



Patronage Networks and Power Disparities: The Legacy of Political Patronage in Indonesia's Governance and Democracy

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Abstract

This study examines the role and impact of political patronage on Indonesia's governance and its contribution to the power disparity. It offers strategies to mitigate patronage's negative effects and promote effective governance, highlighting its persistence as a sign of Indonesia's still-developing democracy. Using a qualitative descriptive method and literature review, data collection includes primary sources like research reports and surveys, and secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and news. Key search terms include patronage, clientelism, corruption, oligarchy, and money politics. Findings reveal that patronage remains widespread through vote buying, selective distribution of goods and services, and misuse of public funds for elections. Historically, patronage dates back to pre-independence (tribute systems), post-independence (oligarchic consolidation), and reformasi (non-merit-based governance). Under the New Order, patronage networks became deeply institutionalized, hindering democratic progress. Today, patronage persists in regional elections, where incumbents act as patrons appointing officials, while civil servants seek career advancement through these networks. The social, political, and economic entrenchment of patronage weakens institutions, erodes public trust, reduces competency in governance, and limits fair, pro-people policies. To address these challenges, this study recommends strengthening anti-corruption bodies, enhancing political party funding regulations, ensuring merit-based appointments, and improving the electoral system for greater inclusivity and accountability.

Keywords

Political Patronage; Institutional Governance; Power Disparities; Democratic Transition; Electoral Reforms

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran dan dampak patronase politik terhadap tata kelola pemerintahan di Indonesia dan kontribusinya terhadap kesenjangan kekuasaan. Penelitian ini menawarkan strategi untuk mengurangi dampak negatif patronase dan mendorong tata kelola pemerintahan yang efektif, serta menyoroti keberadaannya sebagai tanda demokrasi Indonesia yang masih berkembang. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan tinjauan literatur, pengumpulan data mencakup sumber-sumber primer seperti laporan penelitian dan survei, serta sumber-sumber sekunder seperti artikel jurnal, buku, dan berita. Istilah-istilah kunci yang dicari meliputi patronase, klientelisme, korupsi, oligarki, dan politik uang. Temuan-temuan menunjukkan bahwa patronase masih meluas melalui pembelian

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suara, distribusi barang dan jasa secara selektif, dan penyalahgunaan dana publik untuk pemilu. Secara historis, patronase sudah ada sejak masa pra-kemerdekaan (sistem upeti), pascakemerdekaan (konsolidasi oligarki), dan reformasi (tata kelola pemerintahan yang tidak berbasis jasa). Di bawah Orde Baru, jaringan patronase menjadi sangat terlembaga sehingga menghambat kemajuan demokrasi. Saat ini, patronase masih terus berlanjut dalam pemilihan kepala daerah, di mana petahana bertindak sebagai patron yang menunjuk pejabat, sementara pegawai negeri sipil mencari peningkatan karir melalui jaringan ini. Patronase sosial, politik, dan ekonomi melemahkan lembaga-lembaga, mengikis kepercayaan publik, mengurangi kompetensi dalam tata kelola pemerintahan, dan membatasi kebijakan yang adil dan pro-rakyat. Untuk mengatasi tantangan-tantangan tersebut, studi ini merekomendasikan penguatan lembaga antikorupsi, perbaikan peraturan pendanaan partai politik, memastikan penunjukan berdasarkan prestasi, dan perbaikan sistem pemilu agar lebih inklusif dan akuntabel.

Kata Kunci

Patronase Politik; Tata Kelola Kelembagaan; Kesenjangan Kekuasaan; Transisi Demokrasi; Reformasi Pemilu

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Introduction

Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy with a population exceeding 270 million (Husna & Fahrimal, 2021; International Trade Administration, 2023), has undergone significant political transformations since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. This transition, often referred to as the *Reformasi* era, is characterized by multiparty elections, decentralization of power, and expanded civil liberties (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Natsir & Ridha, 2018).

The democratization process was anticipated to enhance political equity and reduce corruption, as democratic systems theoretically provide more robust mechanisms for checks and balances as well as accountability (Diamond, 2008). Indonesia has indeed made progress in this direction, evidenced by the establishment of institutions such as the *Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi* (Corruption Eradication Commission) and the implementation of direct local elections (Buehler, 2010).

Despite advances in democratic structures, political patronage remains deeply embedded in Indonesia's governance framework. In the social science literature, patron is the concept of social status relationships and control of economic resources. The concept of patron is always followed by the concept of client, without the concept of client the concept of patron certainly does not exist. Therefore, the two terms form a special relationship called clientelism. The patron-client concept, which has its roots in Blau's social exchange theory, was formulated to analyze

transactions in social relations. Economic exchanges, which are characterized by calculation and self-interest among actors, are contrasted with more socially oriented transactions, such as those that occur in role-based relationships with intertwined rights and obligations, especially among individuals who have strong social ties.

This study examines the social factors and conditions that influence the types of transactions likely to occur between actors. A key premise is that the structural and temporal context of interactions—including the nature of past and anticipated relationships—shapes actors' orientations toward one another, their preferences, decision-making processes, and patterns of interaction within governance. This concept also suggests that societal imbalances in material and social conditions tend to create power disparities (Spread, 1984). According to social exchange theory, patronage relationships can contribute to the formation of a more integrative social structure. In specific contexts, patronage is often defined as the distribution of material benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for political support (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). This practice continues to play a crucial role in Indonesian politics at both the national and local levels.

However, clientelism extends beyond mere relationships between individual voters, politicians, and brokers. At times, these relationships become institutionalized, reflecting phenomena such as political group support for specific candidates. This dynamic is best understood within the essential framework of clientelism: *quid pro quo*—something given in return for something. Stokes et al. (2013) and Hicken (2011) describe this as a form of "contingent exchange." Patron-client systems thrive in societies facing complex social and economic challenges, such as limited access to natural resources. These dynamics are particularly prevalent among farmers, fishers, and traders in rural or peri-urban areas. In such settings, the relationship between patrons (benefactors) and clients (dependents or workers) is often characterized by the provision of assistance to meet the clients' needs.

In the book "*Democracy for Sale*" by Aspinall & Berenschot (2019), it is shown that economic patronage is used to form clientelist relationships between political elites, politicians, and the public, primarily for electoral purposes. Clientelist practices in Indonesia are characterized by the minimal use of political parties by legislative candidates to win elections; instead, candidates tend to rely more on informal networks. This contrasts with the dominance of political parties in India, where there are numerous organizations and political parties, as India is the world's largest democracy. The different electoral systems, strong political traditions, and more centralized party structures in India make political parties more influential in controlling the electoral process compared to Indonesia.

The implication of these practices is that politicians focus more on winning elections through success teams and the use of money politics. Official institutions, such as political parties, the *Komisi Pemilihan Umum* (General Election Commission), and the *Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum* (Election Supervisory Agency), are often controlled and weakened by political parties. Patronage manifests in forms

such as vote-buying, the distribution of goods to specific groups (club goods), the provision of various social services, and the use of public funds for electoral purposes (pork barrel politics). Moreover, clientelist patterns continue to be favored by politicians for mass mobilization during socialization or campaigns (Anggoro, 2019).

