



# Ilham Arif Sirajuddin (IAS) and the Tenuous Relationship between Politicians and Political Parties

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**Abstract.** This study focuses on the political dynamics that arise from employing the open proportional electoral system, particularly in South Sulawesi. It evaluates the benefits and drawbacks of this system, examines the relationship dynamics between politicians and political parties since its implementation, and discussed various backgrounds related to the decision of Ilham Arif Sirajuddin (IAS) to change parties. This study uses a qualitative approach and secondary data as the main source. The results highlight the advantages of using an open proportional electoral system, as well as the various political dynamics it creates. Despite the implementation of this system, the political dynamics between politicians and political parties persist, with parties retaining their power and politicians relying on them, often switching parties to align with their political ideals at each stage of the political contest. The use of the open proportional system allows politicians to strategically select political parties as their vehicles, as demonstrated by Ilham Arif Sirajuddin, who switched parties ahead of the 2024 Indonesia general elections.

**Keywords:** Politicians, open proportional electoral system, political party, clientelism, rational choice.

## 1 Introduction

Indonesia, being a nation with a democratic form of government, is dedicated to realizing its objective of providing social welfare to every citizen. A general election was conducted to ensure the sustainability of the country. The electoral system, which is a set of rules for holding general elections, played a crucial role in the implementation of the election. The electoral system comprises three key elements, namely, ballot structure, constituency structure, and electoral formula, to ensure that all election processes and results are objective [1]. It is equally important for the

electoral system to have a robust legal basis for its implementation to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process [2].

Indonesia has implemented a proportional election system, which includes both closed and open proportional systems [3]. This system is based on the percentage of parliamentary seats that will be divided among the political parties that participate in the general election [4][2]. In a closed proportional electoral system, political parties are the only ones elected, and the people's representatives in parliament are determined solely by the parties. On the other hand, the open proportional election system allows voters to directly elect the candidate of their choice to represent them in the people's council [5].

The 1955 election was the first and only election during the Old Order Era to use a purely proportional electoral system. During the New Order Era, from 1971 to 1997, all elections used a closed proportional election system [2]. The 1999 transitional elections also used a closed proportional electoral system but have been considered the most democratic elections since the Old Order and the New Order Era [6][3]. In 2004, an open proportional electoral system was introduced, based on Law Number 12 of 2003. This system has been in use until the 2019 election [3]. The open proportional electoral system used in the 2019 election is based on Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections. Article 168, paragraph 2 of Law Number 7 of 2017 states that "Elections to elect members of the DPR, provincial DPRD, and district/city DPRD shall be held with an open proportional system."

The Constitutional Court has decided on the 2024 Simultaneous General Elections, stating that they will continue to use an open proportional election system. However, this decision has sparked interesting discussions about the ongoing political phenomenon. The petitioner's argument is centered around the fact that the legitimacy of political parties as election contestants has been directly reduced by the current electoral rules in an open proportional electoral system [7]. This, in turn, causes a decrease in a politician's loyalty to their party, weakens the party itself, and results in politicians being more concerned with how to read the opportunities of being elected in elections, regardless of which party they are affiliated with [1][8]. Proportional election systems, both open and closed, have their advantages and disadvantages. When evaluating these two systems, it's important to consider their priority and purpose of implementation. A previous study, suggests that if the primary goal of elections is to strengthen the party system, then the closed proportional system is the better choice. On the other hand, if the priority is to promote democratic values, then the open proportional system is the ideal choice[5].

In Indonesia, democracy, elections, and the national welfare are interlinked. The type of democracy that is most appropriate is determined by how effectively national welfare goals can be achieved using democratic means [9]. Indonesia experienced a period of dark democracy from the early era of independence until the New Order, where the welfare of the nation was affected by the centralization and monopolization of power by Suharto's militaristic regime. The Reformation era ended the New Order and brought democratization to Indonesia, and the military was prohibited from taking part in state politics [10].

The Reformation Era brought about a spirit of democratization that changed the political landscape of Indonesia. The country witnessed significant milestones such as changes in the electoral system, high political participation, and freedom of speech [11]. The shift from a closed proportional to an open proportional electoral system paved the way for the emergence of new political parties. Many politicians who were previously affiliated with one of the three parties of the New Order Era (PPP, PDI, and Golkar) established new parties and participated in elections during the Reformation Era. This change also altered the dynamics of the politicians' relationships with their parties. The emergence of new political parties is often driven by internal conflicts within existing parties. Politicians who establish new parties are more likely to succeed in elections than if they remain part of the three major parties established during the New Order Era. Internal conflicts have become a common feature of parties during the Reformation Era, often caused by coalition issues, clientelism, or losing political battles within their parties [12] [13]. These internal party conflicts have remained a significant dynamic in the politics of the Reformation Era until the present day.

