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Money Matters: From the Power of Capital to Political Power in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia

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Abstract

Since the 1998 Reformation, Indonesian politics has experienced major institutional transformation toward electoral democracy. One crucial change is the direct election of regional heads, including mayors, who were previously appointed by governors with central government approval. However, this shift also brings new challenges. This article examines the case of PT. Mayasari Bakti Utama (MBU) as an example of a capital-based political dynasty. The family owning this large transportation company has utilized its economic resources to build political power in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia. The study aims to explain how both informal actors (such as kyai) and formal actors (political party elites) are mobilized for family political interests. Using field observations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and library research, this study finds that, first, the MBU family employs kyai networks to build legitimacy among Tasikmalaya's religious population. The charisma of the kyai shapes voter behavior in favor of the MBU family. Second, political elites use their positions to support the family's electoral ambitions. Third, unequal capital distribution enables the MBU family to "buy" influence and secure political power. Thus, economic capital strongly determines the political configuration in Tasikmalaya, reinforcing previous studies that political power in Indonesia often originates from economic strength.

Keywords: Kyai, parties elite, Pilkada, vote-buying

Abstrak

Sejak Reformasi 1998, politik Indonesia telah mengalami transformasi institusional besar menuju demokrasi elektoral. Salah satu perubahan penting adalah pelaksanaan pemilihan kepala daerah secara langsung, termasuk pemilihan wali kota, yang sebelumnya diangkat oleh gubernur dengan persetujuan pemerintah pusat. Namun, perubahan ini juga membawa tantangan baru. Artikel ini mengkaji kasus PT. Mayasari Bakti Utama (MBU) sebagai contoh dinasti politik berbasis modal. Keluarga pemilik perusahaan transportasi besar ini memanfaatkan sumber daya ekonominya untuk membangun kekuatan politik di Tasikmalaya, Indonesia. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menjelaskan bagaimana aktor informal (seperti kyai) dan aktor formal (seperti elit partai politik) dimobilisasi untuk kepentingan politik keluarga. Dengan menggunakan observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terarah (FGD), dan studi pustaka, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa: pertama, keluarga MBU memanfaatkan jaringan kyai untuk membangun legitimasi di tengah

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masyarakat Tasikmalaya yang religius. Karisma kyai berpengaruh besar terhadap perilaku pemilih yang mendukung keluarga MBU. Kedua, elit politik menggunakan posisinya untuk mendukung ambisi elektoral keluarga tersebut. Ketiga, ketimpangan distribusi modal memungkinkan keluarga MBU untuk “membeli” pengaruh dan mengamankan kekuasaan politik. Dengan demikian, kekuatan ekonomi sangat menentukan konfigurasi politik di Tasikmalaya, sekaligus memperkuat temuan penelitian sebelumnya bahwa kekuasaan politik di Indonesia sering kali berakar dari kekuatan modal ekonomi.

Kata Kunci: Kyai, elit partai, Pilkada, pembelian suara

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to explain and analyze in depth the development of power through the power of capital. Apart from that, this article also explains how the business elite who later becomes the mayor of Tasikmalaya City - “uses” informal figures (such as Kyai) and formal figures (such as political parties elites) for their political interests. Kyai who have charisma in the eyes of followers and the public, such as studies (Deni Permana et al., 2022; Maunah, 2022), also influence their perceptions of choosing candidates who are carried by owners of capital (can also be called owners of capital). Meanwhile, political elites are used to provide parties as “political vehicles” when contests for direct regional head elections (Pilkada) are held (Buehler et al., 2021; Tindage et al., 2020).

When the political reforms in 1998 rolled around, the setting for regional head elections changed compared to the previous era (the New Order era) (Davidson, 2018; Muhtadi, 2019). Regional heads during the New Order era were elected by the President (for governors) and the Minister of Home Affairs (for regents and mayors) (Agustino, 2019, 2020). However, once political reforms were implemented, decentralization was introduced, and the electoral system of regional heads changed: Governors, Regents and Mayors are now elected by citizens who have the right to vote.

Scholars have noted that this reform represents a critical milestone in Indonesia’s democratic trajectory. Diamond (1999), for example, explains that Indonesia was a few of several countries that succeeded in democratizing in the late 1990s. The following year, Freedom House (2010) published their report explaining that Indonesia is the only country in Southeast Asia that is categorized as “free”.

