

PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AS POLITICAL CLIENTELISM: THE DOUBLE EDGE OF THE SMART INDONESIAN CARD (KIP KULIAH) PROGRAM IN WEST SULAWESI

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Abstract

In post-authoritarian Indonesia, the open-list proportional electoral system affords incumbent legislative candidates the opportunity to appropriate state budgetary patronage resources for personal, particularly electoral, objectives. This system reorients the primary focus of patronage politics from a party-voter dynamic to a candidate-voter relationship, thereby establishing informal networks as central to patronage distribution. This research investigates how an incumbent legislative candidate leverages informal networks to exert control over state policies, thereby redirecting the implementation of the Kartu Indonesia Pintar program toward clientelistic ends. Employing a qualitative case study with an explanatory orientation, the study draws upon interviews with beneficiaries, party administrators, and campaign teams, supplemented by documentary evidence from social media and online reports. The findings indicate that the implementation of the KIP Kuliah program has become a political arena where Fem-01 transcends her formal legislative authority, effectively acting as a de facto policy implementer. Through a shadow bureaucracy, Fem-01 mobilizes informal networks to capture the program's implementation and cultivate long-term clientelistic ties with beneficiaries. Conceptually, this study contributes to the discourse on money politics by introducing the notion of 'disguised money politics,' defined as a subtle form of vote purchasing facilitated through state-funded welfare programs. The findings underscore how democratization has blurred the demarcation between bureaucratic procedures and informal politics, highlighting that policy implementation itself constitutes a political act extending beyond formal institutions.

Keywords: *clientelism; implementation; informal politics; public policy*

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INTRODUCTION

Post-reform Indonesia is described as a patronage democracy, where clientelistic practices coexist with democratization (Simandjuntak, 2012). In this era, political clientelism, primarily employed as a strategy to secure votes, has also positioned Indonesia as the country with the third-highest prevalence of money politics globally (Muhtadi, 2023). Beyond profoundly transforming the character of election administration in post-New Order Indonesia, the shift from a closed proportional election system to an open-list proportional system has substantially contributed to the rampant practice of money politics (Muhtadi, 2019). This shift changes the main locus of patronage politics from the relationship between "party and voter" to "candidate and voter" (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020).

The patronage relationship between political parties and voters was a defining characteristic of centralized clientelism during the New Order era, wherein Golkar served as the principal axis of patronage distribution. Under the doctrine of *'Loyalitas Tunggal'*, elections functioned as a mechanism to identify and compensate citizens in regions that supported Golkar during general elections (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020). In practice, Golkar mobilized voters by directing the local bureaucracy to act on its behalf (Liddle, 1988). Consequently, citizens received various forms of patronage goods disseminated from the central government through state programs. The post-authoritarian transition towards democratization, particularly marked by the adoption of the open-list proportional electoral system, has marginalized the role of political parties and fostered a more personalized form of patronage. During this transition, candidates can connect directly with voters, frequently through informal networks like campaign teams. This fundamental shift incentivizes incumbent candidates to exploit their authority and discretionary power to appropriate state programs such as social welfare schemes, development funds, and government project contracts. Using informal networks, such programs were rerouted to voters as patronage goods for electoral purposes.

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This transformation has, in fact, intensified and democratized money politics practices to an extreme scale at the local level (Muhtadi, 2021), concurrently failing to establish a rational and technocratic model of governance consistent with the principles of 'good governance' advocated by reformist proponents (Hadiz, 2022). Indeed, these principles have increasingly been perceived as benefiting elite interests while harming general population, as they contribute to the expansion of capitalism by displacing human lives and causing environmental degradation (Novianto, 2024). Within this system, instead of developing coherent policy agendas, candidates—especially incumbents—leverage their access to state resources (such as social welfare programs, development funds, and government contracts) to engage in direct political exchange with voters. Public policy, therefore, is not the result of rational deliberation or institutional planning, but rather a byproduct of electoral strategy and personalized political networks.

This study investigates the implementation of the Smart Indonesian Card program (KIP Kuliah), orchestrated by Fem-01 (pseudonym) through her informal patronage network during the 2024 legislative election. Fem-01 is the incumbent candidate for the Indonesian House of Representatives from the Nasdem Party in the electoral district of West Sulawesi Province. In every benefit distribution event, the tagline 'Remember

the Scholarship, Remember Fem-01' was officially employed to reinforce public awareness that she is the populist figure associated with the Smart Indonesian Card program. Fem-01 successfully cultivated long-term clientelistic relationships with her constituents by rebranding this program, securing her seat in the 2024 legislative election in West Sulawesi. She significantly outperformed her competitors, garnering 122,194 votes—a fourfold increase from her 2019 legislative election results, which totaled only 30,946 votes. While some interpret this victory as an absence of money politics, given that Fem-01 reportedly did not expend her personal funds, many cynically view the outcome as a direct consequence of the politicization of the Smart Indonesian Card program.

