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Translating Membership into Power at the Ballot Box? Trade Union Candidates and Worker Voting Patterns in Indonesia's National Elections

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Abstract

This article analyses the effectiveness of trade unions' electoral engagement in the union-dense electoral localities of Bekasi and Tangerang in Indonesia's 2009 legislative elections. Our analysis reveals that legacies of authoritarianism, electoral rules, and union fragmentation pushed unions to pursue an ineffective electoral strategy of running union cadres on various party tickets. In Bekasi, local leaders within the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions (FSPMI) chose not to mobilize resources to support union candidates because the union's national leadership had failed to convince them of the soundness of its strategy. In Tangerang, local leaders embraced the National Workers Union's (SPN) national electoral strategy, but had inadequate membership data to conduct electoral mapping and did not provide candidates with financial and leadership support. Neither union, meanwhile, gave much consideration to the problem of translating membership to votes: survey data reveal that most members could not name union candidates, and many of those who could did not vote for them. The article argues that, despite its flaws, trade unions' strategy of engagement in the electoral arena constitutes an important step forward in the consolidation of Indonesia's democracy.

Keywords: elections; electoral participation; trade unions; voting patterns; Indonesia

Introduction

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, unions in capitalist East and Southeast Asia played little part in formal politics. Anti-communist authoritarian regimes excluded workers, in many cases establishing state-backed unions that subordinated and disciplined labour for the sake of political stability and economic development. "Beneath the miracle" of rapid economic growth was a highly productive but politically contained working class.¹ By the end of the century, capitalist authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand had democratized, but the exclusionary legacy of authoritarian rule affected the capacity of unions to seize new opportunities for political mobilization, particularly in the electoral arena. With the

exception of Indonesia, Southeast Asia's unions had no institutionalized links to parties after independence, and those connections were shattered so deeply under authoritarianism that it was impossible for unions to pick up where they had left off. For the most part, militant working-class mobilization was not a central feature of democratic transitions in Southeast Asia, so, unlike Brazil or South Korea, unions could not exploit this momentum to found a viable labour party.² Although labour participated in the opposition movement that brought down Marcos in the Philippines, the opposition consisted of a diverse array of groups with conflicting agendas and hence did not form a solid foundation for a progressive party that represented labour's interests.³ Throughout the region, non-programmatic elite-dominated parties quickly occupied the political space opened by democratic transitions, leading non-elite actors to engage primarily in extra-parliamentary political participation and to avoid institutionalized links with the clientelistic (arguably oligarchic) parties that dominated the landscape.⁴

In democratic Indonesia, unions also initially confined their collective efforts in the political sphere to tactics such as street demonstrations and lobbying lawmakers for favourable legislation. But in recent years, some unions have begun to pursue an electoral strategy that entails running union cadres in legislative races at both the local and national levels. We analyse the electoral engagement of unions in Indonesia, assessing how historical legacies, institutional configurations, and organizational settings have shaped their capacity to participate effectively in electoral politics. Our analysis demonstrates that legacies of authoritarianism, electoral rules, and union fragmentation have combined to shape the electoral opportunity structure of Indonesia's unions. These factors have led some unions to strike bargains with the major political parties to place union cadres on their tickets in some local races and in several national electoral districts where parties face tight elections. We examine this strategy through case studies of the strategies of two of Indonesia's largest federations, the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions (FSPMI) and the National Union of Workers (SPN) in the lead-up to the 2009 national elections. Although none of the candidates won, our case studies of the two union-dense localities of Bekasi district and Tangerang city identify several lessons for future electoral endeavours.

We begin the analysis by explaining how Suharto-era labour relations influenced both links between political parties and unions, and unions' understanding of their role in electoral politics. We then outline the key institutional features of Indonesia's contemporary political system that shape the political opportunity structure faced by unions. We end the discussion of national dynamics with an analysis of the political strategies of FSPMI and SPN before shifting our focus to the local level, analysing how these unions implemented their national strategies in Bekasi district and Tangerang city. We assess the effectiveness of these strategies through an analysis of the interaction between unions and parties at the local level and surveys of workers in these two union-dense electoral districts.

Legacies of an authoritarian past

Legacies from the Suharto era (1967 – 1998) continue to shape the context in which Indonesian unions mobilize today. The system of exclusionary corporatism established by Suharto, who came to power in the bloody aftermath of a thwarted coup attempt in 1965, profoundly affected the resources with which labour entered the democratic era. The military oversaw the systematic eradication of the left, murdering hundreds of thousands of suspected members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and detaining hundreds of thousands more.⁵ Under Suharto's rule, the left had no organized presence. Indonesia's most powerful union, the All-Indonesia Organisation of Labour Unions (SOBSI), had links to the PKI and was decimated in the massacres that followed the failed coup.⁶ The Suharto regime not only exterminated unions linked to the communists but also severed the links between unions and political parties.

The regime deterred future working-class mobilization through creating pliant state-backed organizations that it could control. In 1973, the regime forced the surviving noncommunist unions into a state-controlled federation, the All-Indonesia Labour Federation (FBSI), renamed the All-Indonesia Workers' Union (SPSI) in 1985. The state granted SPSI a de facto monopoly on organizing in the private sector, but it depoliticized SPSI.⁷ Although the regime never succeeded in eradicating independent organizing,⁸ labour was organizationally weak: only 2.7% of the workforce was unionized on the eve of democratization.⁹ Furthermore, SPSI, which remained the largest union, was hobbled by its continuing dependence on both employers and the state.¹⁰

