



Building Democracy with Autocracy: A Case Study of the Personalisation of Political Parties in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia was the third-largest country at the beginning of the reform era, but its Democracy Index has declined significantly. Many factors, including leadership in political parties, have influenced this decline. This study aims to examine in greater depth the leadership of political parties in Indonesia, how party leadership works, and why the circulation of party leadership does not work. This study uses a qualitative case study approach. Five major parties, namely PDIP, PKB, Gerindra, NasDem and Demokrat, were selected as research subjects. This study found three problems in political parties. First, regulations are enacted to advance the elite's desire to strengthen the party chairman's position. Second, the dominance of a single leader prevents the circulation of internal party leadership. Party policies are centralised, weakening internal party democracy and closing off channels for ideas and thoughts to the decisions of a single individual. Third, the personalisation of party leaders through online media has led voters to increasingly rely on party leaders as guides in their decision-making, indicating a decline in the importance of party organisations. This study contributes to the field of political science and reinforces prior social and political science research, particularly on political parties in Indonesia.

Keywords

Democracy; Political Parties; Personalisation; Single Dominance; Party Policy Centralisation

Abstrak

Indonesia telah menjadi negara terbesar ketiga pada awal reformasi, tetapi Indeks Demokrasi Indonesia mengalami penurunan secara signifikan, penurunan ini dipengaruhi oleh banyak faktor salah satunya adalah faktor kepemimpinan di partai politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji lebih mendalam mengenai kepemimpinan partai politik di Indonesia, bagaimana kepemimpinan partai bekerja, dan mengapa sirkulasi kepemimpinan partai tidak berjalan. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif pendekatan studi kasus. Pilihan lima partai besar yaitu PDIP, PKB, Gerindra, NasDem dan Demokrat di pilih sebagai subjek penelitian. Penelitian ini menemukan tiga masalah dalam partai politik, pertama, adanya regulasi dibuat berdasarkan keinginan elit untuk memperkuat posisi ketua partai, kedua, dominasi kepemimpinan tunggal yang menyebabkan sirkulasi kepemimpinan internal partai tidak berjalan, kebijakan partai bersifat sentralistik melemahkan demokrasi internal partai akibatnya saluran gagasan

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dan pemikiran tertutup oleh Keputusan individu tunggal. Ketiga, Personalisasi ketua partai melalui media online telah menyebabkan pemilih semakin menggunakan pemimpin partai sebagai pedoman dalam proses pengambilan keputusan mereka, menunjukkan penurunan pentingnya organisasi partai. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pengetahuan dalam studi ilmu politik dan memperkuat kajian sebelumnya dalam studi ilmu sosial politik secara spesifik kajian dalam studi partai politik di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci

Demokrasi; Partai Politik; Personalisasi; Dominasi Ketua Partai; Sentralisasi Kebijakan Partai

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Introduction

Indonesia has been the third-largest democracy since 1998, marked by the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy during the reform era. As a democratic country, the government has taken various significant steps, including the establishment of democratic institutions and the liberalisation of political and civil rights.

At the beginning of the reform era, the government succeeded in improving the democracy index. However, in recent years, the quality of democracy has declined, marked by rising anti-liberal tendencies and political instability. The IDI score fell from 6.71 in 2022 to 6.53 in 2023, marking the lowest point in 14 years. This decline indicates a disruption in the democratic process in Indonesia (Nugraha et al., 2025). This decline is marked by the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian practices. On the one hand, the government has been able to maintain regular elections, which are the main foundation of its democratic system. On the other hand, the government's focus is limited to the electoral process, even though this sometimes obscures the need for strong institutions and norms (Ulum et al., 2020).

Why has Indonesia's democratisation index declined sharply? This is due to the lack of seriousness on the part of political parties in Indonesia in developing a quality democracy. Democracy is merely a gateway for political parties to gain power, ignoring the values and norms of a strong democratic system. The majority of political parties will do anything, even if it means breaking the law. Party leadership anomalies are increasingly dependent on charismatic and popular figures to attract votes. This dependence on personal charisma has diverted parties' attention from developing a solid organisational structure and a coherent policy platform, which ultimately leads to opportunistic and corrupt practices (Fionna, 2016).

Previous studies have shown that charismatic leadership has played a significant role, but this does not mean that absolute control can be exercised by a single person. Tan & Tan's (2012) study suggests that the emphasis on individual personalities rather than ideology and party structure has weakened the institutionalisation process of political parties in Indonesia. This trend has long-term implications for the stability and functioning of the party system. This study has attracted considerable criticism. For example, Ristyawati et al (2025) emphasise the importance of encouraging political parties to adopt more democratic internal mechanisms and implement term limits to ensure the development of cadres and democratic governance. This study is supported by Priowidodo et al. (2019), who found several cases in which the final decision-making authority often rests with the party leader at the central level, bypassing input from the provincial and district levels, further strengthening the concentration of power in the hands of a handful of individuals.