This study discusses the concept of implementation as politics by emphasizing that politics continues even after a policy is developed. As Anderson (2011) argues that policies are shaped during their implementation, making implementation an integral part of policy-making. This idea challenges the traditional separation between politics (policy creation) and administration (implementation) in the Wilsonian model. To delve deeper into this concept, the study utilizes Bardach's (1977) implementation game theory, which suggests that while policies are formally decided at higher levels, implementation plays out as a political game—like involving informal tactics by unofficial actors at lower levels. This approach is deemed acceptable as long as implementation plans are carefully crafted and executed with thorough follow-through (Hill & Hupe, 2002).

Bardach's theory emphasizes the role of actors he refers to as "fixers of the game" who go beyond their formal roles to ensure policy implementation. This is exemplified by legislator Frank Lanterman, who exceeded his legislative role and directly acted as a policy implementer to overcome implementation barriers (fixing the game). Within this theoretical point of view, Fem-01 can similarly be viewed as a 'fixer of the game.' However, rather than merely 'fixing the game', Fem-01 devised a new game scenario and strategically redirected the scholarship

program's implementation for her clientelistic purposes. Such deviations are not primarily addressed by Bardach's theory. This phenomenon raises questions that Bardach's theory does not fully anticipate, thus potentially revealing contradictions in its basic assumptions. Nevertheless, the theory remains valuable in explaining how political actors like Fem-01 can dominate the implementation game, especially when informal strategies are employed. This opens an analytical bridge between policy implementation theory and studies of political clientelism.

This research delves deeper into the significance of informal politics by examining how informal networks play a crucial role in policy implementation. The prevalence of informal networks as political machines has been a central topic in research on political clientelism in post-Soeharto Indonesia (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020; Aspinall & Hicken, 2020; Berenschot, 2018, 2019; Hicken et al., 2022). However, the existing literature has mainly associated campaign teams and informal actors with short-term practices such as vote-buying or "money dawn" attacks (known as "*serangan fajar*"). All those short-term practices usually take place close to the election day. Little attention has been paid to how these networks extend their influence beyond election periods to control the implementation of state programs. By systematically controlling these programs, they foster long-term clientelistic relationships between incumbents and constituents.

Even though both are motivated by clientelism, this analytical gap is problematic because buying votes with personal funds is generally seen as unethical and illegal, while the distribution of state-sponsored programs tends to be more publicly acceptable (Stokes et al., 2013). Furthermore, dominant definitions of money politics often frame it as a candidate's last-minute utilization of private funds—a one-off, transactional, and election-focused phenomenon (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020; Aspinall & Hicken, 2020; Muhtadi, 2021; Nichter, 2011). In contrast, the concept of relational clientelism shifts the focus toward the sustained use of state programs to cultivate long-term political

contracts with voters (see Batubara et al., 2024; Nichter, 2011, 2018; Nichter & Peress, 2017; Savirani & Aspinall, 2017). However, even this concept does not fully encompass the possibility that money politics can occur outside electoral periods, through the state budget, and in recurring forms. This study addresses that conceptual gap by exploring how the repeated use of public programs—such as KIP Kuliah—for political gain blurs the boundary between legal patronage and illegal vote-buying, and between policy implementation and political clientelism.

By examining the implementation of the KIP Kuliah program which is orchestrated by Fem-01 through an informal patronage network, this study bridges policy implementation and political clientelism within the broader framework of informal politics. Specifically, the research analyzes how incumbent legislators leverage control over state programs by mobilizing informal networks to redirect implementation toward clientelistic ends. The article presents its argument in five sections. The first section shows relational clientelism in the form of the distribution of the KIP Kuliah program is driven by elites through informal networks. The second section challenges traditional definitions of money politics, suggesting that the program is a veiled form of vote-buying. The third section discusses electoral populism and how politicians use popular welfare programs like KIP for clientelism in response to democratization and changes in electoral systems. The fourth section details the characteristics, structure and mechanisms of the informal patronage network led by Fem-01, functioning as a political machine. The final section examines Fem-01's overreach of authority, highlighting its violation of the checks and balances principle in Indonesian constitutional law. Furthermore, it explains how the appropriation of the KIP Kuliah program by aspirational houses creates significant impediments to public policy delivery.

METHOD

This research was conducted over a six-month period, from May to September 2024, employing a qualitative research design that integrates a case study approach with an explanatory orientation. Following

Gerring (2017), a case study is conceptualized as an intensive investigation of a single case intended to uncover deeper causal mechanisms. This approach was adopted to examine the phenomenon of relational clientelism, specifically as manifested in the implementation of the Smart Indonesia Card for Higher Education (KIP-Kuliah) program orchestrated by Fem-01 and his informal networks. The explanatory orientation was used to identify and analyze the structural logic behind observable social patterns, as well as to construct, elaborate, or test theoretical propositions (Neuman, 2015).