However, after several years, Indonesia’s democracy has not been consolidated. instead it has regressed (Aspinall et al., 2020; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Aspinall & Warburton, 2018; Power & Warburton, 2020). One of the reasons for the regression to occur is the outbreak of vote-buying in national and sub-national election systems (Aspinall & Sukmajati,

2017: Muhtadi. 2019). One interesting locus to discuss is the dynamics of subnational politics in the Tasikmalaya. Why is it interesting?, Since Tasikmalaya was divided in 2001 into two administrative regions, a regency and a municipality, there are no significant differences between the political and social actors in terms of social, cultural and political locality, as the actors in both administrative regions work together and are actively involved in political and economic affairs in Tasikmalaya. This region is also the economic and governmental centre of East Priangan, earning it the nickname 'Black Pearl' of East Priangan, which includes the administrations of Ciamis Regency, Banjar Regency, Garut Regency, and Pangandaran Regency. Meanwhile, Tasikmalaya is famous as the 'City of Santri' (Islamic students), with thousands of Islamic boarding schools. There are 1,344 Islamic boarding schools in Tasikmalaya Regency and 1,770 in Tasikmalaya City.

However, the label 'City of Santri' is not only based on the number of Islamic boarding schools, which number in the thousands. There is also the political influence of the kyai (Islamic teachers) who own the Islamic boarding schools and are actively involved in directing the votes of the electorate in Tasikmalaya's electoral politics. (Hasbullah, 2020; Rosyad et al., 2022; Tasikmalayakota.bps.go.id; Opendata.jabarprov.go.id).

As the "City of Santri," the people of Tasikmalaya City highly respect the Kyai (teachers as well as religious leaders). They are not only used as spiritual teachers for Muslims, but also as charismatic leader figures (Deni Permana et al., 2022; Maunah, 2022) so that students and most residents obey them. Obedience to Kyai is considered part of worship, apart from obedience to God and His Prophets. This charisma is often used by political actors in electoral contests to gain voters' votes. Several studies show this relationship (Kusmayadi et al., 2016; Nasir, 2015). Apart from the Kyai, there are other important political actors, namely the parties elite. The parties elite is considered to "own" a ticket for anyone who wishes to participate in the Pilkada contest.

In the 2007 and 2012 Pilkada, the largest capital owner in Tasikmalaya City (the family of a major Indonesian transportation company. PT Mayasari Bakti Utama, MBU) was involved in the Pilkada and won. The question is, why and how does financial capital transform into political power in a religiously conservative, subnational context? How did they influence the Kyai to support him in the Tasikmalaya Pilkada in those years? And how can the parties support capital owners who are not parties cadres in the Tasikmalaya mayoral election contestation? This research is interesting because it explains comprehensively about the relationships between actors that are built, financial networks are played, until power struggles occur. These dynamics form the foundation of the main question explored in this study, namely the link between financial resources and political control in a religiously conservative local context. The core problem in this study is how the MBU family's financial capital transforms into political power within Tasikmalaya's religiously conservative context. The puzzle lies in the paradox that Islamic political elites, kyai, and religious organizations—who

are expected to uphold moral and ideological values—become politically dependent on financial contributions from the MBU family. Through large donations and material support, the MBU family successfully co-opts these religious and political actors, weakening their independence and ideological commitment. Consequently, Islamic elites and kyai no longer struggle for Islamic moral values, but instead serve the business–political interests of the MBU family.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of capital rulers who shifted to become political rulers closely intersects with studies of clientelism (Abus, 2022; Dewan et al., 2021; Ravanilla et al., 2022). This classic patron-client framework is relevant to understanding how the MBU family constructs reciprocal relations with Kyai and party elites. Scott's classic study (1972) explains very interestingly and in detail the very strong reciprocal relationship between landlords (patrons) and sharecroppers (clients). This theory is relevant for understanding the reciprocal relations between the MBU family, Kyai, and party elites. The relationship reflects an imbalance of power between patrons, who possess higher status and control financial resources, and clients, who depend on those resources. Patrons provide economic benefits, financial support, and protection, while clients reciprocate through political loyalty, votes, and services that help secure the patron's interests. Such ties emerge within unequal structures of wealth and authority, as seen in the MBU family's dominance in Tasikmalaya. Farmers as clients try to provide their labor (as a given service) to their Master whom they serve. In return, clients will receive protection and assistance when they are experiencing difficulties. This relationship is not only economically oriented, it is often even politically oriented. This can be understood when they vote for their patrons who run for certain political positions and win the competition.