Another legacy from the Suharto era is the severing of the historic links between unions and political parties. Under Suharto's predecessor, Sukarno, major political parties across the political spectrum had ties to labour unions.¹¹ Leftist unions were strongest, but centrist and religious unions were also influential.¹² In the same year that the regime restructured unions, it also consolidated Indonesia's multitude of remaining legal parties into just two parties – the United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI).¹³ These “opposition” parties co-existed with the state's political vehicle, Golkar. Neither the opposition parties nor Golkar cultivated SPSI as a base of political support.¹⁴

Forcing all of the surviving Sukarno-era unions into a single organization and restructuring political parties were crucial steps in cutting the ties between parties and unions. Equally important was the regime's promotion of economic unionism, enshrined in the regime's labour relations ideology, Pancasila Industrial Relations, which portrayed political parties as “outside” interests that divided workers along ideological lines and framed union involvement in politics as a dangerous distraction from the real work of unions: organizing workers for national development and negotiating peacefully with employers to improve wages and working conditions.¹⁵ Under the New Order, unions were not instructed to avoid capture by a political party; they were excluded from politics altogether.¹⁶

Suharto's regime largely succeeded in its efforts to marginalize and depoliticize labour. It left Indonesia with a legacy of weak and dependent unions that organized a small part of the workforce and that were deeply apolitical. When Suharto fell from power in May 1998, labour played a minor role in the mobilizations that contributed to his resignation.¹⁷ However, the Habibie administration introduced a number of important reforms that positively affected labour's prospects in the political sphere. The government recognized freedom of association, a move designed primarily to quell international criticism of Suharto's labour rights record, but which created new space for legal unions to be established in workplaces.¹⁸ Dozens of new independent unions formed and numerous leaders of the former state-backed union broke away and established new organizations.¹⁹ Another important change under Habibie was the return of competitive democratic elections in 1999, which gave unions the opportunity to participate in electoral politics. Unions, however, faced a number of obstacles that limited their capacity to engage politically. Some factors, such as the organizational weakness of unions, the strength of Suharto-era elites, the absence of left parties, and a wariness of political links between unions and political parties, were a legacy of the Suharto years. Others, such as the fragmentation of labour and the legislation regulating party formation and elections, were features of the post-Suharto era.

Unions' political opportunity structure

With democratization, unions have greater opportunities to engage in the electoral arena. Political parties fundamentally shape access to electoral politics, so union's links to them play a major role in union strategies. Historical relationships with parties have therefore played a decisive role in their entry into electoral politics. In Argentina, for example, the dominant union quickly fell back into its old partnership with the populist Peronist party, which like unions experienced harsh repression under authoritarian rule.²⁰ In Mexico, Poland, and Taiwan, unions had strong ties to political parties under authoritarianism and maintained them after the transition to democratic rule.²¹ Where unions had no historic links to political parties but militant labour movements emerged in the waning days of authoritarian rule, unions used this momentum to form labour parties, as in Brazil and South Korea, or to extend their cooperation with the party that led the popular movement that opposed the authoritarian regime to the electoral arena, as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) did with the African National Congress in South Africa.²² In some post-communist countries, such as Czechoslovakia, unions forged relationships with emergent socialist or social democratic parties.²³ In these cases, labour entered the electoral arena backing a specific party to which it had strong links.

In Indonesia, unions confronted a political terrain in which no party espoused pro-labour principles. Democracy opened the door for a revival of left-leaning parties, but Suharto-era elites entered the democratic era with deep pockets and control over existing organizations. They quickly adapted to electoral politics and have not just survived but flourished in democratic Indonesia.²⁴ Using the material power they accrued under Suharto, they fund and often directly

control major political parties. Collusion among elites, combined with the increasing dependence of parties on raising donations from wealthy donors, has made parties increasingly unaccountable to public interests.²⁵ The major parties are non-programmatic and differentiate themselves primarily by whether they are religious or nationalist.²⁶ None of the parties with seats in the national legislature have a left or even social democratic orientation.²⁷

Unions might form a labour party, but union fragmentation and the rules for establishing and sustaining political parties have thus far prevented labour-based parties from gaining traction. The law on political parties requires new parties to establish branches in the majority of Indonesia's localities, and to win at least 3.5% of the popular vote in national legislative elections in any given election in order to run in the subsequent election. These laws have impeded the formation and survival of grass-roots parties with limited financial means and have locked in oligarchic dominance of Indonesia's political party system. Even when parties succeed in registering, they usually do not win enough votes to compete next time around. As a consequence, although a number of small parties with left or social democratic orientations – including successive iterations of a labour party led by Muchtar Pakpahan – were established in the first decade after the fall of Suharto, none have won seats in the national legislature or met the electoral thresholds that would allow them to participate in successive elections. If unions had united behind the party, it may have been able to clear those thresholds. But Pakpahan's party was tied to the confederation that he founded, SBSI, which was too small and internally divided to provide a firm foundation for a labour party, and since the party was seen as a personal vehicle for him, other unions refused to support it.

The difficulty of establishing a viable labour party or even a more broadly based social democratic party has constrained labour's options in the electoral arena. Political parties control nominations and access to the electoral system, so unions that wish to participate in electoral politics have to deal with them. But unions faced a number of difficult issues in the lead-up to the 2009 national elections. First, unions were reluctant to become too strongly tied to one party, fearing that this would cause internal strife among their members with varying political affiliations. This ambivalence, of course, also made unions less attractive potential partners to parties. Second, given the small size and fragmentation of unions, political parties were not highly motivated to make political deals with them, since individual unions could not credibly commit to delivering substantial votes on a national scale.

Although labour could not offer much at the national level to parties, it potentially had more to offer them in union-dense localities.²⁸ Indonesia's unions are fragmented, but their membership is geographically concentrated. In Indonesia's decentralized political system, each of its more than 500 districts and municipalities (*kabupaten* and *kota*) has local legislatures and directly elects executives. In highly competitive multi-member districts, securing a base of union voters could provide the margin of victory in national legislative and local races.²⁹ The industrial

heartlands of Java and Sumatra were the most obvious locations for tapping into a base of unionized voters.

