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Oligarchic Hegemony and the Crisis of Party Representation in Indonesia

Hegemoni Oligarkis dan Krisis Representasi Partai Politik di Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the paradox of political parties in Indonesia's post-Suharto democratic transition by analyzing the gap between their formal democratic functions and their practical political behavior. Although political parties are institutionally designed as instruments of representation, political education, and popular sovereignty, in practice they have increasingly functioned as mechanisms of elite consolidation, oligarchic control, and patronage distribution. This research employs a qualitative socio-political approach using documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative political economy. The analysis applies Gramscian hegemony theory, cartel party theory, and elite theory to explain how political parties have shifted from democratic institutions into hegemonic structures that normalize money politics, transactional politics, and elite domination. The findings show that these weaknesses are systemic rather than incidental, rooted in oligarchic capital, weak internal party democracy, and limited civil society oversight. Meaningful reform requires structural changes in party financing, internal democratization, and stronger civic control.

Keywords: Democratic representation; Hegemony; Indonesia; Oligarchy; Political parties

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji paradoks partai politik dalam transisi demokrasi Indonesia pasca-Soeharto dengan menganalisis kesenjangan antara fungsi demokratis formal dan praktik politik yang terjadi. Meskipun partai politik secara kelembagaan dirancang sebagai instrumen representasi, pendidikan politik, dan kedaulatan rakyat, dalam praktiknya partai semakin berfungsi sebagai sarana konsolidasi elite, kontrol oligarki, dan distribusi patronase. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif sosio-politik melalui analisis dokumen, analisis wacana, dan ekonomi politik komparatif. Analisis menggunakan teori hegemoni Gramsci, teori partai kartel, dan teori elite untuk menjelaskan bagaimana partai politik bergeser dari institusi demokratis menjadi struktur hegemonik yang menormalisasi politik uang, politik transaksional, dan dominasi elite. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kelemahan tersebut bersifat sistemik, berakar pada modal oligarkis, lemahnya demokrasi internal partai, dan terbatasnya pengawasan masyarakat sipil. Reformasi yang bermakna memerlukan perubahan struktural dalam pembiayaan partai, demokratisasi internal, dan penguatan kontrol publik.

Kata Kunci: Representasi demokratis; Hegemoni; Indonesia; Oligarki; Partai politik



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INTRODUCTION

Political parties occupy a foundational position in the architecture of modern democracy. As Giovanni Sartori famously observed, parties are the central linkage mechanism between civil society and the state, serving as the primary institutional conduit through which citizen preferences are translated into public policy.¹ In Indonesia, the formal restoration of multiparty competition after the fall of President Suharto in May 1998 was greeted with considerable optimism.² After three decades of authoritarian rule, the reformasi era appeared to inaugurate a new democratic chapter in which political parties would serve as genuine agents of popular sovereignty, ideological pluralism, and accountable governance. Marcus Mietzner captures this initial optimism by noting that the post-1998 proliferation of parties was understood, at least normatively, as a corrective to the enforced political uniformity of the New Order.³

Yet, more than two decades after reformasi, a persistent and troubling paradox defines Indonesian party politics. Political parties that were ideologically mandated to champion democratic values, social justice, and the welfare of the rakyat (the people) have, in practice, become instruments of elite consolidation, factional power struggles, and transactional politics. The vision and mission statements enshrined in party statutes routinely invoke noble democratic principles: popular sovereignty, social welfare, national unity, and good governance.⁴ These normative proclamations, however, stand in stark contrast to the everyday realities of Indonesian political life, in which parties function primarily as organizational vehicles for electoral competition funded by oligarchic capital and mobilized through clientelistic networks rather than programmatic appeal.

This paper argues that the crisis of Indonesian political parties is not a temporary developmental problem that can be resolved through incremental reform, but rather a deeply structural phenomenon rooted in the intersection of political economy, institutional design, and the persistence of patrimonial social relations. The dysfunction of Indonesian political parties represents what this paper terms a stubborn problem, a systemic pathology that resists easy diagnosis and even harder solutions, precisely because the key actors who would need to initiate reform are the same actors who benefit from the existing arrangements.⁵ The term deliberately echoes policy scholarship on 'wicked problems' while applying it to the specific institutional logic of party hegemony in a young democracy embedded in oligarchic structures.