Fieldwork was conducted between July and August 2024, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretive analysis through contextual immersion. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify 26 key informants across three regencies in West Sulawesi: Polewali Mandar, Majene, and Mamuju. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and informal dialogues were held with 22 participants, including 15 student beneficiaries from five universities, party officials, members of women's Islamic study groups (*kelompok pengajian*), parents of beneficiaries, and a senior administrator of the *Rumah Aspirasi*.

Informant selection followed strict criteria aimed at identifying individuals who were direct beneficiaries and participants within the patronage network. However, access to five key figures, including Fem-01 herself and specific political brokers, was restricted. Some potential participants declined to participate due to concerns about the political sensitivity of the research, particularly in relation to the upcoming regency elections. To address this lack of direct access, a month-long documentary observation was conducted in October 2024, analyzing online media reports and visual content from Fem-01's official social media accounts. This secondary data was essential in capturing the populist communication style used to reshape the program for electoral purposes.

To make up for the lack of direct access to Fem-01, the researcher conducted a month-long process of documentary observation in October 2024. Secondary data were collected from various online media plat-

forms reporting on Fem-01's activities related to the KIP-Kuliah program. Special attention was paid to visual content such as photographs and videos which was regularly published by Fem-01's official social media accounts. These materials not only complemented primary data but proved essential in capturing how Fem-01 and her informal networks—through a populist communicative style—reframed and redirected the program's implementation to serve electoral objectives.

The data was analyzed through a process of condensation, guided by the study's theoretical framework. To ensure validity and reliability, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing field observations with interview accounts, cross-referencing primary narratives with secondary documentary evidence, and consulting existing literature. This multi-layered analytical approach provided a nuanced interpretation of the clientelistic mechanisms at play.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Clientelism: Elite Initiated Exchange

As an incumbent legislative candidate and member of Commission X of the Indonesian House of Representatives, Fem-01 has the authority to influence education policy. As House of representative member, this authority based on function outlined in Law No. 17/2014 and DPR Regulation No. 10/2020 which require her to address and act on public aspirations. For her own electoral purposes, this authority can be directed towards constituents in her electoral district.

It is difficult to deny that Fem-01's victory in the last legislative election can be attributed to her success in building long-term clientelistic relationships with voters, particularly scholarship beneficiaries. She skillfully uses the distribution of The Smart Indonesian Card scholarships for college via the aspiration program. Nichter (2018) refers to this type of relationship as relational clientelism where the exchange relationship is interactive, involves contingent exchanges, and the benefits can be enjoyed outside of the election period. Hicken (2011) describes how patronage goods become more

credible to beneficiaries when there is an expectation that the relationship will continue.

From the beginning, the relational clientelism between Fem-01 and thousands of The Smart Indonesian Card scholarship beneficiaries in West Sulawesi was not driven by sufficient citizen autonomy. Unlike the bottom-up request paradigm that emphasizes citizen-initiated relational clientelism (Nichter, 2011, 2018; Nichter & Peress, 2017) or social movements as a strategy to form political alliances/contracts with candidates (Batubara et al., 2024; Savirani & Aspinall, 2017), the long-term relationship between Fem-01 and the scholarship beneficiaries was actually formed top-down through elite encouragement. Through informal patronage networks, Fem-01 builds the resilience of relational clientelism by offering the benefits of the Smart Indonesian Card program to vulnerable poor people. Hierarchy plays a crucial role this relationship as the inequality in status and power drives Fem-01 to use her influence and resources to establish conditional relationships with the poor (Scott 1972). This structural inequality ultimately becomes a material prerequisite for the dominance of elite encouragement in directing this program.

According to Stokes (2011), poverty leads to clientelism, both of which are prevalent in societies where economic and political activities are concentrated among a few elites (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020; Berenschot, 2018). Vulnerability serves as a strong motivator for citizens to form long-term clientelistic relationships with candidates (Nichter, 2018). Being poor and vulnerable is essentially a minimum requirement for citizens to qualify as recipients of The Smart Indonesian Card program. Consequently, this scholarship program instills a strong sense of entitlement and high expectations among the poor, who feel deserving of the scholarships. However, their reliance on state aid creates ample opportunities for Fem-01 to manipulate such social welfare programs to further their electoral interests. By controlling state resources and exploiting the vulnerability of the poor, Fem-01 and her support network can identify which voters and families require specific types of assis-

tance. This explains why the success of vote buying is closely tied to the significance of social preferences in shaping political attitudes (Finan Frederico & Schechter, 2012).

The majority of recipients (informants) in this study hailed from impoverished families. They learned about the Smart Indonesian Card program through word-of-mouth, either by chance from friends or neighbors, through regular outreach efforts by the support team, or directly at Fem-01's community events. Each potential recipient receives assistance from *Rumah Aspirasi* throughout the entire process, from registration and selection to final approval. *Rumah Aspirasi* also ensures that the ministry and universities are informed that the recipients they support are indeed eligible for the Smart Indonesian Card scholarship.