As a result, political parties in Indonesia face many problems, particularly issues with party structures that do not meet democratic standards. The most striking issues concern term limits and the personalisation of parties in Indonesia. Until now, there has been a legal framework limiting the term of office of political party leaders in Indonesia. The absence of such regulations has harmed democratic principles themselves, as leadership changes do not occur regularly, creating an environment in which party leadership can become authoritarian (Ghafur, 2024). The unlimited authority of party leaders allows them to act arbitrarily, hindering internal party democracy and leadership renewal. This has led to oligarchic practices and a feudalistic culture within parties, where party leaders wield significant control (Mukhlis & Tajuddin, 2024).

Another study, for example, Muklis et al. (2025), has examined in depth the terms of office of party elites in the Philippines and the United States. These countries helped create binding regulations on political parties. Both countries have set term limits for their legislators, which helps to maintain democratic leadership turnover. In the Philippines, the term of office for members of the Senate is limited to six years with a maximum of two re-elections, while members of the House of Representatives serve for three years with a maximum of three re-elections. This is in contrast to members of the House of Representatives in Indonesia, who can serve indefinitely as long as they are elected by the people in every election.

The dominance of political dynasties and elitism within parties has also hindered the development of meritocracy and perpetuated authoritarian practices (Martini et al., 2026). The facts show that the elite has hijacked policy, so that the legislative process no longer reflects public aspirations but is geared towards maintaining internal political interests (Said, 2025). This is not without reason. Mietzner's (2008) study explains that the need for political parties to raise funds outside the budget in order to maintain their independence from state institutions further strengthens the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader who manages these funds. Mietzner's latest study (2025) also refutes the notion that the widespread distribution of power during Indonesia's early democratic transi-

tion actually hindered the achievement of a new monopoly of power. This distribution has triggered intense competition among elites, thereby preventing the return of personalistic autocracy.

This argument is reinforced by Kristiyanto et al. (2023), who state that political parties in Indonesia are undergoing a process of institutionalisation and resilience strengthening, which involves strengthening the role of leadership within the party. However, this does not always mean control by a single individual; rather, it is a collective effort to adapt to electoral democracy. Cases of internal conflict within parties, such as that experienced by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), show that control is not absolute and is always contested. Conflict management models and charismatic leadership influence play a role in resolving these conflicts (Swestin, 2014).

This research is very important because there are signs of abuse of authority within the party leadership in Indonesia, and a tendency for party leaders to use an iron fist under the pretext of strengthening democracy. This study employs institutional party theory to facilitate and re-examine the internal dimensions (e.g. organisational structure, leadership stability) and external dimensions (e.g. social relations, electoral dynamics) of political parties, as well as their functions within a democratic state, by conducting an in-depth analysis of the leadership recruitment system within political parties in Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative research design with a case study approach across five major parties: the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), the National Awakening Party (PKB), the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), the National Democratic Party (Nasdem), and the Democratic Party. It is hoped that this study will provide a complete picture and contribute to the development of political science studies in Indonesia by presenting empirical facts about political party leadership and providing solutions to the dominance of a single power in political parties, which is contrary to and undermines the principles and functions of political parties in Indonesia.

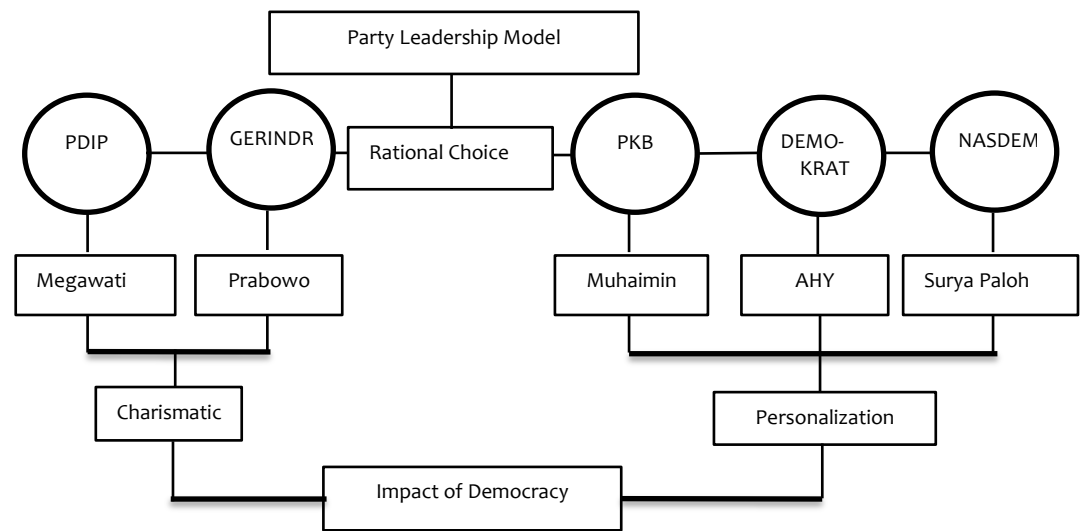
Method

This research design uses qualitative methods with a case study approach. The case study method is used to provide in-depth insights into specific political events or phenomena. For example, a study of the 2010 regional head elections in Manado combined qualitative and quantitative methods, including direct observation, media reviews, and interviews with various stakeholders (Sampe, 2021). Qualitative methods were chosen for three important reasons. First, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how party leadership recruitment models are implemented operationally by Indonesian parties. Second, we wanted to understand why parties are increasingly relying on charismatic and popular figures to attract votes. Third, we wanted to examine the impact of single-party dominance on democracy in Indonesia.