Large, established parties, including the Golkar Party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the United Development Party (PPP), the National Awakening Party (PKB), the National Mandate Party (PAN), flirted with trade unionists in the lead-up to the 2009 elections. Smaller, newer parties like Gerindra also explored the possibility of tapping into the labour vote. With the exception of PKS, however, the flirtation was just that. PKS made the strongest commitment, fielding nine labour candidates for the national assembly, including representatives of SPN (textiles), ASPEK (finance), FSPMI (metals), and the metalworkers' union associated with the legacy confederation, KSPSI. PKS placed labour candidates in union-dense electoral districts in the Riau Archipelago, Central Java, West Java, and Banten. In addition, labour candidates competed on PKS slates for local office in several districts. Aside from PKS, only Gerindra ran a recognized labour leader for national legislative office, Idin Rosidin, formerly a national leader of KSBSI.

PKS's investment in building a labour constituency was primarily the work of Edi Zanur, an idealistic party cadre who fervently believed that Islam and unions shared the same goals of justice and prosperity for all. After deciding that it was too difficult to establish PKS-controlled unions, he established a labour non-governmental organization (NGO) called the Indonesia Labour Foundation (ILF) in 2003 in the hope of developing personal links to union leaders through educational activities. The ILF did not publicize its connection to PKS, since Edi believed this might make establishing links to workers more difficult, given the poor reputation that political parties have in Indonesia. Edi also became close to Rustam Aksam, president of Indonesia's largest federation, SPN. In 2004, two members of SPN's national board ran for national legislative office for PKS. One of these candidates, Bambang Wirahyoso, became SPN's president after Rustam died.

PKS was most successful in developing its connections to labour from 2007 to 2010, when Indra, a lawyer, took the helm and shifted the organization's focus to advocacy work.³⁰ PKS also formally institutionalized its interest in labour within the party when it established a bureau for workers, farmers, and fishers (BTN). As the 2009 elections approached, Edi endeavoured to deepen PKS's collaboration with unions in the elections. Edi's efforts not only resulted in more union cadres running for office on PKS's ticket; he also helped to broker deals with two of Indonesia's largest trade unions, SPN and FSPMI. These deals resulted in the nomination of multiple union officers as legislative candidates in national and local races.

The political strategies of FSPMI and SPN

PKS's partnership with two of Indonesia's largest trade unions marked an important change in Indonesian labour politics. FSPMI's and SPN's leadership resembled much of the rest of the labour movement in their aversion to parties and electoral politics. In the early post-Suharto

years, many labour activists were deeply suspicious of political parties and eschewed union participation in electoral politics.³¹ The lingering influence of economic unionism is evident in the refusal of many unions to ally with any particular political party, and in the care that most unions take to confine their participation in politics to demonstrating, lobbying, and organizing the occasional multi-candidate forum. Until recently, most union leaders were emphatic that unions had no business dealing with parties and that doing so would tear unions apart and distract them from workplace issues. Even KSBSI, which formed a labour party, never convinced the majority of its members of its validity, and the party was a constant source of friction among its leadership.

The decision by the national leadership of FSPMI and SPN to become more actively involved with electoral politics – and necessarily with political parties – was a bold step, one they knew would be unpopular within their ranks. Members and much of the leadership were at best ambivalent about the decision to engage in “practical politics”. National leaders made the case that unions needed a voice in the legislature and that the best way to accomplish this goal would be to run union candidates for established political parties. Indonesia’s electoral laws did not allow independent candidates to run in legislative elections, so mounting union candidates meant convincing political parties to place union cadres on their electoral slates.

As discussed above, of the major political parties only PKS had developed a strategy for outreach to unions. As the 2009 elections approached, the national leadership of FSPMI and SPN met with leaders from numerous parties. Only PKS did not ask for money in exchange for positions on the ticket, and only PKS was willing to commit to running multiple union candidates in union-dense districts across the nation. Since FSPMI’s and SPN’s electoral strategy for 2009 was to run union candidates for office, both unions decided to work most closely with PKS. The specific form that these agreements took, however, differed.

SPN moved more quickly than FSPMI, perhaps in part because it had collaborated with PKS in the 2004 elections. SPN formalized its agreement with PKS in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in September 2006. This agreement committed the party to running candidates identified by SPN, conditional on these candidates passing PKS’s vetting process, and for SPN in return to agree to mobilize its members to support PKS candidates. Although the decision to sign the MOU proved to be controversial internally, Bambang and other national leaders supportive of the MOU pushed it through. SPN’s national leadership instructed branches across Indonesia to implement the national deal with PKS by identifying possible candidates. Local leaders in some areas were enthusiastic about the possibility of running for office for PKS, others were not, so the MOU was implemented unevenly. Some SPN cadres ran for other parties, an undertaking that Bambang, the union’s president, considered to be in violation of the MOU. In the end, Bambang estimated that 15 SPN cadres ran for office for PKS.

FSPMI pursued a more cautious strategy than SPN. Much of FSPMI's leadership was extremely wary of engaging in electoral politics. Signing an MOU might give the appearance that the federation was beholden to a particular party, something FSPMI's constitution prohibited. National leaders therefore ruled out concluding an MOU. Elements of the national leadership, including the president, Said Iqbal, nevertheless wanted to work closely with PKS, since it was the only party willing to bargain with them. Rather than sign an MOU with PKS, Iqbal and other leaders crafted a two-track strategy. On the first track, national leaders negotiated as many PKS candidacies as possible for FSPMI cadres at both the national and local levels. On the second track, the union's central committee (DPP) encouraged local FSPMI chapters to cut deals with any political party that would agree to run union candidates on local slates. No national leaders ran for any party other than PKS, but FSPMI cadres ran for a variety of parties at the local level. The federation set strict rules about how union cadres could run for office. It forbade the use of union attributes in campaign materials, and local branches that decided to participate in campaigning had to form front organizations for that purpose.³² The goal was to put an institutional layer between the union and any political party. As with SPN, the reaction from local branches was mixed, and some embraced the plan with greater enthusiasm than others.

