

Helpdesk Research Report

Electoral accountability in Indonesia

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Question

What are the constraints to electoral mechanisms of accountability? What evidence is available that certain interventions or tools impact on electoral accountability?

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1. Overview

This report provides an overview of constraints to electoral accountability, with a particular focus on Indonesia. It also looks at interventions or tools that can impact on electoral accountability. There are many different definitions of electoral accountability. For the purposes of this report, electoral accountability is defined as citizens' ability to use electoral mechanisms¹ to incentivise politicians to act in their interests.

In his literature review on electoral institutions and local government accountability Packel (2008, p. 1) notes that that "little attention has been devoted to how specific electoral mechanisms fare in delivering accountability, or even whether elections are used by voters to hold officials accountable for certain policy decisions." Packel also notes that electoral studies tend to focus on the national level rather than looking at electoral systems at the local level (2008, p. 1). This rapid literature review has found limited evidence of interventions or tools that can impact on electoral accountability at the subnational level.

¹ In Indonesia, competitive elections take place at the national, provincial, and district (regency or municipality) levels. At the district level, the district administration is divided into the District Legislative Assembly (DPRD) and the District Government, consisting of the District Head and his/her vice (Valsecchi, 2013). See also <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/10/24/how-indonesia-s-2014-elections-will-work/gr87>

2. Constraints on electoral accountability

Multiple accountability relationships

Based on a desk-review of case studies of political accountability, Acosta et al (2013, p. 13) note that an elected legislator may be accountable to his or her party, or those who funded their campaign, as well as to voting citizens. Consequently, they argue accountability in representative democracies tends to be more complex than a two-way relationship between voters and government. If the needs or desires of these different actors diverge, accountability can suffer (Carey, 2009 cited in Acosta et al, 2013, p. 13).

Hamid (2012, p. 336) notes that the rules and procedures of parliament in Indonesia force MPs to prioritise committee work, loyalty to a faction, and consensual decision making over their constituents.

Confusion about the role of different levels of government

Discussing Indonesia, Rodden and Wibbels (2012, p. 11) state that voters often do not know which level of government provides them with which services. Central government ministries have continued service delivery programmes from the pre-decentralisation period that are now in direct competition with those officially transferred to subnational governments. This has resulted in confusion and inefficiency (USAID, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, the position of the provinces in subnational governance remains unclear. As a result, provincial and district activities sometimes overlap, or are in competition with each other, while at other times essential tasks are not fulfilled and services are not provided (USAID, 2009, p. 21).

Lack of information

An IFES survey (2010, p. 1) finds that 75 per cent of Indonesians say that they do not have much or any information about local elections. Moreover, the majority of respondents stated that they do not have sufficient information about issues such as voter registration; candidacy; campaigns; how to mark ballot papers and when and where to vote (IFES, 2010, p. 5).

Corruption

Both vote buying and the practice of selling candidacies reportedly occur in Indonesia. An Asia Foundation survey on voting behaviour in Indonesia (2013) finds that 34 per cent of respondents had experienced vote buying. However, a report by USAID (2009, p. 18) argues that vote-buying might not necessarily harm electoral accountability, as voters who sell their votes may still have other ways of influencing incumbents during their terms in office (Ibid). Such mechanisms include a broad range of CSO-led initiatives, such as efforts to shape local budgets and legislative agendas; “regulatory impact assessments” that consult with citizens before new regulations are finalized; activist parent/teacher associations and clinic advisory committees (Ibid). The USAID report notes that while these activities take place in relatively few places in Indonesia, some subnational governments are open to such initiatives (Ibid).