Currently, there is a limited number of studies that deeply examine patronage and clientelism in Indonesian politics. While existing research highlights the significant role of patronage in shaping contemporary Indonesian politics, many aspects remain underexplored. For instance, a comprehensive study of the 2014 legislative elections found that the majority of candidates engaged in various forms of patronage politics, including vote-buying and the distribution of goods to specific groups (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). Local-level research also indicates that patronage networks influence various aspects of governance, from bureaucratic appointments to the allocation of development projects (Berenschot, 2018). These findings underscore the profound impact of patronage on Indonesia's political system and highlight the need for further research to systematically analyze these dynamics.

This study aims to examine the role and impact of political patronage on power disparities within Indonesia's governance framework. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped patronage networks, including their pre-independence origins and their role during the New Order regime—both of which continue to influence contemporary political dynamics and hinder the spirit of *Reformasi*.

Additionally, this research investigates the mechanisms through which patronage operates, particularly how political elites utilize state resources to maintain power through the distribution of material benefits to loyal supporters. The study also assesses the impact of patronage on governance outcomes, focusing on bureaucratic appointments, electoral processes, and policymaking. In many instances, decisions are driven by political loyalty rather than competence, leading to inefficiency and corruption in public administration. Furthermore, this research seeks to identify pathways for reform by evaluating potential strategies to mitigate patronage-driven power imbalances and strengthen democratic accountability. By understanding how patronage network's function, this study aims to provide insights into the broader implications for Indonesia's democratic consolidation and political accountability.

Analyzing the operation of patronage is particularly crucial in understanding how clientelist networks shape electoral competition, political loyalty, and public service delivery. For instance, political elites often manipulate public sector appointments to reinforce their networks, leading to the persistence of corrupt governance practices. By addressing these issues, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on democratic consolidation and the challenges of political accountability in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia.

Method

This research employs a descriptive method to provide a clear, objective, systematic, analytical, and critical depiction of the development of political patronage, its manifestations, power disparities, and its impact on governance in Indonesia (Furidha, 2023). Using a qualitative approach and literature review, the researcher aims to collect theoretical data through an analysis of relevant literature and written sources (Mohajan, 2018). The process begins with identifying relevant data sources, including primary sources such as research reports and survey data, as well as secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and news articles. The criteria for source selection include topic relevance, author credibility, and publication quality (Ahmad & Ayub, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through searches of journal articles, news sources, and printed and electronic books, utilizing reputable platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and university digital libraries. The search keywords included terms such as patronage, clientelism, corruption, oligarchy, and money politics. Once the data were collected, the researcher evaluated each source based on its reliability, validity, and relevance to the research topic (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021; Sugiarta et al., 2023). The selection process involved assessing titles, abstracts, and content to ensure that the obtained information was valid and met the research criteria.

The data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes emerging from the collected data. This study utilized a six-stage thematic analysis technique to interpret qualitative data from reports, survey data, journal articles, books, and news articles (Dilger, 2022). The researcher began by reading and familiarizing themselves with the data, then narrowed it down by selecting key terms such as political patronage, institutional governance, power disparities, democratic transition, and electoral reforms, alongside appropriate citations. The researcher compared and synthesized information from various sources to determine its relevance to the research topic. Data integration was performed to construct a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, with an evaluation of how findings from one source supported or contradicted those from other sources (Liu & Yoon, 2024).

To ensure data reliability, the researcher utilized verified sources and cross-checked findings with other references. Potential biases in source selection and interpretation were mitigated through an objective and systematic approach (Carter et al., 2014; Noble & Heale, 2019). Bias can occur at any stage of research, including study design, data collection, analysis, and publication. Research bias arises from the researcher's subjective beliefs, values, attitudes, or preferences, which may influence the design, execution, or interpretation of research results. Bias may also result from methodological flaws, leading to systematic errors in data collection, analysis, or interpretation. To minimize bias, the researcher evaluated the study design for potential biases in participant selection, data collection, and

analytical techniques. Implementing randomized sampling ensured that each member of the population had an equal chance of selection, thereby reducing selection bias. Additionally, blinding techniques, such as double-blind trials, helped minimize observer bias by preventing both the researcher and participants from knowing group assignments. Furthermore, maintaining transparency through thorough documentation of procedures, decisions, and potential conflicts of interest enabled independent verification and replication, thereby ensuring the study's credibility.

As a result, the researcher coded the data and organized them into categories based on shared characteristics. This process facilitated an understanding of the relationship between patronage networks and power disparities, grounded in Blau's social exchange theory. From the analyzed data, the researcher developed a model positing that “patronage networks are the primary mechanism for perpetuating power disparities in Indonesia.” Based on the patron-client concept, this model examines the development of political patronage, its manifestations, and its impact on governance in Indonesia. The researcher compared the findings with existing theories and previous research to draw valid and comprehensive conclusions.

Discussion

The Origins of Political Patronage in Indonesia

Political patronage in Indonesia is a deeply rooted practice with roots stretching from the colonial era to the present day. The development of this phenomenon was shaped by a combination of political, economic and social factors, which evolved under different regimes while adapting to the changing political landscape. This system laid the foundation for patron-client relationships that continued into the reform period. Understanding these historical origins is crucial to understanding how deeply patronage has been embedded in the culture of politics and governance in Indonesia.

Tracing the historical trajectory of the patron-client system reveals its early seeds in the pre-independence era, particularly during the era of kingdoms. The roots of this system are found in royal regulations, such as the obligation to pay tribute to the king (Suhardiman & Mollinga, 2017). At that time, vast tracts of land were considered the property of the monarch, and those who cultivated them were required to pay taxes, rents, and tributes. The collected tributes were partially allocated to the king and partly distributed to nobles and princes. This practice was seen not as unjust but as a duty owed to the king, thus embedding feudalism within the societal structure and forming the basis for the patron-client system (Rahmawati, 2023).

Feudalism is a social system characterized by a rigid superior-subordinate relationship, heavily reliant on historical social structures based on noble status and land ownership. This system has existed in the Indonesian archipelago since the era

of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms, including the Old Mataram, Kediri, and Majapahit Kingdoms. During this period, kings were regarded as divine incarnations or representatives of God, granting them the exclusive right to control land and distribute its management (Singgih, 2025).

Nobles and landlords held absolute power over commoners, who were entirely dependent on the ruler. The authority of the ruling class was unquestionable, as criticism or opposition was virtually impossible. In this context, the people's existence was perceived as granted by the ruler rather than based on inherent rights (Graca, 2023). Consequently, societal obligations were prioritized over individual rights. This dynamic fostered a patron-client relationship, wherein the commoners depended on rulers who controlled access to land and other essential resources.