This assistance comes with expectations. Following the principle of *quid pro quo*, *Rumah Aspirasi* expects that potential beneficiaries and their families will commit to voting for Fem-01 in the upcoming legislative elections. When we examine how the program operates, we can see it has dual aspects. On one hand, the Smart Indonesian Card is an example of programmatic politics, where the criteria for receiving aid is simply "are you part of the beneficiary class?" On the other hand, it also embodies clientelistic politics, asking "will you support me?" While these two angles differ, they can coexist without dismissing one another. Beneficiaries might rationalize the clientelistic aspect by fulfilling the programmatic criteria, while the first angle conveniently masks the political motivations behind the second. We can describe what Fem-01 did from Machiavelli's idea of *verita effettuale de la cosa* (the practical truth of the situation). According to this principle, the focus isn't on the morality of an act but on its effectiveness in reaching a goal. Viewed through this Machiavellian point of view, the economically vulnerable recipients of the Smart Indonesian Card form a highly effective political network for garnering votes in legislative elections.

The influence of state resources and citizens' socio-economic conditions are not the only crucial elements for a successful clientelism strategy. An equally important factor fostering these relationships is the na-

ture of the patronage goods themselves. Voters tend to gravitate towards benefits that offer individual gain, such as financial incentives for their votes (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020). Unlike the transient nature of dawn raids, which consist of one-off transactions, the Smart Indonesian Card stands out because it involves cash through a recurring distribution model, providing benefits that extend well beyond election season. This monetary support evokes a sense of obligation (Finan & Schechter, 2012) and fosters a norm of reciprocity through repeated engagements (Hicken, 2011). During an interview, one recipient articulated this sentiment, saying, "there's a discomfort, even guilt, if you don't choose Fem-01. That feeling was built because Fem-01 has continuously supported us through the Smart Indonesian Card." It is this sustainable aspect of the Smart Indonesian Card program that sets it apart from other forms of money politics.

Disguised Money Politics

Muhtadi (2021: 11) defines money politics as the last resort for candidates to influence voters' decisions by giving them money. In the Indonesian context, money politics is widely known as "*serangan fajar*," which involves distributing specific amounts of money to voters in the days leading up to the election (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020: 4). Aspinall & Sukmajati (2016) view it as a vague term and prefer to use the terms patronage or clientelism. Various researchers define money politics in different concepts, such as electoral clientelism (Nichter, 2011), retail clientelism (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020), transactional clientelism (Aspinall & Hicken, 2020). These definitions are all based on the same fundamental assumption: that money politics involves one-off interactions.

According to Aspinall and Berenschot (2020: 51), money politics occurs when candidates lack the power to control state resources necessary for building relational clientelism. These scholars argue that the funds for money politics always come from the candidate's personal finances. Therefore, state programs in the form of cash distributed by incumbent candidates to buy votes are not considered vote buying (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020: 9). The definition of money

politics in Article 523, paragraphs (1) to (2) of Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning elections is limited to a specific time frame: money politics only takes place during the campaign period, quiet period, and voting day. This study reveals that these definitions are insufficient to explain the phenomenon of using social programs in the form of cash by incumbent candidates for electoral purposes. Based on the perspectives of political experts and the definitions in the election law, it is evident that this phenomenon does not fall under the categories of money politics or vote buying. This issue with definitions has implications for how the public and election organizers understand and address money politics.

In this study, Aspiration program of the Smart Indonesian Card stands out as an exception. Despite being funded by the APBN and distributed outside of election periods, this program can still be categorized as money politics due to its cash form. This study challenges the mainstream view and rejects the reductionist perspective of money politics defined by law. Money politics, as described in this study, involves using cash to buy votes both before and after elections, whether from personal or state budgets. This broader definition allows for the consideration of relational clientelism built through social welfare programs like the Smart Indonesian Card, even when it is distributed outside of election periods.

According to Schaffer & Schedler (2007), vote buying is essentially an exchange where candidates purchase votes from citizens. However, Fem-01 approaches the Smart Indonesian Card not just as a one-time exchange for votes, but as a long-term investment. By using the state budget as initial capital, Fem-01 buys the hopes of beneficiaries, turning them into personal assets and fostering a sense of reciprocity. This strategy involves maintaining support through repeated distributions and utilizing beneficiaries as political workers during elections.

The strategic deployment of the Smart Indonesian Card Aspiration program is evident in the statement of a *Rumah Aspirasi* staff member, who noted that each recipient of the card, when multiplied by their family

members, could potentially yield a significant number of votes. In a complete statement, he said that “6000 recipients from Fem-01 plus the number of their family members can produce multiple votes. If the recipient has at least two family members, Fem-01 can get 18,000 votes.” Even this range is not more impressive than the confessions of a number of recipients who were voluntarily interviewed. Additionally, interviews with beneficiaries revealed that Fem-01’s support team encouraged them to get 5 to 25 votes. In order to achieve it, they often direct their immediate family members to vote for Fem-01. This program not only fosters an exchange relationship between voters and Fem-01 but also creates a sense of reciprocity within the recipient’s nuclear family.