In academic discussions, the traditional approach as outlined above has of course been revised. If in the traditional view clientelism was built on trust and loyalty which required a long time, today clientelism is understood as a more pragmatic and short-term reciprocal relationship (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2017; Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020; Stoke et al., 2013). In other words, a brief reciprocal relationship is like people agreeing in a market (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Loughlin, 2020). Even when referring to Nichter (2010) and Nichter & Peress (2017), they call it electoral clientelism.

Electoral clientelism is commonly understood as a mechanism for distributing material rewards to voters which is carried out “only” during general elections. However, evidence from this study shows that such practices can extend beyond electoral cycles and become embedded within broader political and economic networks. The electoral clientelism practiced by the MBU family in Tasikmalaya is not merely short-term or transactional. Their political and financial networks have been gradually developed since the Reformation period and have evolved into a durable structure that continues to influence both local and national

political contests. This is certainly different from traditional clientelism which involves long-term sustainable relationships. As a result, clients no longer have emotional attachment to their patrons so that vote-buying becomes a new and standard mechanism, especially in an electoral context. Referring to the above discussion, electoral clientelism is long-term and transactional in nature, and can develop into a wider network. This study also traces the impact of clientelism in Tasikmalaya, where business elites can easily buy loyalty.

The “exchange” of material for votes shows how money has become a very important object in politics, especially in the electoral system. Money can help candidates mobilize electoral support. Alternatively, money can also help convince voters that the candidate who buys the votes is worth supporting and money can “swap” the voter’s decision at the last minute before he casts his vote in the voting booth. It is undeniable that money more specifically vote-buying is endemic in many new democratic countries. such as Indonesia (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019, Berenschot, 2018: Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020: Muhtadi, 2019). Not only in Indonesia, wealthy families in the Philippines shamelessly lure the poor with money or goods to exchange their votes in general elections (Aspinall & Hicken, 2020, Cruz, 2019). Likewise in African democratic countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and South Africa (Andoh, 2021: Driscoll, 2020; Guardado & Wantchekon, 2021; Nwagwu et al., 2022).

For this reason, the author considers that democracy in effect in countries where money is very dominant and vote-buying occurs in every general election, such dynamics raise questions about the substantive quality of democracy, leading some scholars to conceptualize regimes as patronage or clientelistic democracies. It is more like a patronage democracy in which owners of access to economic resources can “manage the game and even buy voters’ votes because that is what is exchanged (citizen support (votes) and money). Thus, democracy can be reinterpreted as an instrument of capital rulers to gain political power through a legitimate electoral mechanism.

The important question then is who is the target of the vote-buying of the rulers of capital in each election? There are at least two explanations to answer this question. First, the core-voter school which explains that parties or capitalists/owners of capital will target their own support base when giving money or goods in order to buy their partisan votes during elections (Gherghina & Tap, 2022: Muhtadi, 2019, Nichter, 2010). Second, the swing-voter school which believes that parties or the rulers of capital/capital owners will not waste their budget by spending support on floating voters or a base of opponents who can still be influenced (Muhtadi, 2019; Nichter, 2010, Nichter & Peress, 2017). In the practice of electoral democracy that became more open after the Reformation, political mobilization increasingly took place through clientelistic exchanges based on reciprocal relations. These relationships developed between candidates and supporting elites such as traditional leaders, village heads, and respected community figures, and they were not necessarily bound by ethnic ties. Hicken (2015) defines clientelism as a reciprocal and hierarchical exchange formed through the

distribution of material or non-material resources. Such clientelistic exchanges are not rooted in primordial loyalties but in pragmatic cost–benefit calculations. They target not only loyal voters but also floating or swing voters who are easily influenced by money politics. In this context, the MBU family mainly directed its efforts toward swing or pragmatic voters through religious and community networks.

