

***Party Politics and Democratization in Indonesia: Golkar in the Post-Suharto Era.* By Dirk Tomsa. London & New York: Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, 2008. Hardcover: 260pp.**

Almost immediately after the downfall of Soeharto's New Order regime in May 1998, most ordinary Indonesians, politicians, political analysts and scholars of Indonesian politics predicted that GOLKAR — the New Order's political machine — would crumble. Even during the heyday of the New Order, scholars had predicted that GOLKAR would not be able to survive the passing of the Soeharto era. Indeed a celebrated Indonesianist, Benedict Anderson, once dubbed GOLKAR a "living corpse".

This book is a meticulous endeavour by Dirk Tomsa to explain how GOLKAR has managed to survive and even thrive in a free and fair electoral democracy. Tomsa argues that GOLKAR's success is due in large measure to the fact that it was the best-institutionalized party in post-Soeharto Indonesia. Yet at the same time he points out that even GOLKAR is not well institutionalized (p. 4), with its supremacy primarily due to the uneven institutionalization of the other parties — with the exception of PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera or Prosperous Justice Party) — during the period of democratic transition since 1998.

While Tomsa competently applies party institutionalization theories, he pays too little attention to the political-economy dynamics following the downfall of the New Order. In discussing GOLKAR's development after 1998, it is important to evaluate the depth and quality of *reformasi*, which was only half-heartedly executed. Post-Soeharto regimes could not afford to antagonize the old oligarchic elites that managed to maintain their influence by creating new political alliances. The endurance of GOLKAR cannot be separated from the fact that prominent New Order forces managed to systematically reorganize themselves in the new political system. As Vedi Hadiz and Richard Robison argue, these old forces successfully hijacked the new democratic institutions to pursue their predatory interests. Hence critics of *reformasi* politics argue that the period of democratic transition in Indonesia is more or less a continuation of the New Order minus the involvement of the military in politics.

The 1999 election was a difficult period for GOLKAR given the political euphoria surrounding *reformasi*. Unsurprisingly, the party suffered big losses, garnering only 22.44 per cent of the popular vote, compared to more than 60 per cent during the New Order

era. At the same time, its second-place finish indicated that despite the prevailing political climate GOLKAR was still well supported by staunch New Order forces and their sympathizers. Given the fact that GOLKAR had been a household name for such a long period, it was well reified in the minds of most Indonesians.

According to Tomsa, GOLKAR's electoral success in 2004 — when it emerged as the party with the most seats — can be attributed to four main reasons. First, under the leadership of savvy politician Akbar Tandjung, GOLKAR underwent a process of institutionalization that prepared it well to compete in the election. Second, GOLKAR's well-equipped infrastructure and strong party stalwarts gave it an advantage over less well-organized parties. Third, GOLKAR's experience during the New Order authoritarian regime in co-opting traditional leaders — particularly in Eastern Indonesia — resulted in the persistence of traditional patron-client relations in several of GOLKAR's strongholds such as South Sulawesi (pp. 42–44). This appeared to be one of the most important factors that allowed GOLKAR to endure in a competitive party system. Fourth, swing voters who protested against Megawati's PDI-P's poor performance over the previous five years switched their allegiance to GOLKAR in the 2004 election.

GOLKAR's survival capacity in the post-Soeharto era is largely due to its essential character as a political party, which was in fact built for the sake of short-sighted interests, instead of ideological rationale. GOLKAR was founded in 1964 as a conglomeration of army-supported anti-communist forces to become a functional group as an alternative to the party system, which was criticized for being too ideological. Under Soeharto, GOLKAR was a hegemonic political force that fulfilled the function of a party, although officially it was not referred to as such. This suggests that from the very beginning GOLKAR had no ideological stance, aside from being anti-communist. As the communists were systematically obliterated in 1966, GOLKAR was essentially a joint secretariat that assembled various political powers together. The military-backed New Order sought to achieve political legitimacy through regular but phony elections, with GOLKAR formed to be the ruler's party though not an independent ruling party. As the ruler's party under a three-decade undemocratic regime, it was only able to provide “ersatz” values. GOLKAR, nevertheless, was deeply entrenched in people's minds (p. 120).

GOLKAR is very much driven by the party elite's craving for power for the sake of party interests, or more commonly their own. The defeat of Akbar Tandjung by Jusuf Kalla at the 2004 party

Congress clearly indicated that the party elite were convinced that Kalla — who was vice-president — as party chair would open up access to power and government resources. Such a strategy might be justified as a tactic of political survival, but at the same time it confirms GOLKAR's pragmatic attitude and appetite for power.

As Vicky Randall and Lars Svasand argue, the institutionalization of a single party must contribute to the overall institutionalization of the party system and thence to democratization. But this has not been the case with GOLKAR and the institutionalization of the Indonesian party system. The concluding chapter of Tomsa's book paints a gloomy picture for Indonesia's democratic transition. GOLKAR is the best-institutionalized party, but the Indonesian party system has not been an indispensable factor in enhancing democracy. GOLKAR can be successful as an electoral machine, but it does not function well in aggregating and articulating its constituents' interests.

This book would have been more revealing if the author had provided a succinct comparative analysis of how the former authoritarian regime's principal political vehicle managed to capitalize its organizational superiority during the democratic transition. In Chapter Two Tomsa discusses the surviving former communist parties in Poland, Hungary and Russia, as well as former hegemonic parties such as the Taiwanese KMT or the Mexican PRI, but alas he does not take the diverse characters of those parties and their relations with the respective authoritarian regimes into account. Such an account would give a comparative perspective of GOLKAR's endurance.