This phenomenon reveals the dual nature of the implementation of the Smart Indonesian Card: not only does it subsidize the higher education costs of the vulnerable poor, but it also successfully subsidizes the political costs of Fem-01. Optimal benefits were achieved at minimal costs, despite the high political costs involved. The principle of rationality of cost and benefit is a distinct advantage of the exclusive rights (control over state resources) held by incumbent candidates like Fem-01. This dual nature makes it challenging for people to determine whether the deployment of the Smart Indonesian Card is money politics or simply the implementation of government programs. This complexity categorizes this phenomenon as disguised money politics.

Electoral Populism

Democratization has created a strong incentive for political actors to design policies that appeal to the poor. Over the past five years, politicians have demonstrated considerable ingenuity in adapting their platforms to this trend (Aspinall, 2013). This phenomenon, which Aspinall terms electoral populism, has become the primary avenue for introducing social welfare policies. The appeal of populism in electoral competition is closely linked to the open list proportional representation system, fully implemented in the 2009 election. This system allows voters to directly elect candidates, intensifying competition among them to secure votes. Consequently, various social welfare pro-

grams are often driven by political elites who present themselves as champions of social change, adopting populist rhetoric to gain electoral support (Aspinall, 2014: 93).

The open-list proportional representation system encourages legislators to lobby their counterparts in the executive branch to direct social welfare programs to their constituencies (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020). This lobbying is often done through an aspirational mechanism, where legislators propose a list of potential beneficiaries based on the desires of voters in their districts to their executive counterparts. Consequently, both at the national and regional levels, candidates eagerly respond to election incentives by promising a variety of social welfare programs (Aspinall, 2013: 114).

Since the introduction of the Bidik Misi scholarship program in 2010 until its replacement by the Smart Indonesian Card program in 2020, the number of scholarship recipients has increased tenfold. The Ministry of Education and Culture reported a sharp rise in recipients, with 130,000 in 2019 and 200,000 in 2020. Data from Puslapdik Kemendikbudristek RI indicate that both the budget and number of recipients for the Smart Indonesian Card program have grown significantly from 2020 to 2024, with projections reaching a budget of 14.69 trillion IDR and one million recipients by 2025. Since 2019, Fem-01 has facilitated 300,000 West Sulawesi residents in becoming PIP-KIP beneficiaries through this aspiration channel, including 6,000 recipients of the Smart Indonesian Card. Although the program itself is not new, Fem-01 has acted as a catalyst, triggering a surge in the Smart Indonesian Card program and shaping the political attitudes of hundreds of thousands of lower-class residents in West Sulawesi.

The increase in the budget for the Smart Indonesian Card for over a decade has also marked a populist moment. This term was initially popularized by Mouffe (Mouffe, 2020) to describe the destabilization of the dominant hegemonic order, marked by the failure of institutions to maintain their order and guarantee the loyalty of the people. This creates the possibility of building a new collective movement subject (the people) who are able to reconfigure the

order that is considered unfair. However, the populist moment in this study is defined differently, as the moment when democratization successfully encourages political elites to utilize social welfare programs as a populist strategy to shape people's obedience. In this case, Fem-01 has succeeded in utilizing the populist moment through the direction of the Smart Indonesian Card as a patronage item to build relational clientelism with the poor. As expressed by Aspinall (2014), although the direction of social welfare programs has a clientelistic nuance, these programs are often very much needed by local communities.

Despite implementing a populist program, Fem-01's political mobility is more elitist in nature. Since the emergence of Jokowi, the term populism has often been associated with the phenomenon of blusukan, routine impromptu visits to public spaces where he asks about residents' concerns (Mietzner, 2015). Instead of doing blusukan, Fem-01 actually visits her constituents more often in official activities. As for non-formal matters, they become the daily affairs of *Rumah Aspirasi* and informal networks directly affiliated with Fem-01. However, with careful planning and preparation, Fem-01 is always present at the right time, especially at symbolic scholarship handover ceremonies at private campuses in West Sulawesi. Outside of official events, the *Rumah Aspirasi* team has the task of blurring the elitist character of Fem-01 with a populist narrative. Every time they interact with residents, an Fem-01 partisan often asks the question, "Which do you prefer, a people's representative who is more often in Jakarta with abundant assistance to the regions or a people's representative who is often in the regions but does not provide anything?"