In this study, the author argues that both methods are used. First, the owners of capital use their funds to buy the votes of their supporters and also the swing-voters to ensure that the voters will not have another heart. But apart from that, capital owners are actually very active in approaching and buying the voices of charismatic and formal political actors (in Tasikmalaya) to avoid the risk of defeat. Why so? Apart from giving voters a voice that can be manipulated by the charismatic and formal elites, the owners of capital directly buy these influential elites as well. In fact, to create loyalty among all voters, capital owners use their money to carry out maintenance-buying and often rewarding-loyalists-all of which will be elaborated on in this article.

METHOD

This article seeks to understand the political dynamics in the city of Tasikmalaya, especially when the rulers of capital try to enter the world of politics. This opportunity opened up in the Reformation era because democratization has brought fresh air of change towards a more open, inclusive and effective political system (Diamond, 2020, Landemore. 2020). However as previously analyzed by Aspinall et al. (2020) Aspinall & Berenschot (2019), Aspinall & Warburton (2018), and also Power & Warburton (2020) that Indonesian democracy has suffered a setback. Among the causes is the massive and uncontrollable vote-buying.

To understand these political dynamics, a rigorous qualitative approach was employed to ensure validity and reliability. The aim is that the details regarding political dynamics in the research locus can be described in a comprehensive and satisfying manner. For that researchers use qualitative methods to understand the field. With this method, researchers assess a complete and comprehensive picture of research objectives through in-depth and authentic understanding of individual or group experiences (Flick, 2022; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022)

This research was conducted from January 2022 to March 2023, in the City of Tasikmalaya (West Java, Indonesia) (see Figure 1). Tasikmalaya City (often also called Tasik City) was chosen purposively for the reason of its unique character. Kota Tasik only has an urban character, but also has a rural-agrarian character. In addition, the community of Tasik residents is bound by togetherness under the leadership of Kyai as informal leaders (Kusmayadi et al., 2016; Rosyad et al., 2022). One more thing. Kota Tasik is a capital center for big transportation companies in Indonesia: PT. Haji Saleh Budiman (HSB, Budiman bus owner) and PT. Mayasari Bakti Utama (MBU, owner of the Mayasari bus) who has never been involved

saturation was achieved when additional interviews no longer yielded new information, but rather repeated consistent patterns of economic and political capital relations. (Flick, 2022; Timmermans & Tavory. 2022).

Table 1. Research Sources

No	Source	Number
1	Tasikmalaya City Government Bureaucracy	14 people
2	Members of the Parliament of Tasikmalaya City	7 people
3	Family PT. MBU and Management	3 people
4	Family PT. HSB and Management	2 people
5	Entrepreneurs	4 people
6	Kyai (Religious leaders who manage Islamic boarding schools and have a community of students)	4 people
7	Heads of Islamic groups and social organizations	13 people
8	Academics	7 people
9	Journalists	5 people

Source: Researcher (2023)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Money, Families, and Changing Politics

How can the ruler of capital become the ruler of politics? But before answering this question, the researcher will first explain who they are. The MBU transportation company was started by Haji Engkud Mahfud in the 1960s. Initially headquartered in Jakarta, the company later relocated to Tasikmalaya due to increasing state control over the transportation sector in the capital. Apart from the transportation business, MBU now has other business networks such as: properties, hotels, malls, vehicle parts, hospitals, to schools and universities.

Currently, all MBU assets can reach tens of trillions of rupiah if you look at the website source of the Mayasari Bakti Utama Foundation (YMBU) and other sources, by looking at the various businesses it manages (Yudha, 2022). This wealth was obtained through the granting of special privileges from the Soeharto Government (the 2nd President of the Republic of Indonesia who was in power from 1966 to 1998). These privileges include tax breaks and economic capital assistance to build his business empire on the island of Java. In other words, MBU has a close relationship with the authorities, which makes it easy for them to do business. The financial power that has been accumulated since the New Order (Orde Baru) period reflects how old elites continue to maintain their influence. They are not new actors in the arena, but figures who have long sustained reciprocal ties between business and politics.

This type of capitalist is similar to a rent seeker who seeks political legitimacy from the government. The phenomenon of rent seeking contributes to unhealthy business interests, which ultimately burdens and harms the public. Rent seekers are viewed negatively as a means for private entrepreneurs to easily obtain profits, protection, and privileges from the government.