The institutional theory of political parties was chosen to facilitate the analysis of this study. Institutionalisation involves internal dimensions (e.g. organisational structure, leadership stability) and external dimensions (e.g. social relations, electoral dynamics). Studies emphasise the importance of structured development to enhance the role of political parties in democratic regimes (Vukovic, 2019). We then conducted in-depth interviews with 12 informants, comprising 6 members of the political party elite, 2 political experts and 4 voters, to explore their views on the mechanisms for recruiting party leaders in the context of this study. Interviews are very important for collecting detailed, nuanced data, enabling researchers to explore the complex experiences of political actors and the social context. Interviews offer flexibility in data collection, accommodating structured, semi-structured, and unstructured formats to meet different research needs (Nathan et al., 2019).

Data analysis was obtained from various primary and secondary sources, including interviews, party regulations and important political party documents. Thus, we have drawn preliminary conclusions from this study, objectively describing the facts regarding the recruitment mechanism for party leaders in Indonesia, which is not carried out in a transparent and accountable manner, with party leaders appointed based on electoral considerations. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide corrections and contribute ideas, particularly to social and political studies, regarding the future development of democracy in Indonesia. The following is the design of this study.

Diagram 1. Research Design



Discussion

Party Leadership Regulations

Since the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, Indonesia has formed a democratic reform government. The government has sought to limit the power of leadership in government institutions, including political parties, and to prevent divisions among them. There has been a significant proliferation of political parties, but institutional design has been limited (Allen, 2018). There are ongoing efforts to democratise the internal processes of political parties. This includes ensuring transparent and accountable mechanisms for selecting party leaders, avoiding family ties, and establishing clear term limits for party leadership (Sulardi, 2020).

Regulations govern political parties in Indonesia. The existence of political parties is regulated by Law No. 2 of 2011, which states in Article 1 that every political party established must have Articles of Association (AD) and Bylaws (ART). The AD and ART are internal party regulations created to meet the party's needs, including the leadership selection process, which is outlined in the party's AD/ART and involves several hierarchical levels within the party structure, including branch, provincial, and central levels. Each level participates in recruitment and proposals, but the central level makes the final decision (Priyowidodo et al., 2019). For example, the final decision-making authority for the nomination and selection of candidates for President and Vice President, candidates for regional heads at both the provincial and regency/city levels, and, no less importantly, the final decision on who will be approved as the party's chairperson, all rest with the Central Executive Board (DPP) of the PDIP. This centralisation ensures that the highest leadership, particularly the party chairperson, has significant control over the selection process (Priyowidodo et al., 2019).

Events across various regions show that the mechanism for recruiting candidates for leadership positions within the PDIP often relies on their loyalty to the party and its leadership, as well as their political capital, including networks and financial capabilities. The central leadership does this because political parties need loyal cadres and sufficient financial resources to run their party machinery. These criteria serve as the basis for selecting regional party leaders. The majority of political parties in Indonesia follow the same pattern, not only the PDIP but also Gerindra, PKB, Nasdem, and Demokrat. The final decision-making authority often lies with the Central Executive Board (DPP) or individuals who are central figures influential in the party. This centralisation can lead to a lack of transparency and inclusiveness in the party leadership selection process.

The party elite has attempted to democratise internal party processes but still faces significant challenges, especially in the digital age, where information is easily accessible to the public. The lack of regeneration in political party leadership and the dominance of long-standing leaders contribute to an elitist, feudalistic culture. There have been calls within the party for reforms to make the selection process more democratic, such as limiting the term of office of party leaders and increasing

transparency and accountability in the selection process. However, these efforts have always failed because they have not received support from other officials (Mukhlis & Tajuddin, 2024).

We have conducted detailed tracking and research to discuss and analyse the internal regulations of five major political parties in Indonesia: PDP, Gerindra, PKB, Nasdem, and Demokrat. We have analysed each article to maintain the objectivity of this research. For example, in the PDIP, we did not find any standard rules in the AD/ART governing the mechanism for electing the PDIP party chairperson. The ART only contains explanations in Article 15, paragraphs d and e, namely that, in carrying out their leadership, the General Chair has the duty, responsibility, and authority, as well as the prerogative, to determine the implementation of the Party Congress and to propose candidates for Party General Chair to the Party Congress. This regulation only favours Megawati Soekarno Putri and does not offer opportunities to other cadres, instead closing the door on them as candidates for chairperson.

