
The Rise of Political Dynasty and the Candidate Selection Process within the Party: Evidence from Indonesia

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Abstract

The emergence of political dynasties is one of the most pressing problems faced by new democracies in Asia, such as Indonesia. This is illustrated by the increasing number of politicians with dynastic backgrounds participating and being elected in elections to hold positions in the executive and legislative institutions. The number of regional head candidates in Indonesia affiliated with political dynasties increased rapidly from 52 in 2015 to 159 in 2020. Several causes that are considered drivers of the emergence of political dynasties are political centralization, candidacy that tends to be closed, regeneration within the party that does not run optimally, weak institutionalization of political parties, and the absence of free media. However, none of the existing literature explains the emergence of political dynasties through an investigation of the candidate selection process that takes place within the party. This article fills that gap, by presenting the candidate selection process that occurred when the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle nominated Bobby Nasution, son-in-law of President Joko Widodo, as mayor of Medan in 2020. The finding of this article is that the president's strong influence can intervene in the process that takes place within political parties, causing the candidate selection process to be very undemocratic. This is a problem of political parties in Indonesia that tend to be pragmatic in providing recommendations for regional head candidates.

Keywords

Political dynasty, Candidate selection, Process, Party institutionalization, Medan local election

Introduction

The development of democracy in many new democracies, such as Bangladesh (Ruud & Islam, 2016), Thailand (Thananithichot & Satidporn, 2016), the Philippines (Purdey et al., 2016), India (Chandra 2016) and Indonesia has shown the strengthening trend of the emergence of political dynasties, both at the national and local levels. This is reflected in the background data of politicians who participate and are elected in general elections to hold positions in executive institutions (such as regents, mayors, and governors) and legislative institutions or parliaments (Kenawas, 2023).¹ In 2015 regional head elections in Indonesia, there were 52 candidates who were affiliated to political dynasties. The number increased rapidly to 159 in 2020. One of the highlights of this trend was the 2020 local elections where President Joko Widodo's son and son-in-law ran for mayor in Solo and Medan (Nugroho et al., 2021). Both are running through the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), a party that also supports Jokowi's presidential candidacy. Although political dynasties are not new in Indonesia, the candidacies of these two family members are new to Indonesian politics as there is no history of active presidential family members in Indonesia competing in elections (Purdey, 2023). This situation has led many to worry that the president will use his power to help his family members win ('Can Jokowi Be Neutral?', Nov 2023; Palatino, 2024).

Bermeo revealed that political dynasties are usually born from excessive power regimes with at least three characteristics, namely the concentration of military power that has great repression powers, the existence of executive power that grows deeper and wider, and the existence of elections that do not take place healthily and are colored by massive manipulation (Bermeo, 2016). Meanwhile, the existing literature has described a confluence of factors driving the emergence of political dynasties in Indonesia, ranging from political centralization, political candidacy that tends to be closed, party regeneration that does not run optimally, power networks that spread only from certain groups, weak institutionalization of political parties, oligarchy in recruitment, the absence of free media, and the *de facto* exercise of absolute power in political positions (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016; Hamid, 2015; Purwaningsih, 2015). Moreover, the ability of these political dynasties to cultivate and maintain robust networks of power allows them to control and manipulate the internal dynamics of political parties effectively, thus perpetuating their hold on power (Hadiz & Robison 2013). This circumstance can then significantly hinder democratization in Indonesia, both at the national and local level.

¹ A *regency* or *kabupaten* is an Indonesian administrative division under that of a province and equal to a *city* or *kota*.

The various studies cited above have not focused on the candidate selection process that occurs when involving family members of political dynasties in detail. Existing studies on Bobby's victory in the Medan mayoral election focus on the factors that resulted in the victory (Rifki & Mujaeni, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2021), or the dynamics that occurred during the campaign process (Bahri & Kusmanto, 2022). This article will investigate more deeply the candidate selection process that occurs within political parties for the emergence of dynastic politics. Do candidates with political dynasty backgrounds follow the procedures and rules that apply within their parties? How do political parties respond to the presence of candidates with dynastic backgrounds? Does poor party institutionalization contribute to the emergence of political dynasties? This article answers these questions by using a case study of Bobby Afif Nasution's candidacy through PDIP in the Medan mayoral election. While a single case study cannot fully capture the complexities of Indonesian politics, Bobby's selection process provides a tangible example of how family connections, political party dynamics, and party institutionalization shape the landscape of political dynasties in Indonesia. Moreover, Bobby's candidacy also demonstrated how the family holding the highest political position in Indonesia uses its ties to prominent political figures as leverage to gain access to other political offices.