Once in place, the outcomes of both federations' electoral strategies depended on local branches identifying good candidates, getting them on a party slate, and then mobilizing members to vote for these candidates. As we shall see, in Bekasi district and Tangerang city, both federations had difficulty translating national strategies into electoral success.

Implementing national strategies at the local level

Bekasi and Tangerang, industrial satellites of Jakarta, were obvious locations to run union candidates. Bekasi is an industrial area in the eastern suburbs of Jakarta with a high concentration of heavy industries. The largest unions in Bekasi are in the chemical, electronics, and automotive sectors. Among them, FSPMI is the largest federation with about 40,000 members in Bekasi district alone.³³ Like Bekasi, Tangerang is part of Greater Jakarta, but it is located to the west and in a different province, and has a distinct industrial profile.³⁴ Light industries such as textiles, clothing and footwear predominate, which is reflected in the profile of the union movement.

FSPMI, the federation that is so strong in Bekasi, is relatively weak in Tangerang. SPN, by contrast, is among the strongest of unions in Tangerang. Given the strength of FSPMI in Bekasi and of SPN in Tangerang, these were among the most likely localities for the successful implementation of the political strategies of the national leadership of both unions. The political strategy failed in both localities, however. To understand why, we first examine the process through which these political understandings between national union leaders and PKS were translated into local practice, and second, analyse why unions were unable to translate membership into votes for union candidates.

Stage one: cutting deals

Implementing national political strategies at the local level required that PKS party leaders in each locality work with the branch leadership of each union to identify possible union candidates and to develop strategies for mobilizing labour votes for PKS candidates. This process required initiative from the local party branch as well as by the local branch of the union. In Tangerang, SPN officers moved quickly to implement the deal. In Bekasi, union leaders were divided, so the implementation of the national strategy was haphazard.

In Tangerang city, SPN cadres were enthusiastic about the MOU with PKS and proposed six local cadres as possible candidates. However, PKS's national leadership was slow to circulate the MOU to its local affiliates, so when SPN approached the party, local members were unresponsive. Although the local branch of PKS had thought about workers as a voting bloc, they had never considered recruiting unionists as candidates. As a cadre party, however, the PKS chapter moved forward with vetting candidates once they had lists of potential candidates from SPN. Only one of the six, Pramuji, passed muster. Disgusted that SPN had only nominated men, women activists in the union lobbied for the inclusion of Siti Istikharoh, a prominent local SPN activist. As PKS needed more women candidates,³⁵ the leadership was willing to consider her candidacy. After surviving an interview with the party's religious leaders, PKS agreed to include her on its ticket. PKS placed both Pramuji and Siti on the ballot in Tangerang city's second district. Siti was seventh on the slate, and Pramuji was eighth. Pramuji withdrew from the race, preferring not to compete against a fellow SPN official.

In Bekasi, the local leadership was less enthusiastic about the possibility of running candidates. Some of the leadership was eager to engage, and most of these individuals were PKS supporters. The majority of the branch leadership, however, was unenthusiastic about union officers running for legislative office. They recognized the need to participate in electoral politics but feared that premature engagement in politics could endanger solidarity among members and tear the federation apart. They worried that the national leadership was moving too fast and that FSPMI needed more time to prepare and to educate members about union engagement in politics. Moreover, some leaders feared that participation in politics would distract cadres from their union work. Mistrust of political parties also ran deep, since none of them had made workers' issues a priority.³⁶ These leaders suspected that parties just wanted to use unions as vote getters.

Given these doubts, branch leaders moved forward without enthusiasm. They did, however, follow the DPP's directive to identify potential candidates. The DPP persuaded the national leaderships of PKS and PAN to sponsor some candidates in Bekasi – two for PKS, one for PAN – and recommended three local cadres as candidates. The plan went awry, however, once discussions for positions on the ballot began. Local branches of the political parties, not the party's central leadership, controlled the slate for local races, so FSPMI cadres had to bargain directly with them over positions on the ticket.³⁷ Understandably, local party officials preferred

to allocate the top slots to long-time party activists. Local union cadres were incensed about being offered nomor sepatu, which in their view meant that the parties wanted to use the unions as vote getters but did not want to give union cadres a real chance of winning.³⁸ The branch leadership ceased negotiations with political parties but agreed to support the campaigns of FSPMI members who decided to run individually. The large parties shunned these individuals, however, and only three ended up running for local office in Bekasi district, all for tiny parties that had little chance of winning any seats.³⁹

Stage two: turning membership into votes

For union candidates to win, unions needed to mobilize their members to vote for these candidates. Unions have some important advantages in reaching potential voters. Through their membership rolls and workplace presence, they can reach out to their members at home and at work. Moreover, as organizations dedicated to advancing the economic welfare of their membership, union candidates who have fought for the members have reservoirs of credibility that should lead members to vote for them. Translating membership into votes for union candidates, however, requires that members know that union cadres are running for office and that they have sufficient name recognition so that union members can locate them on the ballot paper. With more than two dozen parties, each running numerous candidates in local and national legislative races, the ballot paper in 2009 was huge, disorienting many voters.