At the same time, we also discovered internal rules within the PKB, whereby the leadership of this party, which has a mass base among Nahdliyin citizens, is such that the position of the party's central Chairman is very strong and cannot be replaced by another cadre unless he dies. Muhaimin Iskandar uses a selfish approach and controls his subordinates. Muhaimin Iskandar's significant dependence on personal relationships, especially with influential figures such as Kyais and Ulama Pesantren, is limited to electoral interests. Prolonged internal conflicts have shaken the party and deepened divisions, leading to a sharp decline in PKB's vote share in the 2009 elections. In fact, the party has resources and high loyalty to the kiai and ulama, and there is a culture of obedience within the party, but this is not enough to unite interests within the party structure; on the contrary, it is a factor that hinders critical thinking among its members. This has become an obstacle in promoting innovative leadership and new ideas (Nastain et al., 2024).

Internal regulations of the PKB under Muhaimin Iskandar's control are implemented chaotically, based on personal likes and dislikes, for the sake of party solidarity. The central leadership has full authority as stipulated in Article 17 paragraphs b and c of the ART. The central leadership has the discretion to determine and approve the composition and personnel of the DPW at the provincial level and the DPC at the regency/city level without going through a party conference. It can also freeze the party's leadership at all levels below the central leadership (DPP). If there is a disagreement with the Chairman that is considered a violation of party discipline or criticism of the party chairperson's policies, the Chairman can dismiss and appoint new central party officials. Thus, Muhaimin Iskandar becomes the most powerful individual with unlimited power.

We have also discovered a unique phenomenon within the Gerindra Party: Prabowo Subianto holds two positions within the party's central leadership structure. One person holds two positions, namely Chairman of the Advisory Council and Chairman of the Party. The Gerindra Party's internal regulations, as stipulated in Article 19 paragraphs 1 and 3b of the Gerindra Party's Articles of Association,

state that the Advisory Council is the highest leadership body of the Gerindra Party, led by the Chair of the Advisory Council, who has the authority to select and appoint the Chair of the Gerindra Party based on the decision of the Congress or Extraordinary Congress, which selects candidates for the Chair. This regulation, as with the PDIP and PKB discussed earlier, favours the Chairman, granting Prabowo Subianto very broad, centralised, and dominant powers, enabling him to implement policies without seeking the consideration of other officials within the party structure.

We also tracked the regulations of the party founded by Surya Paloh. Article 29, paragraphs 1 and 2, of the NasDem party's statutes stipulate that the highest position is the Party High Council, as stated in paragraph 1. The High Council is the highest decision-making body of the NasDem Party. Paragraph 2 continues by stating that the first NasDem Party High Council consists of individuals appointed by the Chairman of the NasDem Party Central Executive Board (DPP), Surya Paloh, in accordance with the mandate of the first congress. In the event of a vacancy, the High Council member will be filled based on the results of a plenary meeting of the High Council. The High Council then elects the Party Court, which has the authority to resolve disputes. The decisions of the Party Court are final. With this phenomenon, Surya Paloh, as Chairman of the NasDem Party, can appoint the Chairman and members of the Party High Council at his discretion.

Similarly, the Democratic Party does not stipulate the term of office for its chairperson. Article 79, paragraph 1, stipulates only the term of office for the executive board: five years. This means that the Democratic Party's regulations do not stipulate the term of office, and the chairperson can be re-elected or elected indefinitely. In this party, the position of Chairman of the High Council is held by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the father of Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (Chairman) and Edhie Baskoro Yudhoyono (Deputy Chairman). The authority of the High Council is very significant. The High Council has strategic authority in making important decisions, such as selecting presidential candidates, candidates for the Speaker of the House of Representatives, decisions on coalitions with other parties, and candidates for the Chairman who run in the congress. With SBY's extensive authority, it will be difficult for anyone other than his own sons, AHY and EBY, to enter and occupy important positions in this party. The following table outlines the party regulations governing the mechanism for becoming the party chairman in Indonesia.

Table 1. Regulations contain mechanisms for electing the party's chairperson at the central level

No.	Party	Party Regulations	Article	Mechanism for Electing the Chair of the Central Party
1	PDIP	ART	15 paragraph d and e	Chairperson Megawati Soekarno Putri shall be tasked with, responsible for, and authorised to, and shall have the prerogative to: determine the implementation of

				the Party Congress and propose candidates for Party Chairperson to the Party Congress
2	PKB	ART	17 paragraph b and c	The central leadership has the authority to determine and approve the composition and personnel at all levels, as well as to freeze the leadership of the Party at all levels below the central leadership (DPP). The authority of the chairman, Muhaimin Iskandar, includes the power to dismiss and appoint party officials at the central level.
3	Gerindra	AD	19 paragraph 1 and 3b	The Advisory Council is the highest leadership body of the Gerindra Party, chaired by Prabowo Subianto. It has the authority to select and appoint the Chairman based on the decision of the Congress or Extraordinary Congress, which selects candidates for the position of Chairman.
4	Nasdem	AD	29 paragraph 1 and 2	The High Council is the highest decision-making body of the NasDem Party. The first High Council of the NasDem Party consisted of individuals appointed by the Chairman of the NasDem Party Central Executive Board, Surya Paloh, based on the mandate of the first congress. In the event of a vacancy, High Council members will be appointed based on the results of a High Council plenary meeting.
5	Demokrat	AD/ART	17 paragraph 6 f and 79 paragraph 1	The High Council of the Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono Party has the authority to decide on candidates for the position of Chairman (DPP). Does not regulate the term of office, but regulates the 5-year management period

Source: Articles of Association (AD) and Bylaws (ART) of Political Parties.