Historical references, such as those by Ricklefs (2001), indicate that the origins of political patronage in Indonesia can also be traced to the Dutch colonial era (1602–1949). During this period, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company) and later the colonial administration employed an indirect governance system that heavily depended on local elites, known as *priyayi* in Java and as *rajas* or *datuks* in other regions. These local leaders were co-opted into the colonial administration to act as intermediaries between the Dutch government and the indigenous population. The hierarchical administrative structure entrusted these elites with tasks such as tax collection, law enforcement, and local governance. In return, they were granted economic privileges and political power, creating a mutually beneficial and interdependent system. This arrangement became the foundation for the entrenched patron-client relationships that permeated Indonesian society. The implementation of the *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) in the 19th century further entrenched patronage dynamics. Under this system, farmers were required to cultivate export crops such as coffee and sugar for sale to the government at predetermined prices. Local officials, serving as intermediaries, often exploited their positions for personal gain, exacerbating power asymmetries and deepening the lower class's dependence on their patrons (Ricklefs, 2001).

The end of Dutch colonial rule in 1949 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Indonesian political history. The struggle for independence and the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia did not dismantle the patronage networks developed during colonial times. Instead, these networks were repurposed to serve the interests of the new political elites. In the early post-independence years, Indonesia faced significant challenges, including political instability, economic hardship, and regional rebellions. To consolidate power and maintain national unity, President Sukarno relied on patronage systems to secure the loyalty of military leaders, regional commanders, and political allies (Crouch, 2007). The period of Guided Democracy (1957–1965) saw the centralization of power in the executive branch and the expansion of patronage networks to sustain political stability (Feith, 2007).

The institutionalization of political patronage reached its peak during the New Order regime under President Suharto (1967–1998). Suharto's ascent to power was

marked by rapid and sustained economic growth (with an average Gross National Product growth of +6.7% per year between 1965 and 1996), the violent purging of communist elements, and the establishment of an authoritarian and centralized state. The New Order era was characterized by harmonious relations between the state and the private sector. During this period, the state directly provided capital, contracts, concessions, and credit to entrepreneurs, fostering patron-client relationships between businesspeople and politicians in conjunction with bureaucrats. Armed with excess capital, entrepreneurs became behind-the-scenes actors controlling politicians and bureaucrats in orchestrating the country's tactical maneuvers.

To maintain his grip on power, Suharto developed an extensive patronage system that permeated all levels of government and society. Under Suharto's leadership, three key patronage networks emerged, commonly referred to as the "A-B-G" channels (Marijan, 2010). Channel A represented the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia, specifically the Army. Channel B referred to the bureaucracy, consisting of ministers whom Suharto trusted as his political agents. The third, Channel G, stood for *Golkar*, the state-sponsored political party.

Suharto's patronage system was characterized by centralized control, with Suharto himself at the apex, managing the distribution of resources and appointments throughout the state apparatus and economy. The *dwifungsi* doctrine legitimized the military's dual role in politics and the economy, fostering a military-business complex with extensive patronage networks (Robinson, 1986). *Golkar*, the state-sponsored political party, served as a primary vehicle for distributing patronage and consolidating political dominance (Reeve, 1985). Crony capitalism flourished as Suharto's family and close associates built vast business empires, often in partnership with Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs, embedding corruption within the system (Schwarz, 1999). Bureaucratic patronage further reinforced this structure, with civil service appointments and promotions based on political loyalty and personal connections rather than merit (King, 1982).

The fall of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 marked the beginning of Indonesia's *Reformasi* era, bringing significant changes to the political landscape, including democratization, decentralization, and the emergence of new forms of political patronage. Unlike during the New Order period, when entrepreneurs primarily operated as behind-the-scenes facilitators of state power, the *Reformasi* era saw businesspeople emerge as prominent public actors in the political arena. While the involvement of entrepreneurs in politics is a natural development, it has also introduced new challenges. Although the end of Suharto's regime dismantled parts of the old patronage networks, new patterns of clientelism and patronage have since emerged, adapting to the democratic context. Instead of progressing toward a consolidated democracy, political reforms became entangled in money politics, facilitating the entrenchment of corporate interests and business oligarchies inherited from the New Order (Hadiz, 2000).

The fall of Suharto did not eliminate the role of oligarchs; rather, they transformed from sultanistic-type oligarchs into collective rulers (Winters, 2011). This transformation resulted in a more decentralized reorganization of predatory power through diffuse patronage networks, fluid coalitions, and even competition. State and political elites could no longer govern as they had before (Hadiz, 2005), as they now faced demands for institutional reform at both the central and local levels. However, the oligarchy—a small group of extremely wealthy and powerful individuals—successfully adapted to the changing political environment by embedding themselves within political institutions, including political parties, parliament, and decentralized governance structures.

As a result, post-Suharto political parties became instruments of reorganized oligarchic factions. With many parties controlled by the oligarchy as entry points into the state apparatus, both the government and parliament found themselves unable to escape the oligarchy's influence over state resources. This pattern extended to local governments and regional parliaments as well. Unfortunately, the predatory nature of oligarchic power has resulted in systemic corruption, further weakening state institutions and consolidating the oligarchy's grip on Indonesia's political and economic systems.

During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), initially lauded for his commitment to eradicating corruption, his popularity experienced a sharp decline after 2010 due to high-profile corruption scandals (Suastika, 2020). Despite his reputation as a reformist leader, scandals involving members of his party and cabinet—such as Andi Mallarangeng and Suryadharma Ali—tarnished his legacy and damaged the reputation of the *Demokrat* Party (Sapto Saputro & Pribadi, 2022). The 2013 bribery case involving the Chief Justice of the *Mahkamah Konstitusi* (Constitutional Court), Akil Mochtar, further marred his administration (Idris, 2017; Indonesia Investments, 2017). By the end of his second term, SBY's presidency, once hailed as a triumph of democracy, had become marked by its failure to effectively address corruption. The persistence of patron-client dynamics in Indonesian politics, even after the reform era championed by SBY, highlights deeply entrenched structural challenges.

Moreover, the presidency of Joko Widodo, initially seen as a political outsider and reformist figure, exemplifies the paradox of reformers navigating Indonesia's entrenched political system. While Joko Widodo's administration has been characterized by significant infrastructure development and bureaucratic reforms, it has increasingly relied on patronage networks to consolidate power and maintain political stability. This dependence on patron-client relationships is evident in the allocation of key positions to political allies and oligarchic figures (Fukuoka & Djani, 2016), undermining efforts at anti-corruption and democratic governance. From this reality, oligarchy is not only behind the parties, but its personification is also in plain sight. In legislative elections, they compete. But in the presidential election, they are in coalition.

A particularly prominent trend is the resurgence of political dynasties, exemplified by the rise of Jokowi's son, Gibran, as a political figure and vice-presidential candidate alongside Prabowo Subianto. Political dynasties are rooted in direct familial ties (consanguinity) and marital alliances with other influential clans. Loyalty, obedience, familial solidarity, and the cultivation of patron-client support systems are critical factors sustaining such dynasties. Through these mechanisms, power and vested interests remain preserved and controlled. Critics argue that the strengthening of political dynasties undermines meritocracy (Lamb & Teresia, 2024).