The central research questions guiding this paper are why do Indonesian political parties consistently fail to fulfill their normative democratic functions despite formal institutional reforms? In what ways do Indonesian political parties function as hegemonic structures that perpetuate existing power hierarchies rather than challenging them? What structural conditions would need to change for Indonesian political parties to become genuine agents of democratic deepening? The paper proceeds as follows establishes the theoretical framework, outlines the

1 Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: Volume 1: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

2 David Hanan, "New Perspectives, Challenges and Questions from Filmmakers in the Post-Suharto Reformasi Era 1998–2020," in *Moments in Indonesian Film History* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 265–329, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72613-3_7.

3 Marcus Mietzner, *Money, Power, and Ideology* (Flipside Digital Content Company Inc., 2013).

4 Tomasz Tadeusz Konieczny, "The Politics of Integration in Retrospect and the Supranational Mega-politics of Governance and Design in Prospect: A Roadmap," *European Law Journal* 30, no. 3 (September 28, 2024): 284–328, <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12520>.

5 Muhammad Mutawalli, Zainal Amin Ayub, and Hemen Philip Faga, "Revitalizing Political Parties in Indonesia: Dissecting Patronage-Clientelism Dynamics Vis-à-Vis Political Representation," *Jurnal Mengkaji Indonesia* 2, no. 2 (November 6, 2023): 301–26, <https://doi.org/10.59066/jmi.v2i2.467>.

research methodology, provides a historical background of Indonesian party politics, and analyze the paradox and its hegemonic dimensions; examines the limits of reform efforts and offers conclusions.

Method

This study employs a qualitative socio-political approach by combining documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative political economy to examine the structural dysfunction of political parties in Indonesia.⁶ Data were collected primarily from secondary sources, including Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Parties, party statutes (*anggaran dasar/ anggaran rumah tangga*), party manifestos, electoral reports from the General Elections Commission (KPU), and scholarly works discussing Indonesian democracy, oligarchy, and party institutionalization. These documents were selected because they provide both the formal normative framework and the practical political realities of party behavior. The documentary analysis focuses on identifying the gap between the legal-democratic mandates assigned to political parties and their actual operational patterns, particularly in leadership recruitment, party financing, electoral competition, and political accountability.

The analytical process was conducted through interpretive and comparative methods. Discourse analysis was used to examine how political elites construct democratic legitimacy through narratives of public service, national welfare, and political representation, while often masking transactional politics and elite consolidation. This analysis was guided by Gramsci's concept of hegemony, particularly the idea that domination is sustained through ideological consent rather than coercion alone. Comparative case analysis was then applied by situating Indonesia within broader studies of party politics in Southeast Asia and Latin America, especially in relation to cartel parties, patronage democracy, and oligarchic capture. This comparison helps identify both the specific characteristics of Indonesian political parties and the broader structural patterns that explain why party reform remains difficult despite repeated democratic and institutional reforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hegemony, Oligarchy, and the Distortion of Democratic Ideals

The distortion of democracy within Indonesian political parties cannot be understood merely as an institutional weakness, but must be analyzed as the result of oligarchic hegemony operating through party institutions. In this context, political parties no longer function primarily as instruments of popular representation, but rather as mechanisms for the reproduction of elite power through ideological legitimacy, cartelized political structures, and economic patronage networks. Procedural democracy continues to operate through elections, changes of government, and formal competition among parties, yet the substance of democracy is significantly weakened because political processes are largely controlled by elite interests possessing economic power and access to state institutions⁷.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides an important analytical foundation for understanding this condition.⁸ Gramsci argues that political domination is maintained not only through coercion, but more importantly through consent constructed by institutions, culture,

6 John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Muantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (4th Ed.)*, Sage Publications, 2014.

7 Maciej Bernatt, "Democracy and Competition Law: Exploring Substantive and Procedural Links," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4757822>.

8 Antonio Gramsci, "Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

and ideology. The ruling class creates what he calls “common sense,” a social consciousness in which elite interests are perceived as universal interests shared by society as a whole. Within this framework, political parties function as ideological apparatuses that mediate between the state and civil society while simultaneously preserving the stability of elite domination. Parties are not merely electoral vehicles, but also instruments of political legitimacy that normalize unequal power relations. In post-Reformasi Indonesia, many political parties that initially emerged from democratic movements and opposition forces were gradually absorbed into a hegemonic bloc dominated by oligarchic capital and the remnants of New Order political networks. As a result, these parties ceased to function as transformative democratic forces and instead became institutional expressions of elite continuity .