Based on Table 1 above, we conducted a more in-depth analysis using a rational choice institutional theory approach to obtain an overview of leadership models in Indonesian politics. Each party leader has a leadership model that is strongly influenced by their choice of language, which, in turn, affects voter perceptions. The use of certain grammatical features in political discourse can reflect and shape political authority, which is crucial for engaging diverse voter demographics (Wafa, 2025). In the context of PDIP and Gerindra, these parties require charismatic individuals to garner as many votes as possible in an electoral democracy. The same is

true of the PKB. Muhaimin Iskandar uses a model of leadership based on santri obedience to their kiai. However, in the party's operational leadership, Muhaimin Iskandar has placed the Kiai's son, "Gus Muhaimin", in a position of authority. In the pesantren tradition, santri are subordinates who must obey Gus. Some view that Muhaimin Iskandar has positioned himself as being sensitive to the Nahdliyin culture, which is deeply rooted in conflict. Muhaimin does not open space for dialectics with his subordinates, tending to use an iron fist in order to save his party.

At the same time, the Democratic Party is often seen as a political tool for SBY, with its success closely linked to his leadership. The Democratic Party won the 2009 legislative elections, even securing SBY's two terms as president, with the party benefiting significantly from SBY's popularity (Honna, 2012). The shadow of SBY, who made AHY the highest-ranking member of the SBY family, has not matched his father's popularity, which he built during his time as a leader beloved by the Indonesian people. SBY himself feels it is important to shield his son from disputes caused by internal party dynamics. It is increasingly clear that the Democratic Party's biggest asset is not someone else but SBY himself.

Surya Paloh, a prominent figure in Nasdem, wields significant influence through his media holdings, particularly Metro TV. This media outlet has been used to shape political images and influence public perception, as seen in its biased coverage of presidential candidates Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar in the 2024 election. This shows that Paloh is using the media to strengthen Nasdem's political influence and sway public opinion (Ridwan & Sahab, 2025). Unlike other parties, Surya Paloh has led NasDem to become a party to be reckoned with and has not allowed others to take over the party, even though he has yet to find a successor within his family circle. These abstracts do not provide in-depth details about the authority of Surya Paloh and Nasdem. The fact is that Paloh's control over television stations such as Metro TV plays a crucial role in shaping political narratives and influencing public perception. Nasdem's strategic use of media and modern campaign techniques, such as social media, highlights its significant influence in Indonesian politics (Syam, 2019).

Personalisation and Dominance of Single Leadership

Political party leadership is very dominant in Indonesian democracy. The dominance of single-party leadership has weakened democratic principles by limiting the internal democratic foundations of political parties. The centralisation of power in the hands of a single individual prevents the implementation of intra-party democracy, which is essential for promoting political stability and democracy in Indonesia (Amsari, 2021). Party leaders can become like kings, wielding unlimited power and undermining democratic principles by preventing regular leadership turnover. This can weaken internal democracy within parties and undermine the overall health of Indonesia's democratic process (Ghafur, 2024).

Political experts and scholars have extensively discussed the impact of party leadership dominance. The dominance of a single leader can lead to the personali-

sation of a party, where the leader's personality becomes the centre of the party's identity and election strategy. On the one hand, this can be a strength; on the other, it can be a weakness for the party, depending on the popularity and effectiveness of the leader (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018; Musella, 2020). Leaders of dominant parties often use clientelism as a strategy for political mobilisation. Although highly effective at maintaining power, it can also lead to discrimination and undermine democratic standards if it limits party members' ability to make independent choices. Dominant leaders can significantly influence the behaviour of party members, even those who do not support their leadership candidacy. This can lead to more extreme voting behaviour and increased polarisation within the party.

The dominance of single leadership is often influenced by the founders of the party, who overshadow democracy and party dynamics. For example, in the historical records of the PKB's founding, the founders often left a lasting legacy that continues to shape the party's ideology and operations long after their terms of office have ended. For example, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), founder of the National Awakening Party (PKB), continues to influence Indonesian politics through the values and institutions he established, such as the Wahid Foundation (Franklin, 2024). His legacy is upheld by his family and close allies, who dominate the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama and PKB. Similarly, other parties, such as PDIP, are strongly influenced by Soekarnoism ideology. Soekarnoism ideology still strongly influences the transformation of ideas and concepts within the PDIP party, led by his daughter, Megawati. Equally important are the influence of Prabowo's thinking on Gerindra, SBY's influence on Demokrat, and Surya Paloh's influence on NasDem. However, the strong influence of party founders can sometimes hinder the party's democratisation. The election of party leaders is often influenced by the founders or their families, hindering the development of a more democratic and transparent leadership selection process (Sulardi, 2020).