Informal Patronage Networks

Democratization has shifted the primary focus of political clientelism from party-centered relationships to candidate-voter dynamics (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020: 98). In this relationship, clientelism manifests as what Aspinall & Berenschot (2020) describe as freewheeling clientelism—characterized by democratization and decentralization in which informal networks serving as the central channels for patronage distribution. Ra-

ther than operating through political parties, candidates construct hierarchical networks of informal brokers to connect directly with voters (Aspinall & Hicken, 2020: 137). Political parties, in turn, assume a marginal role, primarily limited to nominating candidates, a function Aspinall & Berenschot (2020) metaphorically label as the “gatekeeper” role.

However, this study finds that Aspinall and Berenschot’s framework does not fully account for the political dynamics observed in West Sulawesi. Although Fem-01 was nominated by the Nasdem Party, her electoral success was largely driven by the sustained militancy and cohesion of a long-established, hierarchically organized informal network extending to the grassroots level. This case diverges from Aspinall & Hicken (2020) observation that Indonesian legislative election support teams typically emerge from short-term clientelistic arrangements. Instead, the relational clientelism underpinning Fem-01’s support resembles the Philippine model, where broker networks are grounded in enduring personal relationships between candidates and their supporters (Aspinall & Hicken, 2020, p. 138). In the most recent legislative election, Fem-01’s victory was bolstered by three well-established and sustainable informal networks: *Rumah Aspirasi*, a religious study group, and private universities.

Trident of Broker

Rumah Aspirasi (hereinafter Ruas) is an official entity regulated under Article 1 (17) of the Tata Tertib (Tatib) Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR RI), as a derivative regulation of Article 234(j) of Law No. 17/2014 on the MD3 Law. Legally, Ruas functions as the personal office of each member of parliament, designated as a space for absorbing and channeling the aspirations of constituents within the member’s electoral district. Since 2020, Fem-01’s Ruas has operated across three locations in two districts of West Sulawesi—Polewali, Mamuju, and Campalagian. Organizationally, each Ruas branch is managed by a coordinator who supervises both an administrative coordinator and a field coordinator. At the operational level, Ruas applies a routine remuneration system for its staff, consisting of a

monthly basic salary, performance-based bonuses, Tunjangan Hari Raya (religious holiday allowance), and a thirteenth-month salary. Staff recruitment is conducted through informal mechanisms, primarily based on personal proximity or friendship networks. In particular, sub-district coordinators are local residents recruited informally, often on a voluntary basis. These sub-district coordinators may further establish a layer of brokers at the village level (village coordinators), whose roles are more fluid and whose responsibilities fall formally outside the Ruas structure.

Beyond its formal role as a site for absorbing public aspirations, Ruas also plays an active role in disseminating information about the Smart Indonesia Card (Kartu Indonesia Pintar, KIP) program through the parliamentary aspiration channel. Sub-district and village coordinators are crucial intermediaries in conveying information about this program to grassroots communities. Ruas is responsible not only for promoting awareness of the program but also for framing it as an outcome of Fem-01’s services as a parliamentary representative in Jakarta. Prospective beneficiaries are directed through several stages of selection: (1) registration at the targeted university, (2) account creation and submission of required documents, (3) document verification, (4) interviews with applicants at Ruas, and (5) field visits to validate applicant data. During the interview stage, beneficiaries and their parents are commonly instructed to support Fem-01 in legislative elections.

However, the broker layers embedded within the Ruas network do not operate uniformly. Drawing on Aspinall’s typology (2014), Ruas elites who support Fem-01 on the basis of loyalty and long-term political commitment—rather than immediate material gain—can be categorized as activist brokers. These actors tend to be relatively open to outsiders and employ technocratic language when promoting aspirational programs and emphasizing Fem-01’s advantages. In contrast, brokers operating at the sub-district and village levels exhibit more fluid yet closed characteristics, with stronger incentives to pursue short-term material benefits. At the grassroots level, these

brokers exercise considerable discretion and autonomy, which creates opportunities for predatory practices. One commonly reported practice is rent-seeking in the form of informal “administration fees” deducted from scholarship benefits, typically ranging from five hundred thousand to one million five hundred rupiah. As Aspinall (2014) argues, candidates with abundant resources but weak electoral prospects are more vulnerable to predation, whereas candidates with fewer resources are more prone to broker defection. Fem-01, endowed with substantial resources, is therefore unlikely to face defection. Nevertheless, despite its strong electoral prospects, Fem-01 remains susceptible to predatory behavior within its broker network.

