

## *Original Paper*

# Clientelism in Indonesia: An Intractable Political Norm

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### **Abstract**

*When it comes to clientelism in southeast Asia, it occurs us that Indonesia has formed its own specialized tricky political norm on clientelism. For norm, with long history in Indonesia, clientelism has played an important role in agriculture and social stabilization. It has been a norm among the public and still makes a difference now. For intractability, since clientelism has been pervasive and inseparable from politics, it does do some harm to Indonesia, including the problem of corruption, the rights of freedom of election and democracy. In this article, I will concentrate on 2 words: norm and intractability, with illustrating the traditions of clientelism and traditions into norm in Indonesia and the downsides of clientelism, mainly focusing on corruption and the application of democracy.*

### **Keywords**

*clientelism, corruption, Indonesia ,oligarchy*

## **1. Introduction**

Indonesia is always thought to be a country with corruption and buying political power through clientelism, and clientelism has become a political norm that seemingly civilians have got used to it with its tricky side effects—corruption and flawed democracy. In this article, I will elaborate the origins and traditions of clientelism, and compare it with current clientelism. Besides, the problems resulting from clientelism will be mentioned and I will try to find to certain solution to this “intractable political” norm to a better future.

Clientelism always derives from the economic and political inequality. Due to the unbalanced power or resources between the patron and client, the later always attains his particular needs which could only be met by the patron in exchange for the client’s devotion. These days, political clientelism refers to the practice of providing personal favors—jobs, contracts, welfare support, money, and so forth—in exchange for electoral support to distinguish it from the less flexible, relatively small-scale and original clientelism in pre-colonial and colonial period in Indonesia.

**Pre-colonial period**

Generally, there are 3 conditions for the early-staged clientelism: traditions of servant and master relationship, decentralized government and hierarchy.

Under the influence of Hindu, Javanese took the consciousness of servant and master and unity of servant and master is possible only because there were certain ties between and properties common to man and God. To some extent, the relationship of master and servant indicated the hierarchy. However, this kind of hierarchy was out of responsibility: it is rather a personal and close tie of mutual respect and responsibility, which also shaped the relationship between the king and the public, hierarchy but respect, leading to the limited power of the king. Besides, it was the relatively limited king's power and divergent lands held by aristocrats that contributed to the decentralized government, which made the public tied with local officials and even became servants of them. That is how early-staged clientelism formed.

**Colonial period**

During the 19th century, Dutch seemed to manipulate the patronage-client regime sophisticatedly. With the aim of restoring order and achieving economic interests, Dutch, as a patron, chose to cooperate with local elites (as a client), who assisted with the social order and united the labor in exchange for political power or extra material benefits. At the same time, the local elites also played a role as patron, manipulating their regional power or authority to extend their influence. For instance, The Javanese elites were clients of the Dutch but at the same time powerful patrons within their own domains, and they were in charge of local affairs but also guaranteed the economic prosperity to prevent the regional influence of the Dutch.

However, what is worth noting is that compared with contemporary political clientelism, colonial and pre-colonial clientelism was considered as patron-client relationship officially, and always relied on face to face character and comparatively less complicated.

**Post-colonial period**

During the 20th century, it is under Suharto's authoritarian regime that clientelism has developed further. With military background, Suharto stressed great importance to armed enterprise in exchange of loyalties. One of the typical examples is Pertamina, dominating the Indonesian oil industry under Ibnu, who kept close relationship to Suharto, and presented devotions in exchange for the prior development of Pertamina. As is written, he (Ibnu) was allowed virtually total autonomy in the running of Pertamina. Secondly, noting Sino-Indonesian's the relatively low political status but competence in business, Suharto chose to cooperate with these businessmen and provided credit facilities and privileged access to the market. Reciprocally, these Indonesian Chinese were required to sacrifice some economic interests and provide political support to Suharto to seek long-term cooperation, and one of the typical figures is Liem Sioe Liong. Electorally, the group named "Golkar" also applied patronage: Golkar would simply use its access to government largesse to buy itself position by establishing itself

as a patronage-dispensing apparatus. Through these 3 aspects, clientelism in post colonial Indonesia developed further and more complicated, accompanied with frequent corruption and oligarchy.

The same is true for current election in Indonesia though under the wave of democracy, corruption and oligarchy still existed, and did some harm to Indonesia. After 1989, many democratic parties were established, while their political legitimacy was always doubted and formed into different factions through patronage. Clientelism still existed and combined with oligarchy and threatened democracy and public interests.

In conclusion, on the one hand, rooted in the long traditions of patron-client relationship, clientelism has become a political norm in Indonesia. On the other hand, this norm is always harmful to the political ecosystem in Indonesia, especially in the problem of corruption and the damage to democracy.