Leadership dominance also shapes the circulation of power within political dynasties. The phenomenon of political dynasties is common in Indonesia, where founding families often continue to hold and maintain power within their own circles. From the first, the next flows, leading to the formation of political party dynasties that can hinder the democratisation process within the party. For example, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) has experienced internal conflicts influenced by family ties and the charismatic leadership of its founder (Swestin, 2014).

Another important finding in this study is that, in a single-leader party, when a party leader holds power for a long time without term limits, this can breed authoritarian tendencies within the party. The personal authority of the leader often overrides organisational rules, resulting in arbitrary decision-making and a lack of regular leadership turnover (Ghafur, 2024). This phenomenon is reflected in important decisions made by parties, both at party congresses and party conferences, which often amend articles in the rules to suit the interests of the party leader, including in the event of disputes within the party and issues surrounding

the replacement of party leadership. As mentioned above, no party explicitly limits the term of office of the party leader, which is certainly contrary to democratic values, where the circulation of power is a prerequisite.

Political parties need strong leaders, according to one of the PDIP's central officials.

"The PDIP needs Megawati Soekarno Putri. Although she is a woman, she is a strong leader who has been tested in facing the tyranny of the New Order regime at that time. She is a firm and charismatic woman, but she can also act as a mother figure who protects everyone." (Interview on 5 January 2026).

Strong leaders play a role in bringing success, but their departure often causes instability and a decline in electoral support. This is because such leaders centralise control, making it difficult for parties to adapt and maintain cohesion after they leave (Alexiadou & Malley, 2022), so that the dominance of one individual in the party can lead to dependence on certain channels and cognitive barriers, where the party becomes overly reliant on the leadership of its chairperson. This can reduce the autonomy and criticality of third sector organisations and other internal party structures, ultimately creating a cycle of continued dominance (Chaney, 2015).

Personalisation has led voters to increasingly rely on party leaders in their decision-making, signalling a decline in the importance of party organisations (Costa et al., 2017). Two main models were identified: "personal parties," in which the leader's dominance is central, and "personalised parties," which retain some traditional party structures but emphasise the leader's role.

Political parties are becoming increasingly modern, and modern politics is becoming more personalised. The characteristics of individuals, both voters and candidates, play a significant role in political discourse. Voters tend to choose candidates whose personality traits align with their own values and the ideology of the party they support (Caprara, 2007). In today's era of digitalisation, the positions of party leaders significantly influence online personalisation on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Factors such as the leader's term of office, party populism, and the party's age also influence online personalisation (Zamir, 2024).

Emotional personalisation on social media has been shown to increase user engagement levels, such as likes, shares, and comments, during election campaigns. Voters are increasingly using leaders as guides in their decision-making, indicating a decline in the importance of party organisations. This trend is supported by the growing role of the media in shaping public perceptions of political leaders (Akhmedova, 2022; Costa et al., 2017). However, personalisation affects internal party democracy. Personalisation strategies, such as incorporating the leader's name into the party's symbol, can significantly impact public opinion and political participation. This approach often turns political figures into brands, thereby

weakening the party organisation (Battista, 2024). For example, in Italy, personalisation has been used to engage voters by focusing on leaders' images, with implications for democracy and political participation.

Personalisation can have both positive and negative effects on democratic institutions. For example, in Mexico, personalisation has been used to restore trust in institutions and increase citizens' commitment to politics, despite concerns about authoritarianism (Ochman, 2021). Meanwhile, in Poland, personalisation has been exploited by politicians for personal gain. However, it has also been used by leaders such as President Aleksander Kwaśniewski to stabilise politics and create prospects for the country.

In Indonesia, the personalisation of party leaders in the reform era is a phenomenon in which the figure of the chairperson or central figure becomes the party's identity, image, and main policymaker, surpassing the party's ideology or programme. Charismatic figures such as Megawati, Prabowo, and Surya Paloh, or new parties with central figures, wield strong control due to historical factors, funding, and patron-client culture, even though this risks weakening the institutionalisation of the party. Two other parties, although not categorised as charismatic figures, such as Muhaimin Iskandar, leader of the PKB, and AHY, leader of the Democratic Party, have similar roles. Muhaimin Iskandar, as a central figure, took control of the PKB after winning a legal case over the validity of the PKB leadership in 2008. After the departure of the charismatic figure Abdul Rahman Wahid, the PKB almost changed control to Muhaimin Iskandar. At the same time, Agus Harimukti Yudhoyono (AHY) is not a charismatic figure. However, the influence of his father, Susilo Bambang Yudhono (SBY), underpins AHY's leadership in the Democratic Party, so that the central control of this party under SBY is the same as under AHY. The following are the main instruments of party personalisation in Indonesia.