This condition becomes more evident when examined through Richard Katz and Peter Mair’s *cartel party theory*. They argue that modern political parties have shifted from representative organizations into cartelized institutions that colonize the state itself.⁹ Rather than relying on mass membership, ideological mobilization, or programmatic competition, parties increasingly survive through access to state resources, regulatory protection, and inter-party elite cooperation. Electoral competition remains formally intact, but substantively, major parties collaborate to preserve a political structure that benefits them collectively. Indonesia strongly reflects this pattern. Broad governing coalitions, the pragmatic movement of parties from opposition to government, and the weak ideological differentiation among parties demonstrate that political competition is based more on the distribution of power than on the contestation of ideas. Political parties are therefore more concerned with securing ministerial positions, state budgets, and patronage opportunities than with advancing coherent public policy agendas or ideological commitments .

Behind this institutional arrangement, elite theory and oligarchy explain the main actors who control party politics. Robert Michels, through his concept of the *iron law of oligarchy*, argues that every political organization, including democratic parties, tends to be dominated by a small leadership group that uses the organization to protect its own interests. Internal democracy becomes weak because strategic decisions are concentrated in the hands of party elites, while ordinary members lose meaningful influence over political direction.¹⁰ In Indonesian political parties, this phenomenon is clearly visible in the dominance of party chairpersons, political patrons, and wealthy financiers over candidate selection for legislative seats, regional executive offices, and even presidential nominations. Party structures are highly centralized and personalistic, where loyalty to individual leaders often matters more than commitment to ideology or policy platforms.

Jeffrey Winters strengthens this analysis through his framework of oligarchy as the politics of wealth defense. According to Winters, materially powerful actors use political institutions to protect and expand their economic interests.¹¹ In Indonesia, the relationship between business oligarchs and political parties is particularly strong because the high cost of electoral competition makes parties structurally dependent on elite financing. Campaign funding, party operations, and voter mobilization frequently rely on wealthy donors and business networks. Consequently, political parties become the primary arena through which oligarchs secure policy protection, access to state contracts, natural resource concessions, and bureaucratic influence. Democracy is therefore transformed into a transactional arena between political power and economic wealth, rather than a genuine mechanism for articulating the interests of citizens .

9 Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy,” *Party Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1995): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001001001>.

10 Robert Michels, “The Iron Law of Oligarchy,” in *Power in Modern Societies* (Routledge, 2019), 111–24.

11 Jeffrey A Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

This structural problem is further reinforced by the normalization of money politics (*politik uang*) within electoral processes. Money politics does not only occur in the form of vote buying during elections, but also within internal party processes such as the sale of nomination recommendations, elite bargaining, and the distribution of political positions.¹² The open-list proportional representation system intensifies personal competition among candidates within the same party, encouraging them to build individual patronage networks rather than strengthening collective party institutions. Under these conditions, political parties lose their function as institutions of political education and instead become brokers connecting wealthy patrons with voters. The relationship between citizens and parties becomes transactional rather than representative, based on short-term material exchange rather than long-term ideological commitment or policy accountability.

Therefore, the crisis of Indonesian political parties should not be viewed simply as a failure of democratic institutions, but as the manifestation of oligarchic hegemony operating through formal democratic structures. Economic elites control parties through financial dependency and patronage, parties preserve this domination through cartelized institutional arrangements that restrict substantive competition, and the entire process is legitimized through ideological hegemony that normalizes these conditions in public consciousness. What emerges is not substantive democracy oriented toward social justice and public welfare, but procedural democracy functioning as an instrument for the reproduction of elite power. This is precisely why the problem of political parties in Indonesia constitutes a *stubborn problem*: a deeply structural condition that is difficult to reform because the very actors expected to initiate change are the same actors who benefit most from maintaining the existing system.

Political Parties and the Paradox of Democratic Representation

Political parties are formally designed to function as the main bridge between society and the state. In democratic systems, parties are expected to represent public aspirations, recruit political leaders, educate citizens, and ensure that government policies reflect the interests of the people. In Indonesia, this function became especially important after the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, when democracy was restored through the Reformasi movement. The re-emergence of a multiparty system created strong public optimism that political parties would become genuine instruments of democratic representation. However, the reality that developed afterward showed a serious contradiction. Political parties increasingly functioned not as public institutions, but as organizational vehicles for elite competition, power consolidation, and access to state resources.