In addition, Fem-01 cultivates long-term clientelistic relationships with several private universities in West Sulawesi. The Smart Indonesia Card program, actively promoted by these institutions, is particularly attractive to economically vulnerable populations. As one core Ruas staff member noted in an interview, “Ruas is always open to any campus that wants to become our partner. Private universities can survive when this program enters their campuses.” These universities thus become important venues for Fem-01 to perform a populist identity, notably through official events such as the “Smart Indonesia Card Scholarship Handover.” In return, these universities are integrated into Fem-01’s broker network. Through their institutional authority, they help direct and secure electoral support for Fem-01 among scholarship recipients, while also minimizing the risk of defection. In one case, a private university required each scholarship recipient to mobilize at least 25 additional votes in support of Fem-01. Similar to Ruas, this campus-based network operates through a hierarchical broker structure controlled in a top-down manner, from university leadership to lower-level intermediaries. The dual function of the Smart Indonesia Card thus exposes the dual role played by academics in partner universities: alongside fulfilling the Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi (the three core obligations of higher education), they also function as political operatives within Fem-01’s clientelistic network.

Fem-01 also maintains another informal network, known as a religious study group (*kelompok pengajian ibu-ibu*), called the YRA. Long before the Fem-01 era, YRA was the main political machine that supported the Fem-01 family’s political journey in Indonesian House of Representatives legislative elections for the past 15 years. Fem-01’s victory in 2019 was also closely tied to the key role of this network. Currently, YRA has thousands of female members (mothers) spread across 71 branches in West Sulawesi. During the Smart Indonesia Card era, this network naturally became a bridge between the aspirations of potential scholarship recipients and Ruas. Even without direct instruction from Ruas, YRA often shares information about the Smart Indonesia Card through the aspiration program during communal Qur’an readings or in informal conversations with their neighbors.

Appeal to Emotion and Negative Inducement

During the 2024 legislative election, informants revealed that Ruas directed them and their parents to vote for Fem-01 during the interview process. After the recipients were declared to have passed, in order to shape political behavior and discipline them and their immediate families from defecting, as well as to buy votes with scholarships (positive inducement), Ruas and her informal grassroots network also utilized appeal to emotion strategy and negative inducement. Appeal to emotion strategy is a persuasion technique used to influence the recipient’s political attitude by manipulating emotions to foster loyalty and control the recipient’s political decisions. A partisan of Fem-01 stated that Ruas employed this strategy to shape the political behavior of the recipients through the influence of their parents.

One informant recalled the form of manipulation used on the recipients’ parents, stating, “It’s a choice between supporting and praying for Buk Fem-01 or ensuring our children’s future. Do we choose a one-time cash gift or a scholarship that supports our children for four years? Who are the people who showed up the night before the election, handing out envelopes, business cards, and kissing our hands, and where are they now? Maybe I haven’t met Mrs. Fem-01, but she

is working hard in Jakarta to provide scholarships in West Sulawesi.” While there is no guarantee that the recipients will choose Fem-01, Ruas understood that they would obey their parents. One recipient expressed a desire to defect from Fem-01, but was quickly reminded by their mother, “Is that being ungrateful?”

Private universities and YRA members also employed emotional strategies on scholarship recipients, creating a sense of guilt and moral obligation. Manipulative statements like “You’ve been given a scholarship, but you don’t show gratitude,” “Why didn’t you choose the one who gave you the scholarship?” and “It’s disrespectful not to choose Mrs. Fem-01” were frequently used. These tactics were paired with negative influences, such as threats of revoking benefits from recipients (Mares & Young, 2016). Many informants reported threats from their universities that their scholarships would be taken away if they did not vote for Fem-01 or refused to fulfill certain mandates. Instead of guilt, these negative influences instilled fear and coercion, leaving the recipients with no choice but to comply. One recipient suspected that the university was using them as political pawns for Fem-01’s victory, stating, “We are here to study, not to engage in politics.”

Implementation Problems

The main function of the legislative institution, the House of Representatives, directly related to the implementation of public policy, is the supervisory function, which involves controlling policy execution (Asshiddiqie, 2006). Meanwhile, the executive institution, the president, has the capacity as the chief executive, with the power to organize government, government administration, duties, and authorities of state administration in the field of organizing public welfare (Isra, 2022). Based on the principle of checks and balances, as referenced in Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-XI/2013, these two institutions have different functions and authorities. The president submits the RAPBN as an instrument for organizing government, with the implementation carried out specifically by the relevant ministries or institutions. On the other hand, the House of Representatives discusses and

approves the RAPBN with the president, as well as supervises the implementation of the approved APBN. This means that the legislative institution functions to supervise the government’s working partners as policy implementers (Isra, 2022).

According to Permendikbud Number 10 of 2020 concerning the Smart Indonesia Program, the distribution and management of the Smart Indonesian Card program is carried out by the Education Financing Service Center (Puslapdik) under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Puslapdik is the official implementer of this program at the central level, along with management units at the provincial, district, education unit, and higher education service institution levels. Despite the limitations of function and authority, the DPR does not have direct access to the management of this program’s budget. However, since the introduction of the open list proportional representation system, they have the discretion to allocate patronage material from the state budget for personal purposes, especially for electoral interests. Members of the DPR usually build close relationships with their partners in the executive and influence them to direct social programs to their electoral districts, claiming credit for distributing benefits to their constituents according to campaign promises (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2020).