While patronage may provide short-term political stability, it risks perpetuating corruption and weakening democratic institutions, posing significant challenges to Indonesia's political development. Post-reform presidential leadership in Indonesia has been marked by several notable dynamics:

First, the implementation of decentralization policies. Laws No. 22/1999 on Regional Governance and No. 25/1999 on Fiscal Balance between the Central and Regional Governments shifted significant political and economic power to local governments (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This transition created new opportunities for patronage at the local level, with local elites, often referred to as "little kings" emerging as powerful figures in their regions. The introduction of local elections in 2005 further intensified competition among local elites and reinforced the importance of patronage networks in securing electoral victories (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016).

Second, democratization has led to an increase in money politics and vote-buying. Studies, including those by The Latin American Public Opinion Project, Afrobarometer, and the Money Politics Project in Southeast Asia, have ranked Indonesia third globally in the prevalence of money politics (Pahlevi & Amrullo, 2020). The introduction of direct presidential elections in 2004 and local elections in 2005 intensified the use of money politics as a form of patronage (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). Money politics has become a dominant determinant in developing regions that still adhere to parochial political cultures. Poor communities are particularly vulnerable, often subjected to coercion or manipulation through material inducements such as basic commodities, cash, or employment offers (Abba & Babalola, 2017; Onapajo & Babalola, 2020).

As long as poverty persists, patronage practices will continue, maintaining elite power and perpetuating inequalities in authority and influence. The essence of vote-buying lies in influencing voter behavior to sway the political pendulum in favor of the buyer, ensuring electoral victory. Vote-buying not only boosts voter turnout with promises of material benefits but also risks undermining genuine democratic participation (Nurdin, 2016). Theoretical perspectives suggest three dominant arguments for explaining vote-buying: 1) socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy play a major role; 2) electoral systems may facilitate vote-buying; and 3) partisan and organizational structures of political parties contribute to its prevalence (Baidoo et al., 2018).

Although vote-buying has existed since the New Order era, it has become more pervasive in the post-reform period. Legal frameworks like Law No. 7/2017 on Elections task the Election Supervisory Agency with preventing money politics, but they lack a clear definition of what constitutes money politics. For instance, gifts such as sarongs or bicycles may fall into a grey area. Furthermore, sanctions for money politics differ between the Election Law and the Regional Election Law (Law No. 10/2016), with the latter imposing stricter penalties on both givers and recipients.

Third, following the collapse of the New Order regime, political reform created opportunities for the emergence of new political parties. Many of these parties were founded by political figures, activists, community groups, or former members of older parties, representing diverse backgrounds, ideologies, platforms, and support bases. The rise of these new parties was believed to enhance political competition, offering voters a wider array of choices in selecting their representatives in government. However, post-reform political parties faced significant challenges in financing their activities (Subekti et al., 2024). The high costs of electoral campaigns, coupled with weak regulations on party funding, increased their reliance on wealthy donors, often resulting in policy concessions and preferential treatment (Mietzner, 2007).

Fourth, decentralization has significantly impacted resource-rich regions. Local elites in provinces such as Papua, East Kalimantan, and Riau have gained control over valuable natural resources, resulting in the emergence of "predatory networks" that exploit these resources for personal and political gain (Aspinall, 2013). Local leaders have leveraged resource extraction authority to build political support, fund campaigns, and enrich themselves and their networks (Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011).

Fifth, Indonesia's ethnic and religious diversity has shaped patronage patterns in the post-reform era. Politicians often mobilize support along ethnic or religious lines, using patronage to consolidate their bases within specific communities (Aspinall & As'ad, 2015). Political parties, which should ideally bridge the gap between citizens and the state, have been co-opted by oligarchic coalitions and party elites to serve their agendas. In some regions, measures such as implementing sharia-based laws or recognizing traditional institutions have been employed as forms of patronage to secure support from specific groups (Buehler, 2016).

Sixth, anti-corruption initiatives have gained momentum, notably with the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission in 2003. Viewed as an anomaly by corrupt politicians and businesspeople, the Corruption Eradication Commission has effectively prosecuted major cases and emerged as one of the world's leading anti-corruption agencies (Butt, 2011). However, entrenched patronage networks have resisted these efforts. According to Transparency International Indonesia, the country's Corruption Perceptions Index scored 34 in 2023, ranking 115th out of 180 countries surveyed. The score, which remains stagnant from the previous year, highlights persistent issues such as weak law enforcement,

political elite involvement in corruption, impunity, and a lack of transparency and accountability (Triono, 2024).

Seventh, the rise of social media and digital technology has introduced a new dimension to political patronage. Politicians and parties increasingly utilize social media platforms to build support networks, disseminate information, and mobilize voters (Tapsell, 2017). While digital technology has the potential to enhance transparency and accountability, it has also been exploited to spread misinformation and sustain patronage networks. The emergence of "buzzers" — paid social media influencers promoting political messages — represents a modern form of patronage in the digital era (Lim, 2017).

Manifestations of Political Patronage

Based on the points mentioned earlier, it is evident that the patron-client system continues to thrive in Indonesia. There are three fundamental reasons for its persistence. First, there is no robust system in place to minimize conflicts of interest among business leaders who also hold political power. The involvement of businesspeople in politics creates a symbiotic mutualism—a mutually beneficial relationship between politicians and business elites, as well as between business elites and political parties.

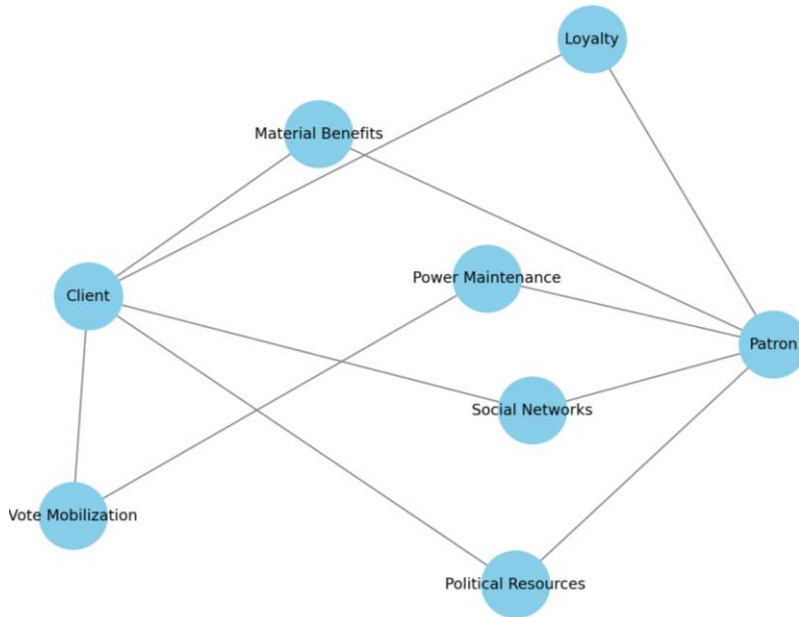
Second, democratization within political parties has largely failed (Bachtiar, 2014). Since the 1950s, political parties in Indonesia have remained underdeveloped institutions due to the dominance of elite figures who primarily use parties as vehicles to secure access to public office (Feith, 1962). This long-standing trend has led to a decline in the legitimacy of political parties, even decades later. Tan (2006) describes this phenomenon as a “widespread antipathy” toward political parties, which have become detached from the masses and function merely as tools for the elite.