Historically, Indonesian political parties have always been closely connected to the changing relationship between democracy and state power. During the parliamentary democracy period after independence, especially in the 1955 General Election, political competition was highly ideological and reflected real social divisions in society. Major parties such as PNI, Masyumi, NU, and PKI represented different political identities and social interests.¹³ This period demonstrated that parties could serve as meaningful channels of representation. However, this situation changed significantly under Sukarno's Guided Democracy and later under Suharto's New Order. Political parties were gradually subordinated to state control, and genuine competition was replaced by bureaucratic domination. Parties became administrative

12 Firman Noor et al., "The Implementation of Direct Local Election (Pilkada) and Money Politics Tendencies: The Current Indonesian Case," *Politik Indonesia: Indonesian Political Science Review* 6, no. 2 (August 7, 2021): 227–46, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ipsr.v6i2.31438>.

13 Yafis Alfian Hasan, "Building Islamic Ideology From Historical Studies : From Pesantren To Parliamentary Leadership," *Ahlika: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 1, no. 2 (December 2, 2024): 128–47, <https://doi.org/10.70742/ahlika.v1i2.108>.

instruments rather than democratic institutions, weakening their ideological and representative functions.

The Reformasi period in 1998 reopened political space and allowed the rapid growth of new political parties. By the 1999 election, Indonesia had 48 competing parties, reflecting a major expansion of political participation after decades of authoritarian restriction.¹⁴ Civil society groups, student movements, labor unions, and religious organizations viewed this moment as an opportunity to transform social demands into political representation. Constitutional reforms also strengthened democratic institutions through direct presidential elections and stronger legislative power. Nevertheless, this institutional openness did not automatically produce substantive democracy. Many of the new parties were not built from organized social movements, but from elite networks seeking new political vehicles. As a result, formal democratization often became a new arena for old elites to reorganize and maintain their influence.

Table 1. The paradox of political parties in Indonesia

Normative Function of Parties	Political Reality
Represent public aspirations	Serve elite and oligarchic interests
Political education for citizens	Minimal cadre development
Recruitment of democratic leaders	Controlled by patrons and financiers
Programmatic competition	Transactional electoral competition
Strengthening democracy	Reproduction of patronage networks

Source: the Author

This contradiction creates what can be called the paradox of democratic representation. Indonesian law, especially Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Parties, clearly states that parties must function as instruments of political education, channels for public aspirations, leadership recruitment, and guardians of national unity.¹⁵ Party constitutions and official platforms also emphasize social justice, people’s welfare, and democratic governance. Normatively, the institutional design is strong and highly democratic. However, empirical studies show that parties invest very little in policy development, political education, or ideological training. Instead, they prioritize media visibility, campaign financing, and strategic alliances that can secure votes and maintain access to power. This gap between legal ideals and practical behavior forms the core democratic problem.

One of the clearest examples of this paradox is the normalization of money politics in elections. Vote buying, commonly known as *serangan fajar*, has become a routine practice in many regions. Candidates distribute cash, goods, or short-term services to voters in exchange for electoral support, especially in local elections and legislative contests.¹⁶ This practice weakens democratic accountability because voters are encouraged to make decisions based on immediate material benefits rather than long-term policy considerations. The open-list proportional representation

14 M. Faishal Aminuddin and M. Fajar Shodiq Ramadlan, “Electoral System and Party Survival: The Case of Indonesian Democracy 1999-2019,” *Jurnal Politik* 8, no. 1 (March 25, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7454/jp.v8i1.1105>.

15 “Undang-Undang (UU) Nomor 2 Tahun 2011 Tentang Perubahan Atas Undang-Undang Nomor 2 Tahun 2008 Tentang Partai Politik” (n.d.).

16 Muhammad Rizki, Muhammad Arizka Wahyu, and Muhammad Suhail Ghifari, “Money Politics in Aceh: A Structuration Approach to Social Structure and Agency Interactions,” *Journal of Government and Political Sciences* 1, no. 2 (December 17, 2024): 87–104, <https://doi.org/10.64323/jgps.v1i2.25>.

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system also intensifies personal competition among candidates from the same party, making individual vote-buying strategies more attractive than collective party programs. Political parties therefore function less as institutions of representation and more as brokers connecting wealthy sponsors with electoral support.