Table 2. Personalisation Tools for Party Leaders in Indonesia

No.	Instrument	Party Chairman	Political Party	Personalisation
1	More Important Central Figures	Megawati, Prabowo, Surya Paloh, Muhaimin Iskandar	PDIP, Gerindra, NasDem dan PKB	Political parties are often identified with a single individual.
2	Long-Term Dominance	Megawati, Muhaimin Iskandar, Prabowo Subianto	PDIP dan PKB	This personality is characterised by very long-term leadership.
3	Main Causes	Prabowo Subianto, Surya Paloh, Agus Harimurti	Gerindra, NasDem, Demokrat	Factors in establishing a party include the charisma of its leaders, a patron-client culture (father-son

		Yodoyono		relationship), and the central figure's control over financial resources.
4	Electoral Impact	Megawati, Prabowo Subianto	PDIP, Gerindra	This strategy is effective for short-term electoral solidity and gains, but it hinders the internal democratisation of the party and creates dependence on a single figure.
5	New Party Pattern	Amien Rais, Anis Matta	Ummat Party, Gelora	This tendency is not only seen in established parties, but also recurs in new parties.

Source: Compiled from several party documents.

The Impact of Party Chair Centralisation

An important element of the concept of modern democracy is the foundation that all citizens have the same, mutually compatible fundamental rights. It is essential to the legitimacy of democratic government that leaders be elected through a transparent and fair process. Democratic institutions must promote accountability and transparency to ensure that government actions are visible and accountable to the public (Ademir et al., 2024; Cogen & Brabandere, 2015; Shuifa, 2008).

One of the instruments of modern democracy is political parties. Political parties are a fundamental element of representative democracy. Political parties play a role in building political careers, conveying information to voters, and providing labels that help voters identify candidates. Political parties are essential for delegating power to elites who are accountable and promote a transparent and fair democratisation process. The main objective of political parties is not merely to win elections and control government institutions, but to enable them to implement policies and influence public policy in accordance with public principles and interests (West, 2015). Political parties should play an important role in organising democratic elections, ensuring that the process is transparent and accountable. They provide a platform for citizens’ political participation and represent voters’ aspirations and needs. Parties are responsible for selecting and nominating candidates for various political positions, ensuring that the election process is competitive and representative (Achmad, 2023).

Political parties are so important to the functioning of democracy because they can facilitate the expression of opinions and ensure the representation of various interests within the political system (Ibero-americanos et al., 2024). However, the public often perceives political parties as the source of problems, with the consequences borne by the public. Historically, political parties were formed in response to significant national crises or major political differences of opinion. For

example, the formation of political parties in the United States was influenced by disputes over the draft law on the distribution of seats in parliament in 1791-1792, which led to polarisation and the formation of different political factions. Political parties were formed to represent the interests of certain classes, professions, or ideologies within the framework of a modern constitutional state. The main purpose of political parties is to contest elections and, after winning, to seize power as the government.

In Indonesia, political parties have shown mixed results in terms of institutionalisation. Although democracy has become increasingly entrenched, the dominance of centralised political figures over individuals has shifted party ideology in general elections, further deinstitutionalising politics (Tan, 2006). Political parties are also often plagued by internal conflicts that are detrimental to the party itself. Conflicts within Indonesian political parties occur at various levels, including between organisations, groups, factions, and individuals. The parties adopt various conflict management models, such as collaborative, competitive, accommodative, compromise, and avoidance, which are influenced by individual character, political needs, and ideology (Priowidodo et al., 2019).

Factions within Indonesian political parties are often driven by clientelism and patronage, rather than ideological differences or regional affiliations. The intensity of factional conflict varies significantly between parties and over time. Although factions within parties can have detrimental effects, they can sometimes enhance government effectiveness and coalition formation (Fionna & Tomsa, 2020). Despite democratic reforms, many political parties in Indonesia still struggle to implement internal democracy. Dependence on centralised individual leaders often hinders the circulation of leadership within parties, which is detrimental to the democratic process as a whole (Amsari, 2021). Many political parties tend to elect or re-elect established figures as leaders, even in the face of public dissatisfaction. This preference for continuity over change limits opportunities for new leaders to emerge (Tomsa, 2016).

We have conducted an in-depth study of five political parties in Indonesia: PDIP, PKB, Gerindra, NasDem, and Demokrat. Despite criticism, political parties are essential for representative democracy. As in a previous study conducted by Bryan (2022), political parties have facilitated political pluralism, decentralisation of power, and the exercise of political freedom. They also play an important role in promoting non-domination and enabling electoral competition. However, political parties in Indonesia are trapped in a centralised structure that tends to adopt an autocratic model within the party. In the five parties we studied, the majority of these central figures use undemocratic methods. As social and political scientists argue, autocratisation can lead to systemic stabilisation while also causing deinstitutionalisation at the party level. This phenomenon, known as “systemic ossification,” results in a party system that appears stable but is vulnerable to destabilisation due to the lack of institutionalisation of the ruling parties (Yavuzylmaz & Tsarouhas, 2022).