The practice of rent seeking is a capitalist plan that seeks to establish political relations with the government in order to obtain business and project profits from the state. Entrepreneurs will look for rent opportunities that the government can provide by surrendering their resources, offering protection, or granting authority for certain types of activities regulated by the government. Rent here is defined as the difference between the market value of a 'favour' from the government and the amount paid by the recipient to the government and/or privately to elites or individuals in government or political office. Rent in the economy arises when the government (on behalf of the public) grants special rights to one or a group of people in business. From the licences granted, entrepreneurs will obtain various facilities in doing business. Entrepreneurs who obtain rent cannot be enjoyed by all other entrepreneurs. Various forms of government actions that can give rise to rent can take the form of granting licences and enforcing protection.

However, after the fall of Suharto in May 1998, the MBU family also needed to think about their existence in the business world. Because after the fall of Soeharto some of his business partners were "finished off by the changing times (Aspinall, 2005; Davidson, 2018; O'Rourke, 2002; Woodward, 2002). The impact of these political changes prompted the MBU family to become involved in politics in Tasikmalaya. What's more, the regional autonomy implemented in the Reform era provided an opportunity for all citizens who have the right to vote to directly elect their regional head (mayor).

For starters, the MBU family continues to maintain and maintain its networks with the bureaucratic, military and parties elites. Especially the elite Golkar Parties (Golkar); Suharto's parties during the New Order era. Not only Golkar, the MBU family also built networks with new parties (which grew and developed at the beginning of the Reformation) such as: the National Mandate Parties (PAN), the United Development Parties (PPP), the Reform Month Parties (PBR), the Prosperous Justice Parties (PKS), and the Crescent Star Parties (PBB), all of which are parties with Islamic nuances.

Why cooperate or network with parties that breathe Islam? Because the City of Tasikmalaya is the City of Santri, where to date there are 1,584 Islamic boarding schools with 177.258 students throughout Tasikmalaya (Alhamidi, 2022). Of the several Islamic boarding schools, there are large Islamic boarding schools such as: Cipasung Islamic Boarding Schools, Sukamanah, Sukahideung. Miftahul Huda, and Baitul Hikmah (Haurkuning).

The relationship with these parties went well because the MBU family “flushed” each parties with the money they owned. Funding the political interests of parties elites when they contested the legislative, regional head, and presidential elections has become a source of behind-the-scenes power owned by the MBU family since the Reformation era. In addition to building relationships with the elite, the MBU family also tries to build relationships with the people through the establishment of several socio-religious foundations. Based on information from one interviewee, the MBU family’s financial capital was accumulated through business networks built with President Suharto’s family and his associates during the New Order era. This financial strength later transformed into political power when the MBU Foundation was established to collect company profits and other funds that could not be audited by state institutions such as the KPK or BPK. Through this foundation, CSR funds were distributed not only for social, educational, and religious activities but also for securing voter support and financing networks of party elites and mass organizations.

“The actions undertaken by the owner of MBU in seizing political power in Tasikmalaya are indeed extraordinary. They sought political support from party elites and cultivate special relationships with several Religious Leaders in order to influence voting behavior in electoral politics, such as legislative elections, presidential elections, and regional head elections in Tasikmalaya. Gaining political support from political and religious elites, as well as votes from the public, has only been obtained through the extensive use of financial power.”
(Interview with Rino Sundawa Putra, Commissioner of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) Tasikmalaya City, 30 Juli 2023)

One of the goals of the foundation is to manage corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds owned by the MBU family. These social foundations are “used” to “steal” people’s hearts by providing assistance to the poor, who are affected by the disaster, providing educational scholarships, and distributing aids for Islamic religious activities in the City of Tasikmalaya. It is this financial support managed by the Foundation that gradually becomes a determining factor in influencing voter behavior in every general election, both at the national and sub-national levels.

Referring to the results of interviews with the MBU family, the financial resources they have have succeeded in getting their family to sit in parliament and in government. They are: Muhammad Husein Fadlulloh, Viman Alfarizi Ramadhan, and Budi Budiman (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. MBU Families in Parliament and Government

No	Name	Family Proximity	Political Office
1	Muhammad Husein Fadlulloh	Grandson of H. Engkud Mahpud from his third son (H. Azies Rismaya Candidate for Regent of Tasikmalaya)	Member of the Republic of Indonesia DPR from the Gerindra Parties faction
2	Viman Alfarizi Ramadhan	Grandson of H. Engkud Mahfud from his sixth son (H. Arif Rahman Hakim)	Member of the West Java Provincial DPRD from the Gerindra Parties faction
3	Budi Budiman	Former Employee and Brother-in-law H. Ade Mahfud (Sacond Son of H. Engkud Mahfud)	Mayor of Tasikmalaya Two Periods (2012-2017) (2017-2018)

Source: Researcher (2022;2023)

Not only family. The MBU family also promoted close colleagues to become public officials and members of parliament (see Table 3 among them).