One of the senior politicians from the Demokrat Party in South Sulawesi, Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS), has joined Golkar due to internal conflicts within the Demokrat Party. IAS emerged as the winner in the Regional Deliberation at the Provincial Level (Musda) of Demokrat South Sulawesi, however, the Central Leadership Council of Demokrat (DPP Demokrat) rejected the result. As a result, IAS believes that he is no longer needed by the Demokrat Party since Ni'matullah was appointed as the Demokrat Party Chairman of South Sulawesi despite IAS obtaining more votes [14].

It is not uncommon for politicians in Indonesia to switch parties, especially in the lead-up to the Simultaneous General Elections of 2024. The same trend can be observed in South Sulawesi, where several politicians have switched parties recently. For example, Muhammad Yasir, a politician from Golkar South Sulawesi, has moved to the PPP [15]. Frederik Victor Palimbong, the Vice Regent of North Toraja, has also moved from Golkar to Gerindra, while Aksan Mappede, the Vice Regent of Barru, has switched from Nasdem to Gerindra [16]. Another notable example is Ambo Dalle, the Vice Regent of Bone, who has left Golkar to join the PPP in anticipation of the upcoming elections [17]. As with any political contest, politicians strive to emerge victorious. Similarly, IAS had his sights set on the Democratic Chairman position in South Sulawesi. Despite winning the contest, however, he was not sworn in. It appears that clientelism played a role, as his opponent had stronger ties to the party's central leadership council's elite [18]. Regrettably, this prevented IAS from ascending to the position of General Chair of the South Sulawesi Demokrat Party.

The objective of this study is to investigate the intricacies of the connection between politicians, namely the IAS, and political parties following the adoption of the open proportional electoral system. This association is shaped by a multitude of elements. For instance, do politicians change their affiliations based on rational choice [19] [20]? Which resources do politicians utilize to vie for political supremacy? Does the traditional practice of clientelism, which has been prevalent in Indonesia, also play a role in the bond between politicians and political parties [21] [22]?

## 2 Research Methods

In conducting our research, we opted for qualitative methods utilizing descriptive and historical research designs, with a focus on literature research [23] [24]. To gather data, we primarily relied upon secondary sources, including books, academic journals, reports, and news articles[5]. This approach was selected due to its relevance and ability to provide a comprehensive overview in response to our research question[25].

The study draws on a diverse range of sources, including online news portals, institutional websites, scientific articles, and books. The news portal data centres on IAS's party-switching decision, along with the actions of several South Sulawesi politicians in preparation for the 2024 elections. The Institute's website offers valuable insights into reviews of the open proportional election system. Additionally, the scientific articles provide key concepts related to the research, such as the review of the electoral system, the advantages of an open proportional electoral system, rational choice theory (new institutionalism), patronage theory, and clientelism.

The paper starts by discussing the pros and cons of the open proportional election system and the relationship between politicians and political parties since its implementation. It also highlights IAS's decision to switch parties. The first research question will be answered descriptively using relevant secondary data [8]. The dynamics of the relationship between politicians and political parties in an open proportional election system will be analyzed historically, from patronage and clientelism politics in Indonesia to the present-day political scene. The phenomenon of IAS changing parties will be examined using the rational choice theory of new institutionalism.

## 3 Discussion

Indonesia underwent significant changes in its socio-political landscape following the end of the New Order regime. The Reformation era ushered in democracy, including holding elections a year after Suharto's presidency. The 1999 Transitional Elections marked a significant shift from the closed proportional election system that was prevalent in the New Order period. One of the most notable changes was the increased participation of political parties in the elections, compared to the three-party system under the previous regime.

The Reformation Era aimed to democratize the country, necessitating changes to the democratic process. The electoral system was the first aspect that required reform. An open proportional system based on the rule of law replaced the closed proportional system that was a hallmark of the New Order Era. A previous study described the advantages and disadvantages of open electoral systems [5]. The description suggests that politicians have fragile relationships with political parties. Their loyalty to a particular party is not as important as their chances of winning an election. An open proportional system creates opportunities for political opportunists and encourages politicians to form alliances with influential individuals outside their party, even if it goes against the party's interests. Political loyalty often turns into patronage, where

politicians prioritize their supporters regardless of party affiliation. This patronage-clientelism model further eliminates *demos* and strengthens *ethnos* in our democracy, as Cornelius Lay points out [6]. Political parties often face internal conflicts that arise from differences in their members' vision, opinions, and support for presidential candidates. These conflicts can cause factionalism within the party and result in members switching to other parties.

In an open proportional system, citizens not only vote for a party but also vote for candidates who are affiliated with that party. This leads to stronger competition between political figures rather than competition between parties. In Indonesia, the focus of politics has shifted from parties to individual candidates. The 2018 Makassar Pilwalkot contestation provides a good example of how politicians can fight for themselves, instead of relying on party work. The recent case of Ilham Arif Sirajuddin underscores the delicate balance between politicians and the political parties they represent. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence, as evidenced by the IAS and other similar cases. During the New Order Era, when the electoral system was founded on open proportionality, party switching was less prevalent. However, in today's open proportional electoral system, the ease with which politicians switch parties has become a pragmatic characteristic.