## **2. Intractability**

### *2.1 Intractability 1: The Problem of Corruption*

Corruptive problems in Indonesia are exposed in bureaucratic corruption and the limited function of anti-corruption institutions. In essence, in Indonesia, clientelism has built a network for the deep cooperation between politics and commerce, and the priority of the market greatly depends on the political background, which leads to large-scale bureaucratic corruption. Due to bureaucratic corruption, Indonesia democratically elected politicians even oppose some anti-corruption institutions.

#### *2.1.1 Bureaucratic Corruption*

When it comes to bureaucratic corruption, it is necessary to mention the traditions of clientelism in colonial-period. As mentioned above, local officials or elites played a great role as a medium, which enabled the local power to be generated to the elites, and resulted in local corruption. Moreover, in short of regional political transparency nowadays: local government institutions in many parts of the country lacking accountability, and coordination between local and national structures considered inadequate, money politics in the regional and village community is pervasive.

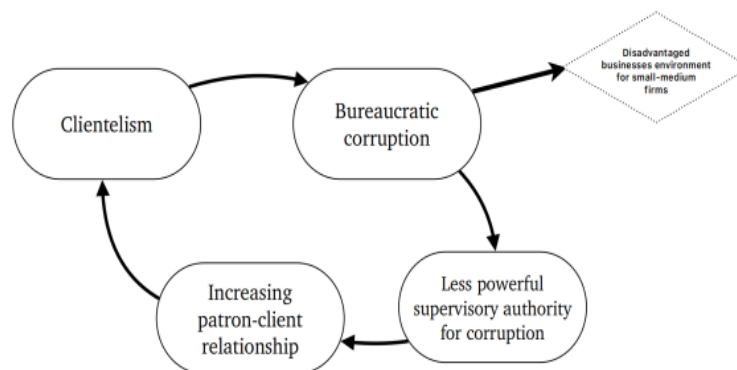
In addition, due to the intimate connections within politics and commerce, senior officials unavoidably take bribes from businessmen. Taking Suharto as an example, the private corporate sector provided the primary medium through which Suharto generated his family's enormous wealth, indicating that through the exchanges with private sectors, he boosted his family business and into monopoly: covering from telecom monopoly to monopoly Timor national car. These corruptive behavior undoubtedly caused privatization of public goods and threatened the public interests.

In fact, the regional and senior officials' corruption chain has been greatly detrimental to the business environment: according to the World Bank's 2015 Enterprise Survey, about a third of surveyed companies reported that they had experienced at least one bribe request in the past, and 45 percent of firms said that gifts were required to get an import licence or construction permit. Overall, irregular payments or gifts were required in about 27 percent of public transactions, while 33 percent of firms

said they were expected to give gifts to secure government contracts, which causes increasing economic burden to small-medium firms and less transparent information for marketing competition. Moreover, actually the bureaucratic corruption in Indonesia also results from the limited surveillance of parliament, which leaves great space for the bureaucracy to manipulate the investment climates in Indonesia. As Arianto A. Pattunru, Neil Mc Culloch & Christian Von Luebke mentioned in their article: unclear charges remain,, often due to poor coordination between local and national governments. Parliamentarians acknowledged that legislative commissions have difficulty in keeping up with national legislation and take a backseat to local bureaucrats in the drafting process.

### 2.1.2 Limited Function of Anti-Corruption Institutions

Meanwhile, the regional and senior officials' corruption chain also affected the validity of anti-corruption institutions. The corruption commission (KPK) was established in 2003 to prevent corruption, but in 2019 Indonesian parliament passed a law unanimously to limit the power and function of KPK, including establishing an supervisory council to oversee the KPK and requiring the KPK to obtain a wiretapping warrant from the supervisory council. Besides, it was demanded that the KPK should complete an investigation within a year, which was detrimental to the long-term corruptive trace and confronting the fact of being intervened by the government officials and high-profile figures. In generation, the traditions and great development of clientelism during Suharto time result in unofficial but practical relationship between politics and commerce and contribute to the bureaucratic corruption as well as less powerful supervisory authority, allowing the corruption and patron-client relationship under clientelism to some degree and into a vicious circulation (as is shown below), threatening the sustainable business environment and the existence of small-medium firms and leading to a waste of public resource.



**Figure 1. Vicious Circle of Clientelism**

## 2.2 *Intractability 2: The Damage to Democracy*

In 2022 Democracy Index report released by economist intelligence, Indonesia gets the overall score with 6.71, referred as flawed democracy. Though after the fall of Suharto and the end of authoritarian, democracy in Indonesia has improved a lot with the appearance of various political parties and direct elections in 2004, it still could not meet the standard of “full democracy”, and always associated with the term “oligarchic democracy” and “patronage democracy” under the influence of clientelism. Next, I will illustrate the damage to democracy from the contrary to democratic values, the limited access to electoral information for the public, and the downsides of oligarchic democracy.