Table 3. Members of Parliament and Public officials Support MBU

No	Name	Public or Political Office
1	Dodi Ferdiana Kusnandar	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
2	Andi Warsandi	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
3	Aslim	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
4	Gilman Mawardi	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
5	Asep Hendri Darmawan	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
6	Kuntara Harjasuparna	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
7	Murjani	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
8	Rahmat Sutarman	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
9	Romdoni Maftuh	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
10	Ridlwan Nurfaozah	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
11	Asep Sopari	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
12	Dadang Rachmat Alfaruq	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
13	Yayat Hidayat	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
14	Deni Daelani	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya
15	Wida Otiva	Member of DPRD Kota Tasikmalaya

Source: Researcher (2022;2023)

Co-opting Religious Leaders through Material Inducements

Religious Leaders is a central informal figure in Tasikmalaya City. This is because the religious leader is an Islamic religious figure who owns a pesantren, where each pesantren has at least thousands of santri (students) which correlates with votes during elections. Even though religious leader have many followers, they are reluctant to get involved in politics (see Table 4).

Table 4. A Number of Islamic Boarding Schools with Large Numbers of Students in Tasikmalaya

No	Islamic Boarding School Name	Number of Students
1	Miftahul Huda Manonjaya	4.500
2	Cipasung	2.596
3	Sukamanah	1.500
4	Sukahideung	2.100
5	Baitul Hikmah (Haurkuning)	2.500
6	Riyadlul Ulum Wadda'wah Condong	3.500

Source: Researcher (2022;2023)

Even so, it does not mean that the kyai are really not interested in entering the world of politics. However, when their names appeared to be nominated as candidates for the legislature or regional heads, there was always opposition from the parties elite and the MBU family. Why is that? Because the kyai are considered to have no financial capital to win the election contestation. In addition, the power of the kyai is not solid because they are divided. This is because there are too many Islamic organizations with various sects such as: Hamida, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Islamic Association (Persis), or Muhammadiyah. This division is caused by the kyai having their own economic interests.

“The position of religious leaders in the political arena of Tasikmalaya is highly dilemmatic when it comes to discussions about the contestation for political office. The primary concern of party elites is not the political program or strategies for winning electoral politics, but rather the extent of financial contributions that can be provided to the party. In contrast, the interests of major business actors (MBU) are consistently well received by party elites, as these capitalists are capable of fulfilling the material demands of the political elite. However, another challenge faced by the kyai is the shifting nature of Islamic political struggles in Tasikmalaya, which have increasingly transformed into the pursuit of economic interests by religious leaders. This shift has further resulted in the fragmentation of Islamic political currents among the religious leaders themselves through various Islamic organizations”. (Interview with Kyai Haji Miftah Fauzi, Head of Ma'had Al-Muzanni Islamic Boarding School, Tajur, Tasikmalaya City, August 21, 2023)

As a result, the power of the kyai can be dampened by accommodating their economic interests. Such as organizing activities wrapped in religion, adding facilities and infrastructure,

providing infrastructure at the pesantren they own, and the like. As a result, the “vote power of the kyai is only used by the MBU family to be “directed” to support their family or their elite support in every election. So that the political attitudes of most of the kyai are becoming increasingly opportunistic and pragmatic.

This situation has made the MBU family always welcome in several parties because they can “buy” kyai which means they can provide votes for parties candidates. As a result, the MBU family has always received support from the kyai elite and also the parties elite, even though they do not have an ideological (and parties) basis. Just because the MBU family can fulfill the wishes of each client (kyai and parties elites) makes the MBU family considered a “benefit provider” for all of its clients.