Another important problem is the erosion of ideological identity within Indonesian political parties. In the past, parties were strongly connected to social and ideological cleavages such as nationalism, Islam, socialism, and class politics. These ideological foundations helped voters understand what each party represented. However, the New Order's policy of forcing all parties to adopt Pancasila as the sole ideological basis gradually weakened this programmatic clarity. After Reformasi, many new parties struggled to rebuild coherent political identities. Party labels became less important than individual candidates, celebrity figures, or family dynasties. Voters often changed party preferences based on personalities rather than policy platforms. This shift transformed parties into personalistic political machines rather than institutions of ideological representation and democratic accountability.

The paradox of democratic representation shows that the problem of Indonesian political parties is not simply poor management or weak institutions, but a deeper structural crisis. Parties continue to perform democratic procedures such as elections, campaigns, and coalition building, yet they often fail to deliver substantive representation for citizens. What should function as a mechanism of public participation becomes a system of elite bargaining and transactional politics. This explains why public trust in parties remains low despite repeated elections and institutional reforms. Political parties still occupy a central position in democracy, but their role has been distorted by patronage, money politics, and elite domination. Understanding this paradox is essential before discussing the larger problems of oligarchy and structural reform failure.

Oligarchy, Party Cartelization, and the Structural Failure of Reform

The crisis of Indonesian political parties cannot be explained only by weak democratic institutions or poor electoral management.¹⁷ The deeper problem lies in the structural domination of oligarchic interests that shape how parties operate, compete, and survive. Political parties have increasingly become arenas where economic elites invest resources in exchange for political access, regulatory protection, and control over state policy. In this system, democracy functions formally, but the real direction of political power is determined by those who possess financial strength and strategic networks. Parties no longer act primarily as channels of representation for citizens, but as institutional platforms for the protection and expansion of elite interests. This condition creates a democracy that appears competitive on the surface but remains highly unequal in substance.

One of the strongest indicators of this condition is the oligarchic capture of party structures. Political parties in Indonesia depend heavily on financial contributions because state subsidies are too limited to support the actual costs of elections and party operations. Campaigns require enormous funding for mobilization, media exposure, candidate registration, and voter outreach.¹⁸ This financial gap forces parties to rely on wealthy donors, business groups, and party leaders with strong personal capital. As a result, those who provide funding gain significant influence over party decisions, candidate selection, and policy direction. Party leadership often

17 Girisusilohadi Joko Purnomo, Dedi Purwana, and Choirul Anwar, "Conceptual Problems of Political Parties Cadre Management in the Reform Era in Indonesia," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4436952>.

18 SoRelle Wyckoff Gaynor and James G. Gimpel, "Small Donor Contributions in Response to Email Outreach by a Political Campaign," *Journal of Political Marketing* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 51–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2021.1910611>.

becomes closely linked to business interests, creating a situation where political access is determined not by competence or public support, but by financial capacity and elite patronage.

Table 2. Structural causes of party dysfunction in Indonesia

Structural Problem	Political Consequence
Dependence on elite financing	Oligarchic control of party decisions
Broad coalition governments	Weak opposition and limited accountability
Patronage-based mobilization	Reduced civic autonomy
High electoral costs	Corruption and transactional politics
Centralized party leadership	Weak internal party democracy

Source: the Author

This pattern is strengthened by what Katz and Mair describe as party cartelization. Political parties no longer compete mainly through ideology or policy alternatives, but through collective control of state resources and institutional privileges. In Indonesia, large coalition governments are common because presidents must secure parliamentary support from multiple parties.¹⁹ This creates broad governing alliances where parties from different ideological backgrounds join together for pragmatic reasons. Opposition becomes weak because many parties prefer access to government positions over principled political contestation. Ministerial appointments, state-owned enterprises, and strategic public offices become instruments of coalition management. In this environment, democracy loses one of its most important functions: meaningful opposition that can challenge power and protect public accountability.

Party cartelization also affects the relationship between political parties and civil society. Instead of building genuine social representation, parties often use religious organizations, labor unions, community associations, and local networks as instruments of electoral mobilization. These relationships are usually based on patronage rather than programmatic cooperation. Support is exchanged for access to state resources, local influence, or symbolic recognition. Civil society groups become politically dependent rather than institutionally autonomous.²⁰ This weakens their ability to act as independent watchdogs of democracy. Instead of challenging elite domination, many social organizations are absorbed into the party system and become part of the machinery that sustains it. Democracy therefore becomes patrimonial, where loyalty and personal obligation matter more than universal rules and institutional fairness.