In Tangerang city, where SPN cadres supported the MOU with PKS, Siti's campaign needed to get word out to SPN members that she was running. Her chances of winning improved after the Constitutional Court ruled shortly before the election that the number of votes received by a candidate, not the candidate's place on the party list, determined who won seats in local and national legislative contests.⁴⁰ Consequently, parties could not (legally) transfer votes from winning candidates to candidates higher on the slate. Having withdrawn from the race, Pramuji threw his support behind Siti's campaign, which assured that SPN's votes would not be split between two candidates in that district. Siti concentrated her campaigning on the estimated 85% of union members who did not have rusted-on political allegiances by engaging directly with the union's workplace units.

Despite these favourable circumstances, Siti did not win a seat. According to the official tally, she received the fourth most votes on PKS's slate, a fairly impressive result since she was seventh on the ballot. The reasons that she did not gain a seat are manifold, but the most important ones were SPN's organizational shortcomings and the power that parties had over vote counting.

In terms of organizational shortcomings, SPN's membership data were patchy. Each plant-level union had membership records, but incomplete records of member addresses. These data were important for electoral mapping, since workers did not necessarily vote in the district in which they worked. In 2009 SPN had plant-level unions in 32 factories in Tangerang city, but the

majority of members who worked in the city lived elsewhere and hence could not vote for Siti.⁴¹ To be more strategic in selecting the optimal electoral district for union candidates, SPN needed better information. In addition, SPN did not raise money for Siti's campaign and, although individuals were supportive, the branch leadership did not provide robust institutional support to her. As a first-time candidate running with limited funds, the union's organizational support would have helped to level the playing field. Siti thus had to rely primarily on the network of women activists in SPN who had championed her candidacy in the first place.⁴²

In addition to these organizational issues, party control over the vote counting process was also a factor. Prior to the Constitutional Court decision, parties mostly worried that other parties would steal their votes. The interests of all candidates running for a party were therefore aligned: the party needed scrutineers to prevent other parties from distorting the count. But with the Constitutional Court ruling that the candidates with the most votes should win, candidates *within* parties now had to worry that other candidates from their party would steal their votes. In the 2009 elections, many candidates spent enormous sums to hire scrutineers for each polling station, since each polling place conducts a public count of the vote. Once the ballot boxes leave the polling stations, votes are tabulated again at the village and sub-district levels, and votes can be stolen at each stage of the tabulation.

PKS had party-designated scrutineers at each stage of the vote counting, but Siti also stationed supporters at ballot boxes, who made a record of the tabulations. Siti's scrutineers reported that she received a far higher vote count than indicated in the official tally.⁴³ Her scrutineers estimated that she received about 4000 votes, enough to be elected. Siti's supporters were unable to observe the vote counting at higher levels, where parties each designated their scrutineers. The "migration" of votes from one candidate to another is understandably a sensitive subject within parties. While no party official would comment on specific cases, sitting legislators agreed that such illegal vote transfers were increasingly likely, since the Constitutional Court decision pitted candidates within a party against each other.

In Bekasi district, the three candidates ran for small parties, and none was well-known among members. Given this, their success depended on the union campaigning for them. Collaboration between candidates and FSPMI's local branch, however, was minimal. Campaigning was also made more difficult by the DPP's policy forbidding the use of the union's symbol and name by FSPMI candidates. Plant-level leadership was also reluctant to facilitate campaigning at their workplaces when the federation had not officially endorsed the candidate. It was little surprise, then, that none of the union candidates polled well.

The view from below

Given the large memberships of both FSPMI and SPN in Bekasi and Tangerang respectively, union candidates should have been able to win seats if members had voted for worker candidates. The previous section examined what unions did – or did not do – as organizations, how these

choices affected individual campaigns, and some of the unanticipated problems that arose as unions worked with parties. In this section, we examine unions' electoral engagement from a different level of analysis, based on a survey of voters in two districts where union candidates ran for office. The survey was administered in late 2009 in District 2 of Tangerang City and in early 2010 in District 1 of Bekasi district. It included 200 workers from each locality: 100 who were members of the union that ran a candidate in that district (FSPMI in Bekasi, SPN in Tangerang), 50 who were members of other unions, and 50 non-unionized workers. Surveyors used snowballing methods within worker communities to reach the targeted number of respondents in each category, and surveyors interviewed each respondent. The survey contained 89 questions pertaining to voting behaviour, the political role of unions, and socio-economic background.⁴⁴ These data tell us, for example, whether (a) workers knew that union candidates ran for office, (b) whether those who knew that they were running voted for them, and (c) whether those who did not know that union candidates were running would have considered voting for such candidates if they had run.

Awareness about union candidates

The survey indicates that few respondents were aware that union candidates were running for office (see Figure 1). When asked whether there was a union candidate running for office in their electoral district, only 21% answered yes. As would be expected, unionized workers were more likely to know (26%) than non-unionized workers (8%). In Bekasi, 25% of FSPMI respondents knew there was a union candidate in their district, compared to 32% of SPN respondents in Tangerang, which suggests that SPN more effectively informed its members about its candidates than FSPMI. However, a higher percentage of SPN members thought that there were no union candidates in their district (47%) than FSPMI members (40%). As many as 36% of FSPMI respondents and 21% of SPN respondents were uncertain whether there was a candidate from their union.

Given the complexity of the ballot, respondents were also asked to name the candidate and the party for which s/he ran. Here numbers plummeted. Only nine out of 200 respondents in Tangerang identified Siti as a labour candidate running for PKS, seven of whom were SPN members. In other words, only 7% of SPN respondents correctly identified their union's candidate. Two out of 200 respondents in Bekasi, both members of FSPMI, identified Mirati. Neither correctly named the party for which she ran. In short, although both unions were ineffective in raising awareness among their members, SPN performed slightly better.