The current leadership model within political parties tends to be autocratic, which we refer to as an “iron fist”, and has the potential to weaken democracy and create an autocratic political system within a country. Electoral autocratic regimes tend to increase the perceived polarisation of the party system. This is due to the high stakes in political competition and a biased information environment, which reinforces the impact of partisanship on polarisation (Just, 2022). As Turkey has experienced, the behaviour of political leaders is a major factor in the weakness of the country’s democracy. The authoritarian values and practices of leaders have hindered the consolidation of democracy.

In addition, various problems have arisen within Indonesian political parties. Political centralisation, a closed nomination process, and weak party institutionalisation have driven the emergence of political dynasties. As a result, parties external to the political parties have interfered in the process of selecting political party chairpersons. For example, in the cases of the Golongan Karya (Golkar) and Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), the involvement of President Joko Widodo has influenced both parties in determining their chairpersons. Golkar unexpectedly chose Bahlil Lahadalia, and PSI appointed Kaesang Pangarep (President Jokowi’s son) two days after he joined the PSI. The president’s influence can significantly interfere in party processes, resulting in undemocratic candidate selection (Ekayanta et al., 2025).

Table 3. The Impact of Centralised Party Leadership on Democracy

No	Party Chairman	The Impact of Democracy				The Impact of Autocracy			
		Accountability	Rotation	Recruitment	General election	Freedom	Opposition	Authority	Law
1	Megawati	✓	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×
2	Prabowo	✓	×	×	✓	×	×	×	✓
3	Muhaimin	✓	×	×	✓	✓	×	×	✓
4	AHY	✓	✓×	×	×	✓	×	×	✓
5	Surya Paloh	✓	×✓	×	✓	✓	×	×	✓

Source: Compiled from FGD analysis studies, Good ✓, Bad ✗, Good Possibility/Bad ✗✓.

Conclusion

This study shows that political parties in Indonesia tend not to be fully modern, institutionalised parties but remain stuck in a personalistic model, with single dominance and the centralisation of power in the party leadership. Therefore, we have concluded the arguments presented, as explained in detail above, of which there are at least three points:

First, we present the facts in this study. As in our previous study, we have found irregularities in political party regulations. The facts show that the regula-

tions governing the five parties we studied, namely the PDIP, PKB, Gerindra, Demokrat and NasDem, are weak. We did not find sufficient party rules to support the development of a high-quality democracy. On the contrary, there is a paradox in party rules, particularly in the mechanism for recruiting party leaders, which is carried out in an autocratic manner that prevents other figures from continuing in the party leadership. The regulations are designed to favour the party chairperson, with no restrictions on the chairperson's term of office. This makes it impossible for other cadres to run for party chairperson. This phenomenon directly hinders the institutionalisation of parties and their democratic development.

Secondly, we found that the strengthening of single leadership dominance was influenced by the founders, who were considered to have made significant financial contributions to the party's growth. Historical factors in the party's establishment also played a role in shaping single dominance. The lack of transparency in the mechanism for recruiting party leaders encouraged the tendency for political parties to serve as instruments passed down to family members, with the founders acting as a protective barrier. As a result, leadership dominance also played a role in shaping the circulation of party power within the political dynasty circle. Power is passed down from one generation to the next without a proper, transparent mechanism for determining party leadership. On the one hand, autocratic leadership within the party can prevent prolonged internal conflicts. However, it has weaknesses in party institutionalisation, as it narrows the space for lower-level party officials to criticise the party leadership's policies.

Third, the dominance of party leaders has led to the centralisation of power in the hands of a single individual. This has shifted the party's ideology and objectives, leading to its deinstitutionalisation. Political parties find it difficult to manage internal conflicts because all policy decisions are left to a single individual, namely the party's largest shareholder. The intensity of factional conflicts varies significantly between parties and over time, which has a detrimental effect on parties' ability to determine the direction of coalitions to win elections.

We therefore recommend that Law No. 2 of 2011 on political parties—which covers the formation, requirements, management and sanctions of such parties—be reinforced with more democratic provisions regarding term limits for the leaders of political parties. This is intended to ensure that political parties, as the main pillars of democracy in Indonesia, carry out their political recruitment functions in a healthy manner so that they are not monopolised by a single individual.

Author Contributions

Rofiq: *Writing-original draft, Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology.*

Rijfa Tuhfah Zahra: *Writing-review & editing, Supervision, Validation.*

Authenticity Statement

We declare that this article is an original work, compiled without plagiarism, and that all sources used have been fully cited. We also confirm that this article has not been previously published or submitted for publication to any other journal or publisher.

Biography

Rofiq is a lecturer and researcher in the Political Science Programme at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang. He is active as a researcher focusing on topics related to democracy, local politics and the politics of education. His most recent published work is *The Failure of the Old Islamic Parties in Indonesian Elections: A Study of the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) 2019–2024*.

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