The argument in this article is that the process followed by candidates from families who hold positions as high as the president can influence and intervene in the candidacy process that takes place within political parties. Even though the process that the candidate goes through is made and declared to have followed the procedures and rules that apply within the party, expressions of dissatisfaction with the process in practice from lower-level party officials are common. This confirms that weak party institutionalization facilitates the formation of political dynasties. Especially in the Indonesian context, the strong role of party administrators at the central level in determining regional head candidates constitutes a loop-hole that makes it easier for political leaders at the presidential level to co-opt political party branches and ignore the rights of party cadres who may be more eligible to become regional head candidates. This happens because the central boards of political parties in Indonesia control the party's financial resources, organizational infrastructure, and access to media (Buehler et al., 2021), therefore if someone has control of the party leadership, he or she certainly controls the entire political party up to the grassroots level. Before explaining the data used to arrive at the above argument in more detail, this article will review the existing literature and discuss the methods used to undertake the research.

Literature Reviews

According to Besley and Querol, a political dynasty constitutes a political method or practice of transferring power or awarding positions to someone who has family ties to the political patron or granter. This inheritance of power is believed to maintain the stability of the political party led by the politician, and the interests fought for by him can continue (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2013). Meanwhile, Dal Bo et al. define political dynasties as politicians' efforts to control the state through the dominance of a political party and advancing candidates who have blood ties to it (Dal Bo et al., 2007). Political dynasties can occur due to several factors, such as weak state integrity due to rent seeking which then creates a fertile ground for the emergence and perpetuation of political dynasties (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016), the benefits derived by members of political dynasties who inherit social, political, and constituent activities (Purwaningsih & Subekti, 2017), and from access to the bureaucracy (Querubin, 2016).

Meanwhile, according to Schafferer, incumbents build political dynasties by opening regulatory space, building political agreements with parties, and other mechanisms that allow incumbents to inherit the privilege of power to their families (inherited incumbency advantage) (Schafferer, 2023). However, the emergence of political dynasties can also be problematic for the political elite and for the smooth-running of a modern democracy, such as elite fragmentation characterized by the presence of other political families in the same area, resulting in a high intensity of competition between local elites (Kenawas, 2015) or the existence of an independent civil society (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016).

The institutionalization of political parties is the process of institutionalizing the party into an established organization. There are two aspects in the institutionalization of a party, namely internal and external aspects. Internal aspects are related to developments within the party, such as organizational systems ('systemness') and 'value infusion.' *Systemness* is a matter of how political parties implement party mechanisms that have been regulated in the party's constitution and the party's ability to organize its members. *Value infusion* refers to how parties build values and ideologies which are then reflected in the party's rules which should be in accordance with these values and ideologies. External aspects are related to 'decisional autonomy' and 'reification.' *Decisional autonomy* refers to how the party takes a stand and makes decisions, whether it can have autonomy or be influenced by other parties. *Reification* refers to how the party builds a support base in the wider community so that the party has a certain image and has a certain constituency in society (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

Basedau and Stroh divided the dimensions of party institutionalization into 'roots in society,' 'autonomy from individuals within and societal groups outside the party,' 'organizational apparatus,' and 'coherence as a unified organization' (Basedau & Stroh, 2008). Other experts discuss party institutionalization as a key factor in welfare state development. Several traits contribute to the stability and effectiveness of the party. First, related to organizational complexity, there must be clear rules regarding the decision-making process and the involvement of administrators from the local to the national level in the process. Well-institutionalized parties developed complex organizational structures with clear hierarchies, specialized functions, and established procedures. Second, decision-making is done organizationally without being controlled by outside forces. Third, there are hierarchical rules to sanction cadres in parliament or party structures who deviate from the party line. Well-institutionalized parties have clear and consistent rules for this. Fourth, there is an effective organizational division of labor for all levels of the party organization. Fifth, there is a stable relationship between the party and its constituents. The parties establish and maintain strong linkages to broader constituencies (Rasmussen & Knutsen, 2021).