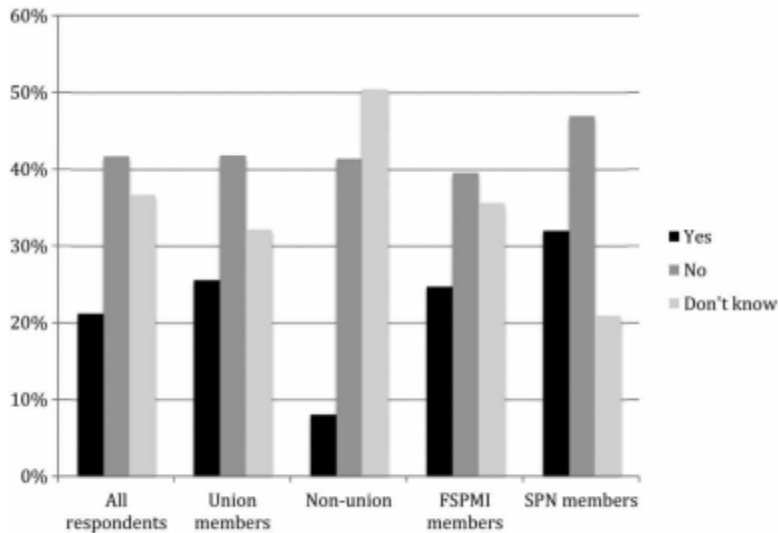


Figure 1. Was there a union candidate in your electoral district?

Did respondents vote for union candidates?

Of the respondents who knew there was a union candidate, only about one in four claimed to have voted for them (see Figure 2). The inability of most respondents to recall the name of the candidates raises some doubts about this response, but the survey was conducted some months after the elections, so some respondents may have forgotten candidates' names in the interim. One-third of the respondents who correctly identified Siti as a PKS candidate voted for her, and one of these three was not a member of SPN. Thus, of the seven SPN members who still recalled Siti's name, only two voted for her (one of the seven was not registered to vote).

These are very small numbers so strong conclusions cannot be drawn from them, but they provide some preliminary evidence that unions cannot presume that their members will vote for union cadres. In addition to doing a better job of informing their members about union candidates, they also need to convince them that they should vote for them. Of the FSPMI and SPN members who knew there was a union candidate but did not vote for them, the most common reason given was that the respondent did not know the individual. Of course, voters seldom *know* the candidates they vote for in elections, but the salient point is not that there is a double standard for union candidates but rather that some union members are wary of voting for union cadres they do not know, which reinforces the point that unions that run cadres as candidates need to do a better job of acquainting the candidates with their members.

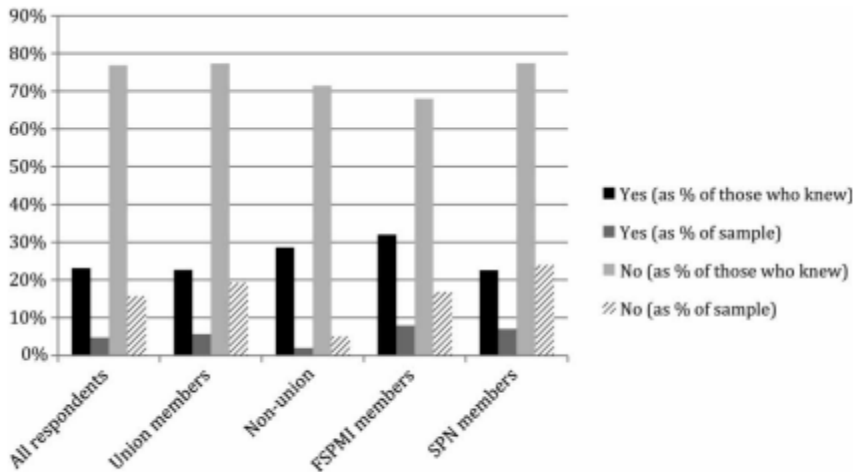


Figure 2. Did you vote for a union candidate?

Are union members willing to vote for union candidates?

The survey also included a question that assessed whether workers were in principle open to voting for union candidates. The respondents overwhelmingly answered yes (87%) and there was little difference among subgroups (see Figure 3). Respondents were also asked to nominate what conditions might lead them to vote for a union candidate. The strongest responses were (1) knowing the candidate, (2) being a member of the same union, (3) endorsement by their union, and (4) the belief that union candidates were more likely to support policies that benefited them.

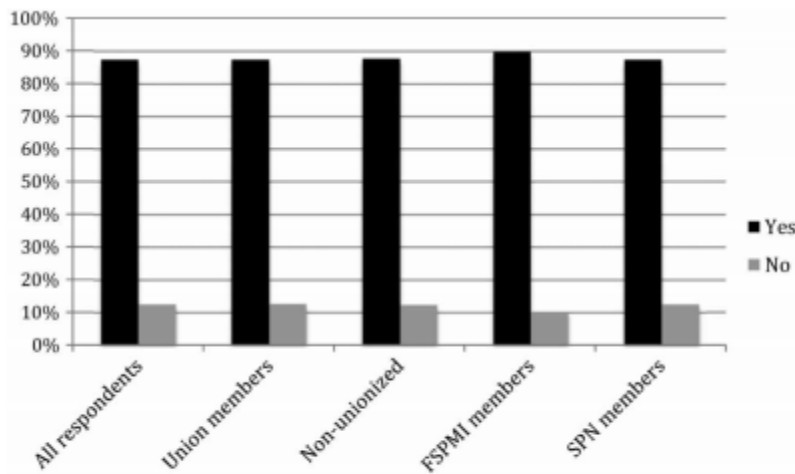


Figure 3. Would you be willing to vote for a labour candidate?