Third, there is no legal framework regulating political party financing (Harahap, 2021). Currently, political parties rely heavily on financial contributions from business figures who have their own interests and agendas. This dependency on elite or conglomerate funding has resulted in minimal transparency and accountability in the management of party finances. In fact, many corrupt practices in Indonesia are linked to political funding involving political parties. At present, the state provides financial assistance to political parties, but the allocated amount remains significantly low, accounting for only 1.5% of the total state budget. This is in stark contrast to countries such as Sweden, Mexico, and South Korea, which allocate between 40–70% of their state budgets to support political parties. To improve political party governance in Indonesia, reforms are needed to enhance financial transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness.

Furthermore, without a clear and sustainable funding mechanism, internal democratization within political parties will remain stagnant. This is evident in several major parties that have been led by the same figures for over a decade—such as PKB under Muhaimin Iskandar, PAN under Zulkifli Hasan, and NasDem under

Surya Paloh. Their ability to finance party activities has solidified their leadership positions, making it difficult for internal competition to emerge and challenging efforts to democratize political party structures.

Figure 1. The phenomenon of Patron-Client Politics in Indonesia



Source: Researcher's compilation from various sources, 2024.

Based on Figure 1, patronage and clientelism manifest in various forms, shaping the political and social landscape through distinct mechanisms and practices. Below are some common manifestations:

First, appointments to key positions often prioritize loyalty to political leaders over professional qualifications and achievements. This practice is not confined to government offices but also extends to public corporations, regulatory agencies, and even international diplomatic posts. By emphasizing loyalty over expertise, political leaders establish a network of loyal supporters across the state apparatus, enabling them to exert greater control over policy implementation and administrative decisions. These networks not only facilitate the execution of political agendas but also shield leaders from opposition and help sustain their influence at various levels of government and public institutions (Jiang & Zhang, 2020; Roelofs, 2009).

A clear manifestation of this patronage system occurs during local elections, where incumbents act as patrons with the authority to select and appoint officials should they be re-elected. Meanwhile, the state civil apparatus serves as clients, seeking positions and career advancement. Additionally, these civil servants often possess a vote base, which can be leveraged as a political asset in exchange for

rewards from the patron. By mobilizing the state civil apparatus during electoral contests, incumbents and politically affiliated candidates gain a significant advantage. Civil servants can be instrumentalized to influence public opinion and voter decisions.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the societal perception of civil servants as holding strategic positions within the community. On the other hand, the civil servants themselves also benefit from this arrangement. By consistently advocating for the incumbent's re-election, they are often promised promotions or new positions in the next leadership term. As a result, this patron-client relationship fosters interdependence, wherein patrons provide career security, and clients reciprocate with political support.

The widespread prevalence of political patronage in the Indonesian bureaucracy contradicts the objective of fostering a professional, high-performing, and politically neutral civil service, as mandated by Law No. 5/2014 on the State Civil Apparatus. This law underscores the importance of a merit-based system in civil service management, emphasizing professionalism, ethical standards, political neutrality, and the elimination of corruption, collusion, and nepotism. Civil service management under this framework encompasses workforce planning, recruitment, promotion, career development, performance appraisal, remuneration, and retirement benefits, all aimed at fostering a competent and impartial bureaucracy.

Second, the distribution of state resources encompasses various assets and benefits, such as government contracts, development projects, social services, public funds, and other forms of financial or material assistance. These resources are often allocated based on political affiliations and loyalties rather than objective needs or merit. This practice, commonly referred to as money politics, is further categorized into club goods and pork barrel politics. Club goods involve providing money or goods to social groups, such as distributing headscarves to religious study groups or sports facilities to youth organizations.

Money politics, as a tool of patronage, manifests in various forms, ranging from direct financial inducements to promises made to voters in exchange for their support. The prevalence of money politics has rendered Indonesian politics exceedingly costly. Reports from various investigative institutions indicate that the political costs in Indonesia reach billions of rupiah. In 2014, the Institute for Economic and Social Research at the University of Indonesia found that the campaign expenses for legislative candidates in the House of Representatives ranged from IDR 1–1.23 billion, while candidates for the Regional House of Representatives spent between IDR 298–570 million (Dartanto, 2014). Similarly, a study by the Corruption Eradication Commission (2023) revealed that candidates for regional head or deputy head positions in local elections incurred expenses exceeding IDR 10 billion.

These findings are corroborated by admissions from several politicians. Dito Ariotedjo, a politician from the *Golkar* Party, disclosed spending over IDR 10 billion. Meanwhile, Masinton Pasaribu, a politician from the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*

Perjuangan, reported allocating IDR 6 billion solely for campaign materials during the 2024 elections (Tempo, 2024b). Despite these massive expenditures, both candidates failed to secure seats in the House of Representatives. Dito and Masinton are just two examples among the 9,917 candidates vying for votes in the House of Representatives elections. These candidates, representing 18 political parties, competed in 84 electoral districts across Indonesia. Additionally, candidates contested seats in the provincial and municipal/regency House of Representatives and the Regional House of Representatives.

Aside from campaign materials such as banners and billboards, the largest financial allocation was dedicated to “envelopes” distributed to potential voters—commonly known as money politics. The figures cited by Dito and Masinton far exceed the campaign costs of previous elections. The Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center of Indonesia identified suspicious financial transactions involving over 6,000 accounts belonging to party officials or legislative candidates for the 2024 elections. These irregular transactions suggest potential money politics during the campaign period, with the total flagged amount reaching IDR 51.4 trillion. One notable indication involved billions of rupiah being deposited into party officials’ accounts, which was subsequently converted into smaller denominations of IDR 20,000 and IDR 50,000. Given the substantial financial turnover during political contests, it is unsurprising that electoral success—including regional elections—is reportedly 95.5% influenced by financial power, much of which is allocated for political “dowries” (Arief, 2024; Tempo, 2024b). The significant funds required during campaigns heighten the likelihood that elected candidates will engage in corruption to recoup their expenditures.

In a complex political system, money plays a crucial role in influencing election outcomes, forging political alliances, and securing access to essential resources for gaining power. To date, the funding sources for political parties in Indonesia are regulated by Law No. 2 of 2008, as amended by Law No. 2 of 2011. These regulations identify three main funding sources: membership dues from legislators serving in the *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) or *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* (Regional House of Representatives), legally valid donations, and financial assistance from the State Budget or Regional Budget.

However, despite receiving state financial assistance, the high cost of political activities continues to exceed available resources, leaving political parties reliant on financial contributions from their members. According to the 2019 General Elections Commission report, 16 political parties received a total of IDR 427,151,741,325 in campaign funds. Of this amount, 79.10% (IDR 337,856,293,303) came from donations by legislative candidates, while 20.09% was contributed by political parties, with the remainder consisting of individual donations (KPU, 2019). These figures highlight the significant dependence of political parties on financial support from their own candidates.