In the 2012 elections for the City of Tasikmalaya, the votes of the santri greatly helped the candidate for the support of the MBU family win (see Table 5). This was increasingly seen in the 2017 Pilkada, when there was a split in the coalition between the incumbent Mayor and the MBU family. At that time, the candidate for the support of the MBU family was only supported by 17% of the parliamentary vote, although in the end the vote acquisition at the time of the election increased to 37.4% (see Table 6). The results of our research show that the role of the clerics in raising the votes of the students at their Islamic boarding schools also boosted the votes of the pair Dede Sudrajat and Asep Hidayat (supported by the MBU family) in the 2017 Tasik Mayoral election.

Based on the description above, the kyai who are informal leaders in Tasikmalaya are used by the MBU family to gain votes. This is because a kyai who oversees a pesantren has a large number of santri and is a voice for the MBU family and candidates sponsored by the MBU family. This situation emphasizes the way the rulers of capital use their money to “buy” kyai in every general election contestation in Tasikmalaya.

Purchasing Parties Elites as “Political Vehicles” of the MBU Family

The MBU family’s financial power enabled them not only to co-opt the support of influential kyai and their santri—who served as significant vote bases—but also to strategically align with and influence key party elites. In other words, *The financial resources enabled the MBU family to strategically align with party elites*. This is done by financing a number of elites during campaigns during general elections. Not only that. The MBU family often finances parties political activities.

This partnership was maintained until the MBU family took part directly in political contestation in the 2012 and 2017 Tasikmalaya Mayoral elections. The MBU family is affiliated with several parties with Islamic roots, such as PAN, PBB, and PBR: well as parties based on nationalist ideology, such as Democrats and Gerindra. Building a grand coalition in Lake City is certainly not without reason. According to an explanation from an MBU family, this

grand coalition was carried out to ensure the victory of its candidates in the 2012 and 2017 Tasikmalaya City Elections. In addition, the formation of the grand coalition is in line with the vision and mission of the MBU family in Tasikmalaya City, and West Java Province on a wider scale. In Tasikmalaya, coalition-building reflects both common and specific features. Alliances between business and political elites also appear in many other Indonesian regions. What sets Tasikmalaya apart is the importance of religious legitimacy in shaping these ties. The MBU family's financial strength, built through business expansion beyond the city, is further reinforced by its political connection with Gerindra's national leadership, now in power, giving the family influence that extends from local to national politics. While similar coalitions exist in other cities where business elites finance political candidates, the Tasikmalaya case demonstrates that religious legitimacy serves as a decisive factor in legitimizing and sustaining elite alliances.

Having a number of political networks with many parties has made it easier for the MBU family to place their relatives in multiple parties. But it's not just family it turns out Senior employees in companies owned by the MBU family who wish to enter politics were also assisted. Most of those who have joined the parties or sat as members of parliament (during the 10 years the MBU family has been in power) are directed to protect and support the political interests of the MBU family.

The election for Mayor of Tasikmalaya in 2012 was an important moment in how the power of money succeeded in placing a relative from the MBU family to become Mayor of Tasikmalaya in the 2012-2017 period-namely Budi Budiman. The emergence of Budi Budiman in the political arena as a party elite and subsequently as the Mayor of Tasikmalaya in 2012 was strongly shaped by the patronage of MBU. He was regarded as a loyal employee with familial ties whose allegiance had been tested over time. His managerial experience in MBU's business enterprises facilitated his transition into political office, positioning him as both a political actor and an intermediary between the government and MBU. Supported by MBU's substantial financial resources and extensive political networks in Tasikmalaya, Budi Budiman secured electoral victory and held the mayoral office for the 2012–2017 period. However, the political trajectory experienced a significant shift in the period leading up to the 2017 mayoral election. As the incumbent, Budi Budiman benefitted from incumbency advantage, reflected in his high levels of popularity and electability, which positioned him strongly for a second term. He successfully consolidated his own political networks and strategically distanced himself from the influence of the MBU family. This process resulted in the dissolution of the patron-client relationship, primarily driven by his growing political ambition. In contrast, the alternative mayoral candidate reluctantly endorsed by MBU lacked both popularity and electability, and was therefore unable to challenge the incumbent's dominance.

At that time, the election was followed by three pairs of candidates, two of whom are supported by a coalition of political parties and another through independent channels.

In the 2012 elections, the MBU family built a grand coalition with several parties namely: PPP, PKB, PBR, PKS, PBB, and Democrats (also known as the “Civil Society Coalition”). This coalition succeeded in defeating the incumbent (Mayor Syarif Hidayat for the 2007-2012 period) by a significant margin (see Table 5). This is not surprising because the strength of the MBU family coalition in parliament is quite large, namely 28 seats (or the equivalent of 62%) of the 45 parliamentary seats (100%).