Based on the principle of checks and balances in Indonesian constitutional law, the function and authority of Fem-01 as a council member should be limited to supervising the implementation of the Smart Indonesian Card program. In the political arena, according to Bardach (1977), policy implementation is a political game that takes place outside formal institutions and can be played by informal actors at the grassroots level. Policy implementers act as the fixers of the game, striving to control the implementation process in alignment with their interests, even if it requires employing informal strategies. In this context, Fem-01 can be considered a fixer in the game of policy implementation. She is always present with an ambiguous function in the midst of beneficiaries at almost every scholarship handover ceremony.

However, instead of being a “policy

supervisor,” through Ruas, Fem-01 is portrayed as a “distributor” and “giver” figure. This creates the image of Fem-01 as the one implementing the policy. This narrative is widely spread through the slogan “ingat beasiswa, ingat Fem-01,” which is consistently and repeatedly promoted until it becomes a doctrine that shapes public belief. Rather than being viewed as a state policy, the public now believes that the Smart Indonesian Card program originates from personal wisdom. This phenomenon illustrates what Aspinall et al. (2022) referred to as programmatic hijacking, which is when the benefits of a specific program are used to benefit a particular party or politician. As a result, from the voters’ perspective, a programmatic policy appears to be particularistic or partisan. This ambiguity seems to be a deliberate electoral populist strategy aimed at seizing the populist moment. As Aspinall & Berenschot (2020: 242) stated, incumbent candidates must ensure they attend the inauguration or handover of aid to claim political momentum. In order to achieve effective conditions for its electoral goals, Fem-01 must go beyond the limits of its functions and authorities by morphing into a shadow executive. However, this ambiguity deviates from the general norm in public policy implementation theory, which is typically associated with formal politics.

Public policy implementers are official actors with technical competence in a specific field and an official mandate from the state to implement public policy. According to the bottom-up paradigm in policy implementation, they are known as street-level bureaucrats—civil servants or public service workers from various lower-level government agencies who interact directly with the public or provide services to them (Lipsky, 2010: 3). This approach shows that top-down determined implementation standards often do not align with the reality on the ground. The complexity of conditions at the lower level and unexpected situations prompt street-level bureaucrats to use discretion and autonomy to make policies more responsive to community needs.

In the implementation of the Smart Indonesian Card program, Fem-01 partisans at Ruas play a role similar to street-level bu-

reaucrats. With discretion and autonomy, they are crucial at the grassroots level to ensure that beneficiaries vote for Fem-01 in legislative elections. The goal of this manipulation is to cultivate a sense of gratitude and dependence among the recipients (Sari et al., 2023: 18). Core staff at Ruas emphasized the importance of these grassroots partisans, as they have a deep understanding of local societal conditions and can communicate instructions in informal language at the community level. They serve as shadow implementers in a shadow bureaucracy under the control of a shadow executive in a shadow state.

As Lipsky noted, street-level bureaucrats not only implement policies but also reshape them based on their discretion and autonomy. One common working mechanism of informal politics in the shadow state is the manipulation of public policy (Hidayat, 2007). Instead of simply translating formal policy standards from above and implementing them through informal means based on real conditions, these shadow implementers often redirect policy towards personal interests, neglecting necessary managerial and political skills.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Fem-01, an incumbent legislative candidate from West Sulawesi, mobilized her informal networks to influence the implementation of the Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP Kuliah) program for electoral gain. The results show that Fem-01 went beyond her formal legislative duties to directly shape program implementation, effectively becoming a *de facto* policy influencer. Through her informal networks, she established a shadow bureaucracy that operated alongside the official administrative structure, allowing her to selectively distribute program benefits and establish lasting clientelistic relationships with beneficiaries.

These findings reveal that patronage politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia has shifted its focus from the party-voter relationship to the candidate-voter relationship, with informal networks serving as the primary mechanism of political exchange. Democratization, instead of dismantling patronage, has reconfigured it within the realm of

policy implementation—highlighting that implementation itself can be a highly political process.

In addition to its empirical insights, this study makes three significant contributions. Firstly, it expands the theoretical scope of money politics research by introducing the concept of “Disguised Money Politics,” which is a covert form of vote buying that operates through state-funded welfare programs rather than private campaign resources. Secondly, it bridges the gap between policy implementation studies and political clientelism by demonstrating how legislators can go beyond their oversight roles and become *de facto* implementers through informal channels. Thirdly, it shows that post-authoritarian institutional and electoral changes in Indonesia have not eradicated clientelism but have restructured its operations within bureaucratic procedures, enabling legislators and their informal networks to take advantage of state programs previously controlled by executive officials.

Collectively, these contributions present a new analytical framework for understanding how clientelism endures and transforms within Indonesia’s post-authoritarian environment, laying the groundwork for future research on the intersection of social welfare program distribution, informal politics, and electoral dynamics in Indonesia and beyond.

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