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BOOK REVIEW

Institutional Design and Money Politics: Vote Buying in Post-Suharto Era

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Muhtadi, Burhanuddin. 2020. *Kuasa Uang: Politik Uang dalam Pemilu Pasca-Orde Baru*. Jakarta: KPG

The collapse of the New Order has opened up political opportunities and space for Indonesians. Defying expectations of improvements in democratic quality, the democracy in Indonesia during these two decades of the *Reformasi* era has maintained its clientelist characteristic. Vote buying has remained rampant in elections. Burhanuddin Muhtadi's book eloquently discusses the dynamics of money politics, particularly the factors shaping its practice, extensiveness, effectiveness in gaining votes, and organization.

This book states that vote buying, a common form of electoral manipulation in new democracies, is also found in Indonesia. Instead of reducing clientelism, the development of post-New Order democracy was marked by an increase in vote buying. The first question that Muhtadi dealt with pertains to the factors that shape the pattern of vote buying in Indonesia.

Muhtadi firstly touched upon the change of the party system after the New Order. The party system, which previously only acknowledged three parties—Golkar, PDI, and PPP—has been expanded to include more parties. This can be seen from the formation of hundreds of parties in the 1999, 2004, and 2009 elections. Unfortunately, the political system's change has not been followed by parties' political credibility and ideological differentiation. In other words, it has been difficult to

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differentiate political parties based on their policy stances or platforms. Parties have mainly been political vehicles for politicians to run in elections.

Another explanation by the author revolved around the changes in Indonesia's electoral system, which has undergone three alterations from closed to semi-open to open list. These changes have impacts on the electoral strategies that legislative candidates employ to get votes. In a closed-list proportional system, voters could only vote for one party, which pushed candidates to focus on winning positions in lists within their respective parties. The transition to an open-list system gave voters the freedom to choose candidates directly and consequently urged candidates to adapt and shift their focus on gaining votes. Muhtadi argued that since the implementation of the open-list system, candidates have become more motivated to develop personal appeal. The main focus of the competition has shifted to internal-party rivalry, urging candidates to stand out from the rest within their own parties. Forming success teams (*tim sukses*) outside the formal party structure has been a common strategy among candidates.

The study found that for the past 15 years, there has been a decline in party ID. This could be seen from the weakening of voter attachment to parties—in 1999, 86% of voters identified themselves with a particular party, and in 2014, the number went down to 14.9%. The decline in party identification strengthens the argument that electoral competition in Indonesia is becoming more candidate-centric. In the practice that occurred in Indonesia and the other new democracies, legislative candidates ended up engaging in money politics to make themselves stand out against other candidates in their parties.

This book seeks to explain the implications of the changes in institutional design since 1998 that have created more opportunity for clientelistic strategies. More specifically, this book states that there is a correlation between the changes in the post-New Order electoral system and the changes in the form and mechanism of vote-buying in Indonesia. This condition could not be separated from the vulnerable state of democratic institutions—including political parties—which

makes the designed electoral and political systems tend to provide incentives for politicians to use clientelistic strategies instead. To put it simply, the main argument that this book forwards is that the open-list proportional system during the *Reformasi* has increased the practice of money politics.

The surveys that the study used show that Indonesia is ranked third in terms of frequency of money politics after Uganda and Benin. In the 2014 legislative elections, 25% to 33% of voters—or between 47 to 62 million people—were offered monetary incentives in exchange for votes. Using the highest estimate, this means that every one out of three eligible voters has been exposed to money politics. This number is three times the number in the 2009 elections. The book also shows that money politics has become a new normality and is widely practiced in elections at both national and local levels.

The rampant use of vote buying leads to a couple more follow-up questions: What are the factors that shape an individual's likelihood of being exposed to money politics? How are voters targeted? This book explains that there are two main streams in the debate about targets of clientelistic practices: the core-voter and swing-voter models. The first model argues that parties distribute material benefits to their supporters or loyal voters to mobilize them to vote on election day. The latter view money politics as a strategy to influence undecided voters.