The survey data also provide some illuminating information that has important consequences for the development of more effective electoral strategies. The first pertains to the selection of partisan allies. SPN formed an alliance with PKS, but their members in Tangerang were not

strong supporters of the party. In the 2009 legislative elections, only 13% of respondents voted for PKS. By contrast, 28% of FSPMI respondents in Bekasi voted for PKS in the 2009 legislative elections. PKS was therefore a much stronger match with the partisan affiliations of FSPMI's membership in Bekasi than to SPN's membership in Tangerang. Although party loyalties have become more fluid in recent years – voters are increasingly shifting their votes from one party to another between elections and splitting their votes in different races in the same election cycle⁴⁵ – members may have strong aversions to particular parties. In the case of SPN in Tangerang, many of its members may have been unwilling to vote for any PKS candidate, whether union-backed or not. If unions wish to better understand electoral dynamics, it would be necessary to survey their members to get a sense of which parties they would not vote for under any circumstances.

A second contextual factor revealed by the survey that may have influenced Siti's performance was that 12% of SPN respondents were not registered to vote in the legislative elections (only one of these correctly identified Siti as a PKS candidate, however). The 2009 elections were marred by problems with voter registration.⁴⁶ Measures were taken after 2009 to reduce the obstacles to voter registration; however, unions should nevertheless be prepared to verify voter rolls prior to elections to ensure that their members will be able to vote.

In sum, the survey demonstrates that labour candidates did not effectively reach working-class voters in their district. Only one in five respondents knew there were union candidates, and few of these respondents could correctly identify the name of the candidate and the party for which Siti ran. The majority of respondents who correctly identified the labour candidates in their district did not vote for them; however, most respondents were willing to vote for union candidates, indicating that if unions do a better job of acquainting their members (and non-members) with union candidates, these candidates may fare significantly better in future elections.

Conclusion

Features inherited from the authoritarian past – the decimation of the left, the severing of links between unions and parties, and low union density – combined with new features of the transition period – organizational fragmentation and unfavourable party and electoral legislation – have created a complex political terrain for unions to navigate. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, these structural features have made it difficult for labour to break into the electoral arena in Indonesia, as evidenced by the outcomes of union experiments in the 2009 electoral cycle.

At first glance, SPN's and FSPMI's unorthodox tactic of running candidates for parties that have not put forward labour-friendly platforms appears an abject failure. However, since both unions were half-hearted in their implementation of the national political strategy, neither case provides a strong test of the effectiveness of the partnering strategy. The case studies do, however, highlight useful lessons for future electoral endeavours. The first and most obvious lesson is that

the national union leadership must convince branch-level leaders of the soundness of their electoral plans well in advance of elections. In Bekasi, FSPMI's local leadership was unconvinced by the union's national strategy, and hence did not implement it. Second, even in Tangerang, where many SPN cadres supported the MOU, the local union was poorly equipped to carry it out, which suggests that SPN's national leadership needed to provide more guidance and support to local branches on how to successfully implement the national strategy. Third, neither union gave much consideration to the problem of translating membership to votes. Quite apart from the issues of patchy membership data, poor electoral mapping and weak campaigning, both unions presumed that members would vote for union cadres. Our data provide weak support for this presumption, but they do show that workers are willing to support union candidates that meet certain standards (for example, honesty). If unions nominate reputable leaders and get the word out, these candidates would likely fare much better in future elections.

A more fundamental issue for unions in Indonesia, however, is whether electoral participation without a labour party or more structured ties to a programmatic party will pay off in any meaningful way. The case studies demonstrate that parties were reluctant to support labour candidates, and since parties are not committed to labour issues, unions cannot count on them to pursue pro-labour policies – the whole point of endeavouring to place union cadres in legislatures in the first place. Given the structural limitations of unions – their geographic concentration, fragmentation, and small size – the parties are only likely to cede them spots in a small number of strategic races. In other words, even if the strategy succeeds, it is unlikely that there will ever be more than a dozen labour legislators in the national chamber, although it is possible that a concentration of labour candidates could emerge in a small number of local parliaments.

The question then is whether the electoral engagement of unions can stimulate the formation of more programmatic parties that tap into a broader working-class base. South Korea's experience is instructive. South Korea shares Indonesia's experience of exclusionary corporatism. Unions there also entered the democratic era without partisan ties; parties were also non-programmatic, and there were no leftist parties. Unlike in Indonesia, however, massive labour mobilizations accompanied the transition to democracy, and Korea's unions are far less fragmented, since the bulk of unionized workers belong to the two major confederations. Even so, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) only established the Democratic Labour Party in 2000, more than a decade after the transition to democracy. Moreover, without subsequent electoral reform that increased the proportionality of voting and broke the stranglehold of regional parties, the party would not have become a national player. This experience suggests that, despite the unfavourable legacy of the Suharto period, Indonesian unions might have a chance of establishing a labour party if unions form partnerships for electoral engagement and work with civil society groups to reform the electoral system.⁴⁷

The bottom-up and localized strategy currently being pursued by Indonesian unions shows little promise of laying the groundwork for a labour party, as it perpetuates divisions among unions by pitting union candidates against each other in the same electoral district. Moreover, in Indonesia's highly competitive elections, money rather than policy has been the main tool for winning votes. For established parties, pinning down a loyal constituency is nevertheless alluring in a setting in which votes swing dramatically from election to election. Could the strategy of running labour candidates in established parties encourage one of Indonesia's major parties to become a programmatic party that cultivates a popular base by delivering policies that benefit union constituencies? The geographic concentration of union membership and the unproven capacity of unions to mobilize their members to deliver votes make this outcome unlikely. At the same time, however, the engagement of unions in the electoral sphere constitutes an important step forward in the consolidation of Indonesia's democracy that may just contribute in the longer term to the emergence of a more programmatic politics.

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Notes

¹ Caraway, Cook, and Crowley, *Working Through the Past*; Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle*; Hadiz, *Workers and the State*

² Aspinall, "Democratisation, the Working Class;" Brown, "Labor and Modes of Participation."

