

Sydney Morning Herald features CDI report

Fundamentalist Islam takes back seat to elite in new democracy

By Louise Williams
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Indonesia's new electoral laws will hobble hardline Islamic parties, but hand the biggest potential advantage in national elections to the incumbent, President Megawati Soekarnoputri, according to an Australian study.

The Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), a federally funded think tank, gives a mixed review of political changes in Indonesia since the authoritarian regime of president Soeharto collapsed in 1998, and questions the motives of the parliament, which last year framed the new political laws.

The study says politics remain the realm of the elite and that political parties have failed to develop coherent policies to tackle the urgent problems of poverty, underemployment, corruption and inadequate public services.

"The [new] system is clearly designed to favour the existing political parties, and the greatest potential winner is [Ms Megawati's Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P], it concludes.

The CDI analysis says smaller parties, many of which support the enforcement of Islamic law among the majority Muslim population, have been disadvantaged by a complex new set of rules and criteria for the proportional representation system, the redrawing of district boundaries and the shifting of an additional 5 per cent of seats to the populous main island of Java.

Ms Megawati's secular PDI-P enjoys considerable support in Java. Islamic parties, more popular in the outer islands, could lose up to 50 seats in the 550-member parliament in polls on Monday week, in effect marginalising fundamentalist Islam from formal politics.

"In view of recent Western sensitivities about the rise of political Islam in Indonesia, this could be a highly significant result of the elections," the CDI says.

Fundamentalist Islam attracts only about 10 per cent of voters, despite Indonesia's majority Muslim population. However, disappointment with the central government has long been channelled into the mosques, especially in long suffering poor, rural communities.

The relegation of Islamic fundamentalism to the political sidelines will not necessarily combat the threat of religious extremism in Indonesia, or its terrorist offshoots.

Apart from Ms Megawati's PDI-P, the four largest political parties also stand to benefit from the new rules. They include the revived Golkar party, formerly the political instrument of the Soeharto regime.

This means the election will probably be dominated by the personal legacies of the two leading post-independence politicians: the former dictator Soeharto, and the charismatic independence leader he deposed in the mid-1960s, the former president Soekarno, Ms Megawati's father. This falls far short of the euphoric expectations for sweeping changes that followed Soeharto's forced resignation in the face of a popular uprising.

Previously, Indonesia had experienced only a brief but flawed period of democracy following independence in 1949 before political freedoms were gradually curtailed, culminating in more than three decades of military backed authoritarian rule.

The coming national elections are only the third democratic polls since 1995.

They are to be followed by the country's first ever direct presidential elections in July. One of the key questions is whether democratic structures can establish a new culture of accountability, or whether the political elite will hijack the electoral process and carve up the control of ministries, government departments and agencies as spoils.

A recent report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group on the coming elections said:

"Elected politicians at all levels are commonly perceived as venal and corrupt. The majority poor complain that democracy has not brought any improvement in their economic welfare."

The CDI said a "particularly Indonesian version of democracy" was emerging, in which "reforms have been engineered to perpetuate the control of political parties by existing elites".