the probability of parties' bad conduct. It demonstrates that the only purpose of forming cartels and embracing other cross-ideological political parties is to reduce conflict and competition. The researchers concluded that the NasDem Party did not dare to advance independently and chose to embrace other parties because, based on the party's political calculation, the party's position would be at risk if the other major parties such as PDIP, Golkar, Gerindra, or PPP form a new axis of power. Each party seeks power, and political shocks will likely occur if one party holds the most political power. Hence, the political cartel must be maintained for the parties' mutual existence, despite their divergent ideology.

Political parties establish a coalition with the incumbent regent because of the incumbent's strong political relations. The incumbent was one step ahead of her political opponents because the regent has been famous by the voters, and she possessed capitals that can be utilized to assist the election process. The incumbent's participation level in direct regional elections (171 areas including 17 provinces, 115 regencies, and 39 cities) increased from 16.57 per cent to 19.49 per cent between 2017 and 2018. Nationally incumbent candidates dominated the election, with 106 regents/mayors and 13 governors (Fadli et al., 2018). Around 82.5% of incumbents re-applied for their positions in 2015, and 63.2% of incumbents were re-elected. The number also increased in 2017. Of 65 incumbent regional leaders and 20 deputies applying in 2017 direct local elections, 48 candidates (56.47 per cent) were re-elected. In 2018, 64 incumbent regional leaders won regional elections in their respective areas, while 11 incumbents won against blank ballots (Damaledo, 2018). Institutionally, political parties operate more rationally and opportunistically, so joining the incumbent is a politically more lucrative choice. Humans as individuals consider rational interests using economic calculations, profit and loss, and other actors' actions and responses of other actors while making decisions. Individuals in institutions tend to take advantage of personal benefits. To reach these aims, the individuals' views must be shaped by institutions and vice versa; hence, the institution's actions and choices may explain people's conduct. Thus, the link between people and institutions is bidirectional since individuals may influence the institution's behaviors.

The rational choice theory approach to institutionalism suggests that individuals are central actors in the political process, and they behave rationally to maximize personal utility and value; actors strive to use institutions to fulfil their needs, and institutions are a collection of rules with organizational members (Hall, P. y Taylor, 1996; Hall & Taylor, 1996). Political parties often face a dilemma between (1) retaining their voters' support by adhering to the party goals and ideological convictions or (2) abandoning these ideals in exchange for political seats. The dilemma arises when coalition partners are needed to form a government, but partner candidates with similar ideologies lack the strength to compete with their political opponents; consequently, the party will use its political calculations and join forces with parties that have a higher victory probability despite their different ideologies (Strøm & Müller, 1999). In this case, the different types of political competition may change a party's behaviors to attain different objectives. Thus, some political parties may

ultimately set aside ideological concerns at the grassroots level because voters are more interested in practical matters than concepts, theories, or programs. One example is vote purchase/bribery at the grassroots level.

The rational choice framework in the issue of cartelization of political parties in the local political context demonstrates the interest in the incumbent's (status quo) probability. The decision creates a chance to win the political struggle for the regional head election. Rationality about the probability of victory and the power of the incumbent has logical repercussions for the party's political activities and logical judgments when deciding with whom to form a coalition. In fact, Phillips (1996), Pratchett (2004) and Lay (2012) have stressed that local democracy should prioritize people's sovereignty in the region (Phillips, 1996; Lay, 2012; Pratchett, 2004).

The rational choice caused the political parties' decreasing interest in their ideology, resulting in the formation of a new set of beliefs that are more actual, empirical, and favorable to political victory. This view is based on the predicted winning prospects of each coalition party, hence it merits the name *turah* (oversized) coalition (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996). The incumbent is a central actor in the dynamics of local politics and behaves rationally to his/her maximize personal advantage. In the subsequent stage, the incumbent attempts to achieve his/her political needs by taking advantage his/her supporting parties and coalitions. Last but not least, political parties as institutions that decide the accumulation of rules and organization members play political roles in winning the supported candidate and the party coalition (Peters, 2005). Thus, the cartelization of political parties can be seen from the waning party ideology, the absence of competition, dynasty politics, and political parties' inability to produce new political cadre figures.

## **Conclusion**

Tantriana Sari's triumph as an incumbent regent was inextricably linked to the cartelization of supporter parties, including NasDem, Golkar, PDIP, Gerindra, and PPP parties which formed an oversized coalition. The cartelization of political parties in Probolinggo regency aimed to reduce friction and rivalry. The cartelized coalition is characterized by the union of political parties of different ideologies, their cooperation in dominating the regional politics, and their agreement not to compete with one another. This cartel politics is caused by the fact that power in political parties is held by a small number of individuals and is centered on the party chairpersons, resulting in the abandonment of the

party's ideology and cadre development, the loss of a credible opposition, and the replacement of public interest by personal ambition.

The political battle has clearly altered the conduct of political parties behaviors associated with the party's ability to survive. The political parties no longer focus on ideological issues, and the distinctions between parties become fuzzy and vague. As an entity that regards voters' and voting behaviors as a result of calculating profits and losses, the political parties creating a cartel by backing the incumbent is a reasonable option.

Finally, the study had some limitations, including difficulty in interview scheduling, locating information resources, and informants' sudden cancellation. In light of this, further studies needed to accommodate the novelty patterns of the political cartel in the context of advancements in the technological practice of electoral elections.

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