According to Amundsen, political dynasties or family involvement in politics tend to limit the level of internal democracy within the party, such as decision-making, including in terms of electing party leaders. Political dynasties can result in parties being managed based on family affairs (Amundsen, 2016). Much literature has explained how the relationship between the weak institutionalization of political parties, which is reflected in the weak pattern of party recruitment, is the cause of the development of political dynasties in various regions in Indonesia (Delsya & Permana, 2022). Harjanto argues that parties in Indonesia more often nominate outsiders or non-party figures in regional elections to win political seats. This shows that such pragmatic actions reflect a lack of concern for the development of democracy and the strengthening of the party itself (Harjanto, 2011). Buehler and Tan also criticized the highly centralized candidate selection process in political parties (Buehler & Tan, 2007). In the candidate selection process, voters and party administrators at the local level are still rarely involved (Nurhasim, 2020). Budi, for example, discusses how the candidate selection by political parties in Indonesia is highly centralized, and the role of voters and local party branches is very limited (Budi, 2020). Meanwhile, at the global level, parties that accommodate political dynasties also tend to show that they do not have a deep level of party institutionalization and result in the unrepresentativeness of the existing political system (Chhibber, 2013).

Research Methodology

This article uses a case study research method. Case study research is an intensive study of a single case to draw generalizations for a common phenomenon (Gerring, 2004). The research focuses on the emergence of a political dynasty by investigating the candidate selection process within a party, with the case of the candidate selection process of Bobby Nasution, the son-in-law of President Jokowi, as a Mayor in Medan City through the Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). The researchers interviewed party members from various levels with categories consisting of candidates, party leaders, and party members to acquire information about the candidate selection process. Data collection was conducted between January and June 2023 with a total of nine informants. Analyzing data required several stages: data reduction, explaining findings, verifying data, and drawing theoretical and empirical conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Medan City, the capital of North Sumatra Province, has an area of 265.10 square kilometers and a population of approximately 2.4 million in 2020; 16.46 percent of the total population of North Sumatra. Medan has 21 sub-districts, 151 urban villages, and 2001 neighborhoods. Medan is known as a multiethnic city because its population consists of various identities, both ethnic and religious. One of the characteristics of the political map in Medan based on the direct election results in the Reform era (Era Reformasi), from 1998, is its dynamic nature. This is indicated by the acquisition of political party seats in the Medan City Regional House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* or *DPRD*) which were alternately won by Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), in 2009, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), in 2014, and the PDIP and Greater Indonesia Movement (*Gerindra*), in 2019 (Purwanto, 2021). The dynamism of politics in Medan is also reflected in the map of competition in the direct mayoral election that was implemented in 2005. In 2005, the mayoral election was won by Abdillah-Ramli who defeated Maulana Pohan-Sigit Pramono. Furthermore, in 2010, the election resulted in Rahudman Harahap-Dzulmi Eldin as the winner after defeating nine other mayor-deputy mayor candidate pairs. In the 2015 election, it was Dzulmi Eldin-Akhyar Nasution's turn to win and be elected mayor.

Table 1 Number of Seats Acquired by Political Parties in Medan City DPRD, 2009-2024

No	Political Parties	Number of Seats in Medan City DPRD			
		2009	2014	2019	2024
1	Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)	9	5	7	8
2	National Mandate Party (PAN)	6	4	6	3
3	Functional Group Party (Golkar)	6	7	4	6
4	Democrat Party	6	5	4	4
5	The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP)	6	9	10	9
6	United Development Party (PPP)	5	5	1	
7	Prosperous Peace Party (PDS)	5			
8	Reform Star Party (PBR)	1			
9	Pancasila Patriot Party	1			
10	Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra)		6	10	6
11	National Democrat Party (Nasdem)		2	4	5
12	United Work Party Indonesia (PKPI)		2		
13	Crescent Star Party (PBB)		1		
14	Indonesia Solidarity Party (PSI)			2	4
15	The People's Conscience Party (Hanura)			2	2
16	National Awakening Party (PKB)				1
17	Indonesian Unity Party (Perindo)				1