This financial dependency often creates an implicit obligation for politicians to repay the favor to their financial backers, potentially compromising public interest

and influencing policy decisions. Additionally, the unequal access to political financing favors candidates with strong financial backing or close ties to wealthy donors, leading to elite dominance over state resources. This dynamic creates a disproportionate advantage for well-funded candidates, while those lacking financial support face challenges in sustaining their campaigns.

To circumvent the high cost of politics, many political parties and candidates engage in pork barrel politics, where pre-election social assistance programs are funded by public budgets to secure voter support. According to Schaffer (2007), pork barrel politics refers to the allocation of material benefits, such as contracts, grants, or public infrastructure projects, to specific localities in exchange for political backing. A defining feature of pork barrel politics is the strategic use of public funds, including local budgets, to consolidate electoral support. Populist policies are often integrated into this strategy, prioritizing short-term electoral gains over sustainable development. These programs enable incumbents to strengthen political networks and cultivate voter gratitude (Djati, 2015).

As a result, voters may perceive populist policies as an indication of the governing elite's capacity to deliver tangible benefits. While social assistance programs may formally comply with financial regulations, their timing and objectives frequently carry political undertones. Welfare budgets often experience a sharp increase before elections, positioning social assistance as a transactional mechanism for electoral support. Incumbents frequently claim political credit for these distributions, fostering the perception that such benefits are personal achievements rather than state-funded initiatives. This perception creates a sense of voter obligation, wherein beneficiaries feel indebted to the incumbent and may support their re-election as a form of reciprocity. Some voters even anticipate greater benefits if the incumbent remains in office, further reinforcing clientelist dynamics, where material aid is exchanged for political loyalty.

Although regulations on political financing exist, their enforcement remains ineffective due to various factors, including limited resources, weak oversight, and a lack of commitment from policymakers. Efforts to reform political financing mechanisms are often obstructed by stakeholders who fear that such reforms could threaten their power and political positions. Nevertheless, enhancing transparency and accountability in political financing is crucial to mitigating these challenges and fostering a more equitable and democratic political landscape.

Third, patronage networks are mobilized during elections to secure votes through promises of jobs, financial incentives, social services, and other tangible benefits. This practice not only distorts the electoral process but also perpetuates a cycle of dependency, where voters support candidates based on immediate material gains rather than long-term policy considerations. As a result, candidates frequently engage in patronage practices to secure voter loyalty (Allen, 2015; Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011; Imai et al., 2020). This approach reinforces a dependency cycle, incentivizing voters to prioritize immediate rewards over governance capabilities or policy platforms.

Examples of political patronage include selling licenses and positions (Kocu, 2022), accepting bribes in procurement, budget manipulation, and other forms of corruption. For instance, in the case of Ben Brahim S. Bahat, Regent of Kapuas, and Ary Egahni Ben Bahat, a member of the Regional House of Representatives from the *Nasdem* Party, patron-client schemes involved demanding funds from *Satuan Kerja Perangkat Daerah* (Local Government Unit of Work) for political campaigns (Triwibowo, 2023). Methods included creating fictitious activities, inflating budgets, soliciting bribes from private parties as project percentages (e.g., 7–12%), and requiring payments from Local Government Unit of Work officials to secure or maintain positions (Andryanto, 2023).

In Southeast Sulawesi, political patronage is evident in career and position allocations, alongside clientelism and voter network mobilization. Governor Ali Mazi, as a patron, leveraged his authority to shape bureaucratic careers. Bureaucrats, acting as clients, offered loyalty and support, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. To secure certain positions, officials often established ties with the governor and were required to pay substantial sums, linking political patronage to the high costs of political operations (Pratama et al., 2023).

Consequences for Governance and Power disparities

Patron-client politics is a fundamental social and political relationship characterized by an asymmetrical exchange of power between individuals or groups with unequal status and resources. Scholars such as Scott (1972) and Geertz (1983) have extensively documented this dynamic across various cultural contexts, defining patron-client relationships as personalized and hierarchical interactions in which patrons provide material benefits, protection, and social access in exchange for political loyalty, electoral support, and social deference from clients. These intricate networks of reciprocal obligations extend beyond traditional bureaucratic structures, creating alternative mechanisms for social organization and political mobilization that often operate parallel to formal institutional frameworks.

The consequences of political patronage are significant and multifaceted, influencing political, economic, and social domains. Politically, patronage undermines democratic processes and creates power imbalances by prioritizing loyalty and political affiliation over merit and competence, leading to the entrenchment of power among a select few and reducing political competition. Officials elected through such corrupt practices often perpetuate corruption in other sectors as they seek to recoup campaign expenditures, including those incurred during pre-campaign, campaign, election, and post-election periods.

Patronage, which creates an imbalance of power, significantly erodes public trust in government and reduces citizen involvement in the political process in Indonesia. When political elites distribute resources, positions, or favors to their loyal supporters rather than based on merit, it fosters a system of clientelism that prioritizes personal or group interests over public welfare. This weakens institutional integrity, as decision-making is influenced by personal loyalty rather than demo-

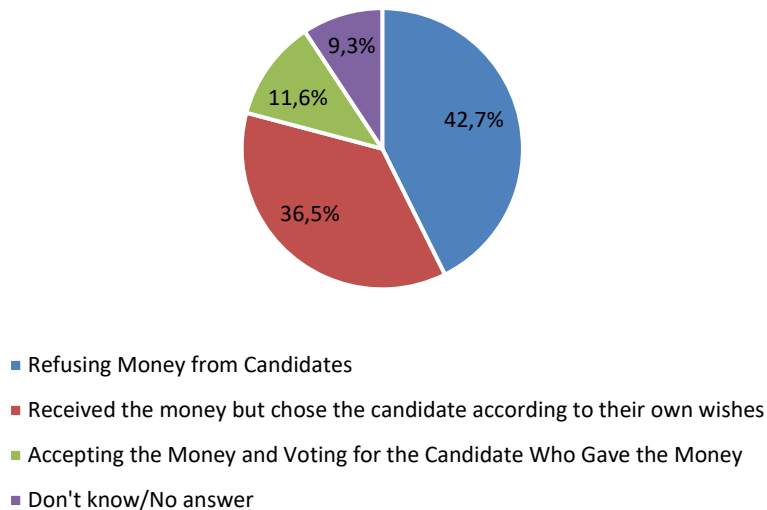
cratic principles, leading to inefficiency, corruption, and policy failures (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). As a result, ordinary citizens, who feel excluded from political benefits and perceive the system as rigged in favor of elites, become disillusioned and disengaged from political participation (Akoji & Richard, 2024; Kosec & Mo, 2024; Mathisen & Peters, 2023). This declining trust in government institutions manifests in lower voter turnout, apathy toward civic engagement, and skepticism toward democratic processes, ultimately weakening democratic consolidation in Indonesia (Barus et al., 2024; Umam, 2024).