The concept of rational choice is frequently utilized to explain how voters make decisions [26] [27]. This idea also factors into the calculations made by political party leaders when deciding which candidates to endorse, particularly in local elections [28]. Furthermore, political investors employ rational choice principles to determine which politicians to financially support during a campaign [29]. In the instance of IAS's transition from the Demokrat party to Golkar, rational choice was the primary motivator behind his decision. IAS believed that Demokrat treated him unjustly, and therefore, he opted to exit the party. His aspiration to run for governor of South Sulawesi in the 2024 regional elections could prove difficult if he remained a Demokrat Party member. Joining Golkar, however, was a rational choice for IAS because it is one of the most influential parties in South Sulawesi, thus increasing his chances of becoming governor if he runs under their banner.

Indonesian democracy has a complex history, with strong political patrons in non-party organizations as well as parties themselves. The New Order Regime maintained power by using functionaries of the workers' state as a political locomotive. This regime established thousands of non-party social organizations to act as distribution channels for political patronage [13]. Meanwhile, the two political parties of that time (PPP and PDI) weakened, making democracy less effective. Today, this patronage model of the New Order Era has become more subtle and targeted in various fields, especially outside of government. Politicians act as patrons who take care of their constituents and maintain relations with the owners of capital (oligarchs) to succeed in the electoral stage by driving a party [30]. Whatever will be utilized by politicians to win political contestation, even ideological identity sentiments such as religion are also the background of political clientelism relationships [31] [32].

The influence of clientelism on Indonesian politics is unmistakable and far-reaching, affecting various political products such as public policy [33]. A prime example of this is the case of IAS, whose experience highlights the impact of an open

proportional election system and the practice of clientelism within political parties. Unfortunately, the Democrats' unfair treatment of IAS, stemming from clientelistic relationships within the party, led him to switch parties. Although IAS had a long-standing relationship with Nurdin Halid, a top Golkar Party official, his political opponents within the Democrats had stronger ties with the party's central leadership council, resulting in his removal. Ultimately, IAS's preference for Golkar over other parties was influenced by his clientelistic ties, which are unfortunately pervasive in Indonesian politics.

The relationship between IAS and Nurdin Halid is based on patronage-clientelism, which is a common practice among politicians in Indonesia [34]. Nurdin Halid, who is one of the major political patrons of the Golkar Party, has a long-standing relationship with IAS, who is a junior politician. Despite being considered a popular politician in South Sulawesi, IAS is still regarded as a rising star in the political arena. Therefore, Golkar is pleased to have him join the party.

Indonesia's democratic framework grants political parties a vital role, despite the occasional fragile relationship between politicians and political parties. Political parties wield the power to determine candidate recommendations, playing a critical role in democratic processes at both central and regional levels. This becomes more pronounced when a party has a legislative fraction and commands a significant number of seats over the threshold needed to nominate the head of government. It's a rational choice many politicians consider when collaborating with political parties. However, political parties can sometimes be less democratic and more authoritarian, leading to inadequate political education for their cadres and the wider public. This can cause party members' loyalty to falter, regardless of the electoral system employed during elections.

While this research may not be all-encompassing, it does offer insight into the intricate workings of political relations, politicians, and political parties. It touches upon concepts like rational choice, patronage practices, and clientelism and their impact. However, there is a need for future studies to delve deeper into these issues and tackle the problem of dynastic politics, which has been prevalent in Indonesian democracy leading up to the 2024 elections.

## 4 Conclusion

The implementation of an open proportional electoral system has significant implications for the political landscape, both positive and negative. On one hand, this system provides greater flexibility for voters and politicians in terms of campaigning and voting options. However, it also has the potential to create tension between politicians and their respective political parties. Politicians must carefully consider which party affiliation will benefit them the most before committing. At the same time, political parties hold the power to reject membership requests from politicians, which can impact the balance of power in the political sphere. Despite this complex relationship, political parties still retain significant bargaining power in the overall political landscape. It is essential to note that a politician's move from one party to

another does not necessarily imply the weakening of political parties in an open proportional system. Various factors influence politicians to change their party affiliation, and it's crucial to understand them to comprehend the shifting dynamics of politics.

IAS's decision to switch parties was influenced by a combination of rational choice and patronage-clientelism relations. This phenomenon is common in Indonesian politics, which implements an open proportional election system. IAS made the decision to switch parties ahead of the 2024 Regional Head Elections based on rational choice. This decision has theoretical implications that rational choice can occur at all levels, not just in voter behavior, party elite decisions, and political investor decisions but also in politicians to changing parties.

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