Attempts at reform have often failed because they address symptoms rather than structural causes. One example is the repeated increase of the parliamentary threshold, intended to reduce fragmentation and create stronger parties. In theory, fewer parties should produce more stable governance and clearer political competition. In practice, however, threshold increases mainly benefit established parties with stronger financial networks and wider patronage systems. Smaller parties with programmatic agendas or genuine social movement roots are often excluded from parliament. Instead of improving democratic quality, institutional consolidation strengthens the dominance of parties already captured by elite interests.²¹ Reform becomes a

19 Karmel Hebron Simatupang, “Multi-Party Systems and Parliamentary Thresholds: The Case of Indonesia’s Presidential System with Comparisons to Germany and Taiwan,” *Journal of Political Issues* 6, no. 2 (January 31, 2025): 99–109, <https://doi.org/10.33019/jpi.v6i2.291>.

20 Nicole Bolleyer and Patricia Correa, “Member Influence and Involvement in Civil Society Organizations: A Resource Dependency Perspective on Groups and Parties,” *Political Studies* 70, no. 2 (May 19, 2022): 519–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720968018>.

21 Arda C. Kumbaracıbaşı, “Models of Party Institutionalization and Problems of Democratic Consolidation,” *Mediterranean Politics* 25, no. 2 (March 14, 2020): 215–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1537102>.

tool for consolidation rather than democratization, preserving the same power structures under a more simplified electoral system.

Another major problem is party financing and its direct connection to corruption. Because the cost of politics is extremely high, many elected officials treat public office as an investment that must generate returns. Business donors expect policy favors, access to state contracts, and regulatory protection in exchange for campaign support. Politicians often use state-owned enterprises, regional budgets, and public procurement systems to recover political costs and reward their networks. Corruption therefore becomes a structural outcome rather than an individual moral failure. Anti-corruption policies are necessary, but they are often limited because they do not change the financial logic of party survival. As long as politics remains expensive and parties remain dependent on private financiers, corruption will continue to be a rational strategy.

The final structural weakness lies in the absence of internal democracy within political parties themselves. Although legal regulations require democratic procedures, most major parties remain highly centralized and dominated by small leadership circles. Candidate selection for legislative seats, governors, mayors, and presidential nominations is often decided through elite negotiation rather than transparent institutional mechanisms. Ordinary members have little influence over strategic decisions, while loyalty to party leaders is rewarded more than competence or ideological commitment. This creates top-down organizations where power flows from patrons to members, not from citizens to representatives. As a result, even inside party institutions, democratic values are weak. The persistence of oligarchic leadership makes reform extremely difficult because those who control the system are also those who benefit most from preserving it.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the crisis of political parties in Indonesia is not simply caused by weak institutional management or incomplete democratic consolidation, but reflects deeper structural problems rooted in oligarchic domination, party cartelization, and patronage-based relations. Political parties continue to carry out democratic procedures such as elections, coalition building, and leadership recruitment, yet these mechanisms often fail to produce substantive representation. Instead, parties have become instruments for reproducing elite power, where financial dependency, transactional politics, and centralized leadership weaken public accountability and internal democracy. The main finding is that the paradox of representation emerges because parties formally carry democratic mandates while practically serving oligarchic interests. This research contributes by offering an integrated explanation linking historical development, institutional design, and political economy, showing that party dysfunction is systemic and persistent rather than a temporary democratic imperfection.

The contribution of this study lies in its argument that reforming political parties requires more than legal or procedural adjustments; it demands structural changes in the broader relationship between power, capital, and democratic institutions. Electoral thresholds, anti-corruption policies, and formal party regulations may improve technical governance, but they remain insufficient if party financing, elite domination, and weak civic control are left untouched. Therefore, meaningful reform must include stronger public financing for political parties, stricter transparency in campaign funding, deeper internal party democratization, and stronger protection for independent civil society and media oversight. Political parties must be pushed to return to their original democratic function as institutions of representation rather than instruments of elite accommodation. Without such structural transformation, Indonesian democracy risks remaining procedural in form but oligarchic in substance, where democratic legitimacy exists only as a formal shell for the continuity of elite power.

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