The persistent presence of patronage networks also reinforces inequality, as marginalized groups lack access to political representation and economic opportunities, further alienating them from participation in governance. Without meaningful reforms to dismantle patron-client relationships, the cycle of distrust and disengagement will continue, undermining democratic stability and public confidence in Indonesia's political system. Despite efforts to reform the patronage-based political system, patronage networks remain resilient and adaptable to a dynamic political climate, as evidenced by the existence of a small group of New Order-era elites who still dominate economic and political resources today. The survival of conglomerates connected to the Suharto family is an example of this dynamic.

Patronage politics distorts resource allocation, leading to inefficient use of public funds, suboptimal development outcomes, and increased corruption as resources are directed based on favoritism rather than need or effectiveness. Additionally, the intersection of political and economic systems through patron-client relationships often fosters corruption and inefficiency within *Badan Usaha Milik Daerah* (Regionally Owned Enterprises). Research indicates that political corruption tied to patron-client relationships results in poor performance and unsatisfactory services from these enterprises, which are supposed to contribute positively to regional economies (Amin et al., 2024). Moreover, such relationships erode democratic processes by fostering an environment conducive to nepotism and collusion (Husen, 2024).

Based on the findings of a survey by Indekstat (2021) titled “*Riset Pandangan dan Harapan Masyarakat Terhadap Situasi Sosial dan Politik Indonesia*” (Figure 2), the majority of respondents view money politics as inappropriate. This is reflected in the distribution of responses, where most respondents (42.7%) rejected monetary offers. Meanwhile, 36.5% of respondents accepted such offers but claimed they did not influence their voting decisions, and 11.6% admitted to accepting monetary incentives and voting for the candidates who provided them.

Figure 2. Distribution of Public Responses to Vote Buying



Source: *indekstat*, 2021.

In the 2019 elections, fraudulent practices often involved distributing cash, vouchers, and digital currencies as incentives to influence voter behavior. Other items such as prayer equipment, construction materials, gifts, and even lawnmowers were also frequently distributed to sway voters (Triyudha, 2023). A comprehensive study by Ford and Pepinsky (2014) highlighted how patronage networks in Indonesia have concentrated economic resources in the hands of elites with political connections, impeding equitable economic development. Furthermore, policy formulation and implementation driven by patronage networks significantly impact decision-making processes. Policies often favor specific groups rather than serving the broader public interest. Mietzner (2015) noted that this influence is evident in economic policies, where political considerations lead to protectionist measures that benefit politically connected business groups at the expense of overall economic efficiency.

Overall, the pervasive political patronage in Indonesia has severe implications, undermining governance quality, hindering sustainable development, and reinforcing systemic inequalities. Its consequences are evident in instances of power abuse by patronage networks, including efforts to weaken the Corruption Eradication Commission. These efforts range from police interventions in well-known public conflicts such as the *cicak* versus *buaya* dispute (Mietzner, 2015), the amendment of the Corruption Eradication Commission Law into Law No. 19 of 2019, placing the Corruption Eradication Commission under executive oversight (Bagaswara et al., 2022), and judicial review outcomes by the Constitutional Court that downplayed public opinion as mere expressions of the right to free speech. Moreover, 75 high-

performing the Corruption Eradication Commission officials failed the controversial national insight test and faced threats of dismissal.

Additional efforts to undermine the Corruption Eradication Commission were seen when the House of Representatives exercised its *hak angket* (inquiry rights) in 2017, spearheaded by politicians from President Jokowi's supporting parties. These actions were motivated by the Corruption Eradication Commission's investigation into the high-profile *KTP-EI* (Indonesia's electronic ID system) corruption case, implicating then-House of Representatives Chairman Setya Novanto, the Golkar Party leader, and other politicians. Court testimonies revealed their involvement in budget negotiations and tender irregularities for the project (Bagaswara et al., 2022). Scholars argue that anti-corruption measures have transformed rather than eradicated patronage practices, as politicians and bureaucrats adapt by distributing resources while avoiding legal scrutiny (Transparency International Indonesia, 2017).

The issue extends beyond individual cases, as many political institutions in Indonesia are frequently undermined by patron-client relationships. Key institutions such as political parties, the General Election Commission, and the Election Supervisory Agency are often controlled and weakened by political elites. For instance, ethical violations by General Election Commission Chairman Hasyim Asy'ari and the Election Supervisory Agency's lack of proactivity in addressing electoral fraud allegations in the 2024 elections illustrate these pressures (Indonesia Corruption Watch, 2024). Further evidence of political patronage is seen in the controversial presidential candidacy process for the 2024 elections. The appointment of Gibran Rakabuming Raka as Prabowo Subianto's running mate—despite clear ethical breaches—demonstrates the pervasive nature of patronage. The Constitutional Court's Ethics Council identified violations by its chairman, Anwar Usman, who approved the candidacy of his nephew, Gibran, who is also President Joko Widodo's son (Tempo, 2024a).

Political patronage exacerbates social inequalities, particularly in rural or marginalized communities, by limiting access to essential services, economic opportunities, and political representation to those who are outside the patron-client networks. In Indonesia, where rural areas often rely heavily on government programs for development, patronage-based governance means that resources such as agricultural subsidies, infrastructure projects, and social assistance are distributed based on political loyalty rather than actual need (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). This exclusionary practice deepens existing inequalities, as those who lack political connections are systematically deprived of opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and underdevelopment.

Furthermore, patronage discourages merit-based progress and innovation. When jobs, contracts, and educational opportunities are granted based on personal allegiance rather than competence, rural and marginalized communities are deprived of skilled leadership and effective policies that could drive local economic growth (Mietzner, 2009). As a result, these communities experience stagnation,

with limited investment in long-term development projects that could enhance their productivity and quality of life. The reliance on political networks for economic survival also weakens civic engagement, as individuals may fear losing access to benefits if they oppose or challenge the ruling elite. This suppresses political competition and perpetuates the dominance of entrenched elites, further marginalizing disadvantaged groups (Hadiz & Robison, 2013).

The lasting impact of this exclusionary dynamic is a widening gap between urban and rural populations, where the latter remains economically vulnerable and politically powerless. The continued concentration of wealth and power among elites leads to policies that prioritize their interests over broader social welfare, hindering inclusive development. Over time, this structural inequality diminishes trust in state institutions, reinforcing public perceptions that the government serves elite interests rather than the common good. Without significant political and institutional reforms to dismantle patronage networks, Indonesia risks entrenching socio-economic disparities that will hinder its progress toward equitable and sustainable development.

Political elites, bureaucrats, and businesspeople exploit strategic projects for personal gain, while patronage is frequently used to mobilize support based on ethnic and religious affiliations, particularly during elections. For example, in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno secured support from the *Betawi* Brotherhood Forum through patronage (Fadiyah & Zakiyah, 2018). Similarly, religious study groups in Jakarta saw leaders influencing voter behavior by prioritizing loyalty over critical evaluations of candidates (Yogantara, 2020).

The prevalence of patronage networks can hinder economic growth, particularly in the context of foreign direct investment. A study by the World Bank (2003) estimated that corruption, largely tied to patronage networks, costs Indonesia up to 2% of its GDP annually. More recent research (Prabowo & Cooper, 2016) highlights that while anti-corruption efforts have made progress, patronage-based corruption remains a significant challenge. The lack of transparency and predictability associated with patronage systems increases perceived risks for foreign investors, potentially restricting Indonesia's economic growth (Habir & Larasati, 1999).