Muhtadi's surveys, administered before and after election days, found that party identification has been one of the factors shaping the decision to practice money politics. On the surface, this finding seems to follow the core-voter model. It is very likely that this is due to the significance of internal party competition caused by the open-list proportional system. However, candidates cannot win by simply targeting partisan voters as the number of voters who identify themselves with a particular party is low. A national survey ahead of the 2014 elections found that only 15% of respondents identified themselves with a particular party. Voters who had been consistently voting for the same party in 2009 and 2014 were as low as 22%. Meanwhile, the percentage of swing voters or those who did not identify with any party reached 85%.

Muhtadi found that there has been a mistargeting of voters by politicians and their success teams. Although candidates and their success teams claimed that they target partisan voters, this study found the contrary, suggesting a discrepancy between the candidates' and success teams' intentions and the realization.

Muhtadi argued that vote buying in Indonesia could not be explained using the core-voter nor the swing-voter model. He offered an alternative model called the personal loyalist model that combines the core-voter strategy with an emphasis on the use of the candidates' and success teams' personal networks. This is supported by findings that a large portion of material rewards have been received by voters who did not identify themselves with any particular party but are part of the candidates' and their success teams' personal clientelist networks. Thus, it is shown that the operation of vote buying goes beyond party bases because both core and swing voters were found to have received incentives.

According to Muhtadi, this method of vote buying is also prone to fraud and malpractice. It has been found that many recipients of monetary incentives did not vote for the candidates who distributed them. This means that although candidates and their success teams have personal networks, they do not have the means to guarantee voters' commitments to support them. In other words, the money is prone to corruption. Due to a lack of monitoring from candidates, some teams can exaggerate the number of targets in their operations so that candidates allocate more resources needed to buy votes.

Although these risks exist, these clientelist practices remain popular in Indonesia. The latter part of the book answers the question of why candidates still invest significant resources for vote buying. How effective is money politics in swaying voters' preferences? Muhtadi's research found that money politics has the capability of influencing voters' preferences up to 10%. In an open-list system, competition among candidates is highly competitive—so competitive that candidates only need to be ahead of their internal-party rivals by a small margin to win seats. The 2014 electoral results showed that the average victory margin

to beat internal-party rivals is only 1.65%. This book argues this has driven many candidates to buy votes.

However, this is not the only reason for vote buying. Several countries have been able to carry out highly competitive elections without tainting the competition with money politics. This book shows that there are at least two reasons why vote buying remains rampant in Indonesia. The first is the prisoner's dilemma. All candidates will benefit if everyone agrees not to buy votes. The prisoner's dilemma is a situation when a candidate violates this agreement and chooses to buy votes, which would place the other candidates at a major disadvantage. In such a situation, candidates who do not take part in money politics would lose. Candidates are pushed to anticipate such a situation and become likely to employ vote buying tactics, despite the possibility that the strategy may not be efficient. The second reason is that although vote buying does not guarantee victory, this strategy is relatively more efficient than other electoral strategies. Candidates and their success teams see money politics as the better strategy for getting votes in comparison to other mobilization strategies.

This book contributes to the academic literature on vote buying. Firstly, from a methodological standpoint, the research differs from prior studies that have been divided along the ethnography-versus-survey line by employing a mixed-method. This choice was made to overcome the methodological challenges in analyzing patterns of money politics in Indonesia. Studies that strictly apply qualitative approaches tend to find difficulty in identifying causal mechanisms and measuring the intensity and breadth of clientelism within a population. On the other hand, purely quantitative approaches tend to lack contextualization in data interpretation.

Secondly, Muhtadi's study emphasized the importance of context in understanding how vote buying is practiced. Existing theories on vote buying—which have been based on cases where party structures are heavily rooted in society—are not sufficient in explaining vote buying in Indonesia, which is heavily shaped by changes in electoral systems, intensive internal party competition, and candidates' reliance on personal

networks rather than their own party structures. This study also shows that partisanship in the Indonesian context is not always related to party identification; it can also mean identification with informal networks.

Lastly, Muhtadi excellently shows how the mainstream models of vote buying are insufficient to explain the practice of vote buying in Indonesia. To fill this gap, he offers a personal loyalist model.

This book is recommended for academics wishing to deepen their study on money politics. It is also an excellent reference for policy-makers to evaluate Indonesia's party and electoral systems and improve Indonesia's democracy.