Politics in Indonesian Parliament, 1966–85

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Since the military came to power in 1966, it has decided to bring politics into parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) and the Congress (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR). In other words, the military, headed by Suharto, wanted to use the form of parliamentary democracy to legitimize its power. Not surprisingly, since assuming to power, the military has demonstrated a tendency to dominate the major political institutions in the country.

This paper attempts to examine how the new government managed to pass major political bills in the DPR? What were these bills? Were all bills in favour of the government eventually leading to the government party’s domination of parliament? What were the reactions of other political groups inside and outside parliament to various bills? Were the civilian and military members of Golkar in parliament united? How strong were political parties in the DPR? These are some of the major questions this paper attempts to address.

It should be noted that the DPR and MPR(S) between 1966 and 1971 were the continuation of Sukarno’s parliament and congress minus leftwing party representatives (that is, Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI, Partindo and Baperki). Some of the vacant seats were later filled by appointed members who were either anti-communist or anti-Sukarno or both.

In parliament, there was/is a division between the civilian Golkar which constituted the Karya Pembangunan faction (known also as the Karya faction) and the military Golkar which composed the military (ABRI) faction. The Karya faction, prior to the 1971 election, rigidly speaking did not consist of appointees from Golkar, but these members were regarded by the authorities as people who shared the views of Golkar. After the 1971 election, however, members of parliament were more clear cut in terms of their party affiliation. Apart from party and military representatives, those in the Karya faction (that is, Golkar) in parliament were either elected on the Golkar ticket or appointed by the government to represent Golkar.

In June 1966, three months after Suharto obtained a mandate (Super Semar or “the 11 March 1966 Order”), the MPRS met in order to legitimate the mandate and to discuss the date of the general elections. The election itself was also a form of legitimacy for the Suharto government. The MPRS decided that the election should take place on 5 July 1968 at the latest.

The 1969 Election Bill and the DPR/MPR Bill

In order to hold a general election, a new election law was needed. On 24 November 1966, the government submitted an election bill (that is, the Bill on the Election
Relating to Members of the MPR and the DPR) together with two other relevant bills to be debated in the DPR, namely: “the Bill on the Structure and Position of the MPR, the DPR and the DPRD” and “the Parties, Mass Organizations and Golongan Karya Bill”. The party bill was discussed for more than a month without any result. It was obvious that the government intended to introduce restructuring of political parties by limiting their membership, and by grouping them into fewer clusters in accordance with the suggestion of the 1966 Army Seminar in Bandung. The opposition from political parties was so great that the DPR eventually decided to concentrate on the other two bills.

Disagreements also existed on the election bill, especially with regard to matters relating to the election system, the proportion between representatives from Java and the Outer Islands, and the number of appointed members in the DPR and the DPRD (regional parliament). The government was at first in favour of the “single member constituency” (or district system) rather than “proportional” system. Under a district system, small parties would not be able to survive but people could elect their own new leaders rather than be represented by established political party leaders. According to this system, residential requirements for a candidate would be imposed. This was in accordance with the recommendation of the 1966 Army Seminar. New Order “militants” such as General A.H. Nasution (who was then Chairman of the MPRS) and anti-communist intellectuals (especially those affiliated with various Action Fronts) were major supporters of the district system.

To discuss the bills, a Committee called the Panitia Chusus 3 RUU was established on 30 January 1967. The Committee consisted of 45 members, the ABRI had six members, the Karya Faction A/B/C had eleven members and the rest (28 members) were political party representatives. However, political parties objected to the district system and the Suharto Government eventually backed down. The Karya Faction was persuaded to go along with the government. By July 1967, it was reported that a general consensus between parliament and the government was reached and the proportional system was adopted. In addition, both sides also agreed that one third of MPR members would be appointed from both the ABRI and non-ABRI, while the DPR would consist of 460 members, of which 360 would be elected. The rest (100) would be appointed.

General A.H. Nasution was not happy about the election system, nor were New Order “militants” within and outside parliament. Up to January 1968 the election bill was not yet ratified by parliament. There were rumours that various Action Fronts exerted pressures to postpone ratification. The DPR eventually decided to ratify the bill together with the other bill on the structure of the MPR, the DPR and the DPRD.

By then it was clear that the election could not be held in time. Acting President Suharto expressed his intention to postpone the election. In March 1968, the MPRS held its session appointing Suharto the President and deciding to postpone the election until 5 July 1971.

There were several “crucial points” in the above-mentioned bill which impeded its smooth approval in the DPR. Most of these points were related to the number of appointed members from ABRI, non-ABRI and Political Parties in the three institution (MPR, DPR and DPRD). There were also clauses which gave the President, Minister of Home Affairs and Governor sole power to appoint those members.