Historically, business actors entering politics have exploited their positions to advance personal interests, such as expanding market access. However, a shift in focus from business to public service is essential for those involved in politics. Abuse of political power by business elites has been evident in major corruption cases, including that of former *Demokrat* Party treasurer M. Nazaruddin. Through his company, PT Permai Group, Nazaruddin received illegal payments related to the Hambalang integrated sports facility project (Pancaningrum, 2017). The issue also recalls *Sexy Killer*, a documentary by Watchdoc, which effectively portrays the entanglement of business interests and political power, spotlighting individuals who simultaneously function as business tycoons and political rulers (Fahmi, 2021).

More concerning, however, are the fiscal consequences of patronage politics, particularly the misappropriation of state and regional budgets by individuals entrenched in clientelist practices. Candidates often engage in vote-buying through methods such as money politics or pay exorbitant political dowries to parties to secure nominations (candidacy buying), funded by personal wealth or contributions from donors expecting future returns (Iman, 2023). These practices are pervasive in elections at all levels, including legislative, regional, and presidential contests.

This environment fosters illegal levies and bureaucratic exploitation, with subordinates coerced into making payments while party operatives siphon state funds for personal or party use. Positions in lucrative government sectors are often allocated to coalition parties, further entrenching patronage networks. Consequently, high political costs limit opportunities for capable individuals lacking financial resources, resulting in legislatures dominated by mediocre politicians backed by substantial financial sponsors. This dynamic undermines merit-based recruitment in civil service (Kristiansen & Ramli, 2006), with political leaders frequently placing loyalists in key bureaucratic positions to maintain control over government resources (Blunt et al., 2012).

While patronage networks may temporarily stabilize politics by co-opting opposition, they ultimately destabilize governance by prioritizing personal and group interests over public needs. Politicians exploit their positions to recover campaign costs, neglecting promises made to voters. Election organizers, too, are not immune, with some accepting material incentives that compromise their neutrality and democratic values. High-profile cases, such as members of local election commissions accepting bribes to secure votes, illustrate these challenges. For instance, in case no. 123-PKE-DKPP/III/2021, a commission member accepted IDR 400 million for 20,000 votes (DKPP RI, 2021; Sulthoni, 2023), while in case no. 65-PKE-DKPP/VI/2020, another member was dismissed for taking IDR 10 million (DKPP RI, 2020).

Such incidents reflect a weak commitment by state institutions to uphold democratic integrity and a tolerance for money politics. While Article 187A of Law No. 10/2016 criminalizes both giving and receiving money for electoral purposes, enforcement is hampered by the difficulty of securing evidence, as recipients rarely admit to accepting bribes. These entrenched behaviors underscore the strength of patronage networks, posing a significant challenge to Indonesia's democratic consolidation. Tomsa (2018) argued that patronage-based politics hinders the development of programmatic political parties and policy-based competition—key elements of mature democracies. Aspinall (2013) noted that competition over patronage resources can spark political conflict and social unrest. With limited state funds, political parties often depend on wealthy individuals, or "political investors," to finance their operations. This dependency blurs the boundaries between political and economic power, fostering what Winters (2011) described as "oligarchic democracy." Breaking the ties between business and politics is imperative to pre-

vent the misuse of political authority for personal gain. Efforts to address socioeconomic inequality require cross-sectoral collaboration among governments, the private sector, and civil society. Inclusive education policies, labor rights protection, women's empowerment, and political reform are essential steps toward building a more equitable and sustainable society.

To curb the influence of patronage, political parties must develop sustainable funding mechanisms. State financing for political parties can reduce reliance on external donors. Similarly, electoral costs should be minimized by covering campaign expenses through state budgets. Continuous political education for the public is also critical, as many candidates resort to money politics to sway voters. With adequate political education and party funding, reliance on external financing can be reduced. As long as political parties depend on bureaucratic processes such as procurement, promotions, permits, social assistance, and budget allocations, bureaucracy will remain vulnerable to political interests (Prasojo, 2019). This dependency challenges the cultivation of an independent and effective political system. Ensuring sustainable leadership, however, requires comprehensive political and legal reforms, alongside the development of competent leaders capable of driving government operations.

As Indonesia Corruption Watch (2024) emphasized, strong political systems, well-functioning political parties, and effective electoral processes are crucial for nurturing competent elites. Addressing the prevalence of patronage-based appointments is vital, as these often place underqualified individuals in key positions, diminishing public service efficiency and state capacity (Blunt et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Since the 1998 *Reformasi*, Indonesia has undergone significant democratic transformations, including decentralization, multiparty elections, and the expansion of civil liberties. However, substantial challenges remain due to the persistence of entrenched political patronage. Patron-client relationships, characterized by material exchanges for political support, continue to influence governance at both local and national levels. These practices are deeply rooted in history, dating back to the colonial era, when local elites were co-opted into colonial administration, establishing hierarchical and dependency-based systems that persist to this day. This has prioritized loyalty over competence in appointments, undermining administrative efficiency and the quality of governance.

Practices such as vote buying and the misuse of public funds for electoral advantage have eroded the integrity of formal institutions like political parties and electoral bodies. These mechanisms have allowed informal networks to dominate, overshadowing the formal systems intended to support democracy. The continuation of patronage networks has significant consequences for state functionality. It fosters widespread corruption, weakens administrative efficiency, and diminishes the quality of public services. This, in turn, perpetuates power disparities, where

elites maintain control over state resources while the broader population remains dependent on these networks for access to services and opportunities. As a result, the political system prioritizes securing personal loyalty over ensuring public accountability or improving citizens' welfare.

The persistent dominance of patronage networks also entrenches social inequality, as those excluded from these networks often lack opportunities for advancement. This deepens the divide between political elites and the general populace, further widening power imbalances. Consequently, political and economic power remains concentrated in the hands of a select few, leaving local governments and public institutions too weak to address the needs of the majority. To address these challenges, comprehensive reforms are urgently needed. Strengthening anti-corruption institutions, reforming electoral systems, and dismantling the historical legacies of patronage are critical steps toward building a more substantive democracy. Additionally, a cultural shift in politics toward meritocracy and accountability is essential to ensure that governance is driven by competence rather than personal networks. Only through such reforms can Indonesia hope to bridge power disparities and foster a political environment where public institutions are genuinely responsive to the needs of the people.

Authenticity Statement

I declare that this writing is purely the original work of the author, and the article is free from plagiarism. This article has not been published and is not being submitted to any other journal.

Biography

Rahmat Kurniawan is an individual with diverse expertise, renowned for his skills in analysis, academia, and as an observer of social, political, and public policy development in Indonesia. Currently, he teaches at the State Islamic University Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh, integrating analysis and academia to foster critical thinking and address urgent issues. His most recent publication, 'Patriarchy and the Paternalistic Culture of Religious Leader Worship Leading to Sexual Harassment in Islamic Educational Institutions,' reflects his commitment to shaping the future of our nation through insightful research and practical solutions.

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