Table 5. Votes for the 2012 Tasikmalaya Mayoral Election

No	Name Candidate Pair	Bearer Partai	Vote Gain	%	Information
1	Budi Budiman & Dede Sudrajat	PPP, PBR, PBB, Demokrat, PKS, PKB	202.097	58,02	MBU Family-supported candidate
2	Mumung Marthasasmita & Taufik Faturohman	Independen (Non-Partai)	28.556	8,20	Independent Candidate
3	Syarif Hidayat & Cecep Bagja Gunawan	PDIP, PAN, Gerindra, Golkar	117.660	33,78	Mayor Incumbent
Amount			348,313	100	

Source: Researcher (2022;2023)

The data above shows that the parties’s voting power also influenced the success of Budi Budiman and his partner’s victory in the 2012 Tasikmalaya City Election. Even though the votes for the Budi Budiman pair were not equal to their coalition’s vote acquisition in parliament, the ability of the MBU family to form a grand coalition was crucial to victory Budi.

Meanwhile, in the 2017 Tasikmalaya mayoral election contest, the political constellation changed. Budi Budiman, who was originally a candidate carried out by the MBU family, in the 2017 elections, he left the MBU family. The researcher awened that he did this action because he felt more powerful and could win the political contest without the help of the MBU family. Seeing this situation, the MBU family did not remain silent. They immediately reformatted the parties and candidate coalitions.

In the 2017 Pilkada, the MBU family formed a coalition with the Gerindra Partin PAN, PKS and Democrats which had 17 seats in parliament. They support the comple Dande Sudrajat and Asep Hidayat. With minority strength, the election results showing the Mihe family’s support pair were quite a surprise. This is because they get 37.0%, 2.60% differ from the incumbent which is supported by the majority of parties (see Table 6).

Table 6. Votes for the 2017 Tasikmalaya Mayoral Election

No	Name Candidate Pair	Bearer Partai	Vote Gain	%	Information
1	Dicky Chandra & Deni Romdoni	PDIP dan PBB	85.510	22,5	
2	Budi Budiman & Muhammad Yusuf	PPP, Golkar, Nasdem, PKB	151.931	40,05	<i>Incumbent</i>
3	Dede Sudrajat & Asep Hidayat	PAN, Demokrat, Gerindra, PKS	141.854	37,40	Spouses Candidates for family support MBU
Amount			379.295	100	

Source: Researcher (2022;2023)

Referring to the discussion above, it shows that the power of money also influenced the votes in the two regional elections in Tasikmalaya. In the first period (in 2012), the MBU family, which received support from the majority of parties, succeeded in winning the candidate it carried. In the second period (2017), there was a change in the constellation, and these changes eroded the large coalition that the MBU family had built in 2012. Even though they were only supported by 17% of the votes in parliament, with the financial power that the MBU family had, they managed to maximize revenue vote of up to 37.4% (see Table 6). Acquisition of the vote was certainly not without reason. The results of our research show that the power of money also influenced the votes won by Dede and Asep in the 2017 Tasikmalaya Pilkada.

CONCLUSION

The political reforms that have taken place in Indonesia since 1998 have marked a significant shift toward political openness. One major change was the transition from indirect regional head elections (through parliament) to direct elections by the people. This new openness was strategically used by the MBU family to consolidate political control. The strategy employed was to leverage financial resources to secure alliances with both religious and political elites. Religious leaders (kyai) were co-opted to mobilize support from thousands of santri who were loyal to them, as their orders tended to be followed unquestioningly. Meanwhile, political party elites were courted to provide electoral vehicles during the 2012 and 2017 mayoral contests.

The grand coalition formed by political parties and kyai in support of the MBU family paved an easy path for their candidate to win the Tasikmalaya mayoral election in the 2012–2017 period. Although the MBU family failed to win in 2017, they managed to avoid a major defeat against the incumbent who was no longer part of their coalition. This shows that the family's financial base successfully transformed into political power within Tasikmalaya's local politics, a phenomenon that may also be found in other regions of Indonesia and possibly in other developing democracies. At the same time, this study demonstrates that financial strength alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by mastery of political networks and legitimacy within the religious sphere.

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