3. Interventions or tools that can impact on electoral accountability²

Independent candidates

In a literature review on electoral institutions and local government accountability Packel (2008, p. 8) suggests that permitting independent candidates could serve to increase accountability, as this is a means of reducing parties' dominance. However, he notes that there is no literature dealing specifically with this issue. In Indonesia independent candidates were permitted following a change to the electoral laws in 2008. According to Buehler (2010), the degree to which this has increased accountability is limited, due to very high barriers to entry into local politics for independent candidates, which do not exist for candidates nominated by political parties.³

Recall

Recall enables citizens to remove elected leaders from office if they are found guilty of wrongdoing (Yilmaz et al, 2008, p. 12). Recall provisions exist in a number of countries, including in Ethiopia, Nigeria and India (Ibid). For example, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the village assembly (open to all adult residents) is able to dismiss the *panchayat*⁴ chairperson if they are found guilty of wrongdoing (Ibid). However, this is only effective if citizens are conferred this responsibility. In Bolivia, where council members are able to recall mayors, the tool has been used as a "political maneuver," reducing accountability rather than increasing it (Yilmaz et al, 2008, p. 13).

Term limits

In their theoretical quantitative study Smart and Sturm (2008) argue that term limits reduce the value of holding office, making incumbents more honest about their performance and their personal policy preferences. Term limits of two or more can therefore increase the chances of politicians implementing policies based on their personal preferences rather than on their re-election prospects (Ibid). As voters are more aware of the true policy preferences and performance of the incumbent, voters are in a better position to select the best performing candidates for a second term (Smart and Sturm, 2013, p. 22).

² International IDEA is in the process of finalising its Democratic Accountability Tool. Jorge Valladares (International IDEA) states that during the course of designing the Democratic Accountability Tool, IDEA "moved on from assessing elections as an 'accountability channel' when [they] ran into attribution problems (it was hard to know whether people would vote based on the delivery of one single service) and, more importantly, when assessment reports lost focus on services (assessing elections rather than accountability within the service which was [their] original intent).

³ Candidates must be able to obtain signatures from 3 – 6.5 per cent of local residents in support of their candidacies (Buehler, 2010, p. 273). Independent candidates also have to post an election bond, and are liable for a fine of approximately US\$2 million if they withdraw their candidacy after it has been approved by a regional elections commission (Buehler, 2010, p. 273).

⁴ Local self-government institution.

However, Smart and Sturm do acknowledge that there is evidence to suggest that term limits can be counterproductive when it comes to electoral accountability (2013, p. 22). They note that term limits prevent voters from keeping good politicians in office (Ibid). Moreover, term limits mean that the incumbent's payoffs from future terms in office are eliminated, and make it impossible for voters to punish opportunism on the part of the incumbent by threatening to replace them with an opponent (Ibid).

In a review of the literature on the impact of electoral institutions on electoral accountability Packel (2008, p. 16) notes that term limits prevent voters from holding officials accountable via retrospective voting. This is because candidates will have no incentive to perform well in their final term in office as voters will be unable to hold them to account at the ballot box.

Looking at local government implemented conditional cash transfers for schools in Brazil, De Janvry et al (2008, p. 3) find that performance was 36 per cent higher in municipalities governed by a first-term mayor who was eligible for re-election than in municipalities with a second-term mayor who was not eligible for re-election. This is because first-term mayors strive to "perform well" because it helps them to get re-elected, whereas second-term mayors do not have the same incentive (Ibid).

Ferraz and Finan (2011) find that reelection incentives reduce corruption in Brazil. They argue that their findings suggest that "electoral rules that enhance political accountability play a crucial role in constraining politicians, even in an institutional context where corruption is pervasive and elites dominate local politics" (2011, p. 1307). Moreover, Ferraz and Finan (2011) find that this effect is stronger in cases where the chances of corrupt practices being discovered are higher. They also find that corrupt activities that voters are unlikely to find out about, will not be prevented by having term limits. An example of such an activity is mayors spending resources intended for the health sector on teacher salaries or on other public goods. While this may be an act of corruption, it is unlikely to be detected because these funds are not openly being diverted for personal gain (Ferraz and Finan, 2011, p. 1284).

Information about candidates' performance

Information about candidates' performance is widely considered to be a means of increasing electoral accountability by enabling voters to "police" their politicians (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012, p. 35). This is because increased information arguably enables citizens to vote out candidates who do not perform well. However, a number of studies find that the impact of transparency on accountability varies depending on the type of information provided (Ibid).⁵

⁵ The impact of information about candidate performance on voting behaviour is looked at in detail in: Strachan, A.L. (2014). *Voting behaviour in Indonesia: Impact of information and performance* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1075). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

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