### 2.2.1 The Contrary to Traditional Democratic Values

As is known, the basic democratic values always contain liberty, equality and justice, but the classic form of clientelism derived from the economic and political inequality between the patron and client, and to some extent even formed hierarchy. Though nowadays, many scholars emphasized the reciprocity in clientelism, it is still unequal from my point of view. Taking the relationship between Suharto and Ibnu as an example, they both attained mutual gains, but Ibnu still needed to show his military loyalties, and under Suharto’s authoritarian. Even now, candidates who want to win in local governmental elections still need to cooperate with local elites: Candidates often need to (promise to) provide privileged access to state resources—jobs, business licenses, government contracts—to attract such supporters to build their campaign organization, which indicates the inequality in state resources and makes the election less transparent and even cheats the locals and the ordinary. In a brief, obscure inequality of patron-client relationship and certain privileges both violate the basic democratic values.

### 2.2.2 Hindering the Freedom of Election

Under the network of clientelism, there is a great possibility that the voters, especially the less educated, get little access to the candidates, causing the information gap and being misled. The lack of transparent public information and special campaign disturbed the basic judgement of the poor voters, violating their free suffrage.

On the other hand, there is a voice that “Money no longer buys elections in Indonesia. Money helps, of course, but it no longer decides the outcome. Indonesians have learnt that it is possible to take people’s money, but still not vote for them”. However, the truth is not always ideal as well. As for the elections are strongly associated with the local elites and regional officials, especially in village, the voters’ choice largely determines their future material benefits and they might be confronted with risks once the fact that they take the money while not vote for them is disclosed. For instance, in Lampung and Kalimantan, a failure to provide such support could lead to a demotion or dismissal, which could endanger the prosperity and status of the extended family. It is like in the name of free choice but directly connecting with the future interests and more like a semi-voluntary votes.

In conclusion, this kind of buying political support in election not only induces the less-educated group, limiting their access to transparent background information, but also more like an “enforcement”, hindering the freedom of election to some extent.

### 2.2.3 The Downsides of Oligarchic Democracy

Clientelism in Suharto time shaped the particular relationship with politicians and businessmen, and after the end of authoritarian and the following democratic reconstructions, the oligarchies with economic superiority tried to adapt to the democratic structures: utilizing the money to make sure the their positions in political parties. Oligarchies developed separate interest campaigns, bringing about restricted representation.

Firstly, with financial support, oligarchies could use money to buy individual votes (as mentioned above), buy whole political parties and even create a new party. Still something to do with Golkar, during the democratic reconstructions, Jusuf Kalla, CEO of Kalla Group became the chairman of Golkar in 2004-2009 on behalf of his group interests and struggled to be presidential candidates later. Besides, Prabowo Subianto with his own business group created Gerindra to be a political leader and also struggled for presidential elections.

Secondly, under patron-client relationship, a candidate can be backed by different oligarchies. According to Jeffrey A. Winters, Wiranto was supported by Self (Cendana?) and Hary Tanoesoedibjo. Similarly, these complicated networks are pervasive in Indonesian politics, and perhaps presidential candidates represent the oligarchic interests instead of the public, hindering the public to vote for the candidates on behalf of them and carry on pragmatic policies to the ordinary: oligarchic control over who can rise as contenders for party leadership, who can run for major offices, and how the political apparatus is used for purposes of wealth defense.

Clientelism in Suharto time manipulated the clientelism, and even after the fall of Suharto, oligarchies sought to rebuild their political networks through involvement of parties and support presidential candidates, leading to the form of oligarchic democracy and Squeezing voters' choice.

### 3. Conclusion

Clientelism is rooted in Indonesian long traditions, and has formed higher-level system. As mentioned above, this political phenomenon has become a political norm. Paradoxically, this norm is bad for Indonesian civil life, but civilians could not get rid of it since it has infiltrated every aspect of Indonesian society. Clientelism is tricky and intractable due to the corruption and the detriments to democracy, though many presidential candidates, like Widodo professed he was non-oligarch, actually they did have oligarchic backers. From my point of view, it is a vicious circulation.

But how to deal with or alleviate this tricky political norm? Generally, it is demanded to form political reforms and develop economies to narrow the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Anti-corruption institution is the main point of political reforms. In 2019, the power of KPK was greatly reduced, and even its chief Firli Bahri was charged with extortion from the administration ministry. Anti-corruption is still a long way to go. To ensure efficiency, it is necessary to emphasize the independence of anti-corruption commission reducing the alliance on executive offices to make sure the justice and high-efficiency.

What is worth noting is the economic development and narrowing the gap of wealth. Vote-buying always happens in the comparatively less-developed regions, where the locals are thirsty for market priority or other material bonus and support. The superior political connections of oligarchies also originate from their extreme wealth. Compared with the poor, middle class is always viewed as opponents to clientelism and vote-buying with relatively advanced material conditions and well-educated background. Enlarging the size of middle class could be a better solution to a high-quality election and democracy.

Clientelism in Indonesia is a complicated political norm, and it is acknowledged that clientelism is always associated with populism and oligarchy, worsening the problem of corruption and flawed democracy. This intractable norm still has a long way to go.

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