

Ideology, institutions, political actions: Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia

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Summary

This article studies the political behavior of an Indonesian Islamist party, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Critics have argued that there are undemocratic elements in the PKS ideology – such as mixing religion with politics and its perceptions on gender equality and religious pluralism – and thus its participation in democratic politics seems to be neither serious nor sustainable. Applying North's theory of new institutionalism, this research found that ideology is dominant as a guideline for party behavior whenever the formal institutions are ineffective, and it will be less so when the formal rules of the game function properly.

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1 Introduction

This article discusses the political actions of an Indonesian Islamist party named Prosperous Justice Party (or *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS). The case is theoretically significant in two respects: firstly, the PKS has been in the limelight of the media and scholarship after it increased its electoral gain by 450% – from 1.7% in 1999 to 7.3% of the national votes in 2004 – and became a coalition member of the government. Yet this success triggered massive criticism and scepticism about the party's commitment toward democracy because it upholds an Islamist ideology, which is not entirely – some even say definitely not – in line with democracy. The critics maintained that if the PKS had the opportunity to take power, it would eventually replace the existing democratic system. Secondly, scepticism about the democratic commitment of Islamist parties participating in democratic politics has also become a hot academic issue. Students of party studies call the fact that Islamist parties participate in a democratic system a „democratic dilemma“, because they tend to be successful in mobilizing democratic support, yet their ideology contains elements incompatible with democratic values.

Drawing on the data from my doctoral thesis, I aim to show that a party's political actions are not only driven by its ideology, but also by the influences of the political institutions in which it operates. In this perspective, the democratic commitment of an Islamist party is not only determined by its ideological orientations, but also –