³ Boudreau, "Elections, Repression and Authoritarian Survival."

⁴ Jayasuriya and Rodan, "Beyond Hybrid Regimes."

⁵ Crouch, *The Army and Politics*; Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*.

⁶ Hawkins, "Labour in Developing Countries."

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- ⁷ Ford, "Testing the Limits of Corporatism"; Ford, *Workers and Intellectuals*; Hadiz, *Workers and the State*; Schaarschmidt-Kohl, "Indonesian Trade Unions."
- ⁸ Ford, *Workers and Intellectuals*.
- ⁹ Quinn, *Trade Union Membership*.
- ¹⁰ Caraway, "Explaining the Dominance of Legacy Unions."
- ¹¹ Elliott, "Bersatoe Kita Berdiri "; Hawkins, "Labour in Developing Countries."; Tedjasukmana, *The Political Character*.
- ¹² Elliott, "Bersatoe Kita Berdiri ."
- ¹³ Crouch, *The Army and Politics*.
- ¹⁴ Some SPSI officials belonged to these parties but held peripheral positions and could at most hope to be awarded the occasional seat in the powerless national legislature. See Hadiz, *Workers and the State*.
- ¹⁵ Ford, *Workers and Intellectuals*.
- ¹⁶ Ford, "A Victor's History."
- ¹⁷ Aspinall, "Democratisation, the Working Class."
- ¹⁸ Caraway, "Protective Repression, International Pressure, and Institutional Design."
- ¹⁹ Caraway, "Explaining the Dominance of Legacy Unions"; Ford, "Continuity and Change."
- ²⁰ Murillo, *Labor Unions, Partisan Coalitions, and Market Reforms in Latin America*
- ²¹ Burgess, *Parties and Unions in the New Global Economy*; Lee, "Labor's Political Representation;" Ost, "The Peculiarities of Communism," Murillo *Labor Unions, Partisan Coalitions, and Market Reforms*.
- ²² Adler and Webster, "Challenging Transition Theory;" Keck, *The Workers' Party and Democratization in Brazil*; Lee, "Labor's Political Representation."
- ²³ Avdagic, "Loyalty and Power in Union-Party Alliances."
- ²⁴ Aspinall, "Elections and the Normalization of Politics"; Hadiz, *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia*; Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*; Winters, *Oligarchy*.
- ²⁵ Mietzner, "Party Financing in Post-Soeharto Indonesia"; Slater, "Indonesia's Accountability Trap."
- ²⁶ Aspinall, "Elections and the Normalization of Politics"; Tomsa, "The Indonesian Party System"; Ufen, "From Aliran to Dealignment."
- ²⁷ The centripetal nature of Indonesia's party system is largely a product of all parties being 'centrist' in orientation. Mietzner, "Comparing Indonesia's Party Systems."
- ²⁸ Caraway and Ford, "Labor and Politics."
- ²⁹ In addition, as voter identification with parties has diminished – as reflected in more split ticket voting and by voting for different parties across election cycles – parties have stronger incentives than before to pin down a base. For a discussion of voting behaviour in Indonesia, see Mujani and Liddle, "Personalities, Parties, and Voters."
- ³⁰ Indra ran unsuccessfully as a legislative candidate for national office for PKS in the 2009 elections in Banten province. When the winning PKS candidate died, he was asked to fill the seat.
- ³¹ Ford, "Economic Unionism."
- ³² Ford, "Learning by Doing."
- ³³ Bekasi is divided into two local administrative units: Bekasi city (*kota*) and Bekasi district (*kabupaten*). We focus on Bekasi district.
- ³⁴ As in Bekasi, Tangerang is composed of multiple administrative units: Tangerang city, Tangerang district, and South Tangerang district. Our case study concentrates on Tangerang city.
- ³⁵ By law, at least one in three of a party's candidates must be women.
- ³⁶ For a discussion of voter antipathy toward political parties, see Tan, "Anti-party Reaction in Indonesia."
- ³⁷ Poor communication between the national and local PKS branches also meant that by the time they opened discussions, local PKS branches had often already determined their slates.
- ³⁸ In Indonesia, high numbers on the ticket are commonly referred to as *nomor sepatu* (shoe size). People with low numbers such as one, two, or three, usually stand a better chance of winning, whereas those with numbers five or higher stand a poor chance of being elected. As the system changed from a closed to open ticket system only weeks before the election, at the time that numbers were allocated, a *nomor sepatu* signalled almost certain failure.
- ³⁹ Jefri Helian ran for Democratic Nationhood Party (PDK) in District 3, Mirati ran for Indonesian Justice and Unity Party (PKPI) in District 1, and Supriyadi ran for Archipelagic Republic Party (PRN) in District 2.
- ⁴⁰ Buehler, "Decentralisation and Local Democracy."
- ⁴¹ This was also the case in Bekasi district: FSPMI had 40,000 members who worked there but only about one-third lived there.

⁴² Gender dynamics likely played a role as well. Although SPN's membership is overwhelmingly women, men predominate at all leadership levels. SPN's leadership did not nominate her initially, which may in part also explain the lacklustre support that they gave to her once she did run.

⁴³ Candidates (union and non-union) interviewed in a range of districts made similar allegations about vote-shifting.

⁴⁴ Almost two-thirds of the respondents were men, and the overwhelming majority (85.2%) of respondents were married.

⁴⁵ Liddle and Mujani, "Leadership, Party, and Religion."; Mujani and Liddle, "Personalities, Parties, and Voters."

⁴⁶ Serious problems with voter registration also occurred in Batam. See Ford, "Learning by Doing."

⁴⁷ These coalitions were important in the fight for electoral reform in South Korea. Lee and Lim, "The Rise of the Labor Party."