Source: Author's analysis

Table 2 List of Elected Mayors of Medan City, 2005-2020

No	Election Year	Mayor and Vice-Mayor	Voter Turnout Rate and Percentage	Political Parties Support
1	2005	Abdillah-Ramli	489.010 (62,55%)	Golkar, PDIP, PPP, PAN, PBR, PDS, Demokrat, Patriot Pancasila
2	2010	Rahudman Harahap-Dzulmi Eldin	485.446 (65,88%)	Demokrat, Golkar
3	2015	Dzulmi Eldi-Akhyar Nasution	346.308 (71,68%)	PDIP, Golkar, PKS, PAN, PKPI, Nasdem, PBB
4	2020	Bobby Nasution-Aulia Rachman	393.327 (53,45%)	PDIP, Gerindra, Golkar, Nasdem, Hanura, PPP, PSI, PAN

Source: Author's analysis

The 2020 Medan mayoral election was followed by two candidate pairs, namely Akhyar Nasution-Salman Alfarisi and Bobby Afif Nasution-Aulia Rachman. Akhyar was

an incumbent candidate who had previously served as Mayor of Medan and was a PDIP cadre, while Salman was Deputy Chair of the North Sumatra Provincial DPRD and was a Prosperous Justice Party cadre. The following table is the configuration of political competition in the 2020 Medan regional elections:

Table 3 Political Parties in the Medan City DPRD in 2019-2024 and Candidates in the 2020 Regional Elections

No	Political Party	Number of Seat in Medan's Parliament	Gave Support to
1	PKS	7	Akhyar Nasution-Salman Alfarisi
2	Demokrat	4	
3	PDIP	10	
4	Gerindra	10	
5	PAN	6	Bobby Afif Nasution-Aulia Rachman
6	Golkar	4	
7	Nasdem	4	
8	Hanura	2	
9	PSI	2	
10	PPP	1	

Source: Author's analysis

Based on its constitution, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) divides its membership into three types based on levels within the party's internal structure, namely Primary Cadre, Middle Cadre, and Main Cadre. Primary cadres are members who have just joined the party and will usually attend various training and political education programs organized by the party to deepen their understanding of the party's ideology, policies, and strategies. They are usually involved in party activities at the local level. Intermediate cadres are members who already have a deeper knowledge and experience of party politics and organization. They will have greater responsibility at the regional and national levels. They are also often the link between party leaders and lower-level members. Main cadre are party members who are ready to be nominated for general election by the party.

In the 2020 Medan mayoral election, the PDIP has set several stages to determine a candidate's nomination. The first stage is a screening conducted at the city or *Dewan Pimpinan Cabang* (DPC), "local leadership council" level of the party, which can be followed by party cadres and figures in the community even though they are not party members. The PDIP usually prioritizes party cadres because PDIP has a strict regeneration system. At this stage, lower party structures, namely branch administrators

at the urban village level can propose names. The second stage is screening conducted at the provincial or *Dewan Pimpinan Daerah* (DPD), “regional representative council” level of the party. This screening process is a process to ensure the candidate's commitment to the state ideology of Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, *Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia* (NKRI) or the indivisibility of Indonesia, and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity), Indonesia's core organizing principle and to which the PDIP is particularly committed, as well as ensuring the completeness of administrative documentation. In addition, at this stage the party DPD will select the candidate on the basis of not just the vision-mission and program, but also the network promoted by the candidate. The networks in question are social networks and financial networks. The PDIP realizes that the only candidates who have the potential to win are those who have strong social networks and financial networks. The third stage is the determination stage which is carried out at the central or *Dewan Pimpinan Pusat* (DPP) “central executive board” level of the party. This final process is the culmination of a process of ideological, strategic, and political considerations that have been carried out in stages from the smallest party structure at the lowest level to being determined by the general chairman at the party's central level.

In the candidacy process for participation in the 2020 regional head election in Medan City, the PDIP administrators at the sub-district level in Medan City revealed that they were welcome to provide input on party cadres and figures in the community who had the potential to become the Mayor of Medan. The involvement of party officials at the local level was limited to providing input on the name of and information about the person to be recommended as a mayoral candidate who would be presented by the PDIP for participation in the regional head election to party officials at the city, provincial, and then to the central level. At that point, party officials at the central level selected the candidate to represent the party in the regional head election.

In the process of selecting Bobby Nasution as the candidate nominated by the PDIP in the 2020 Medan mayoral election, party officials at the provincial level revealed that the party considered Bobby's popularity, which at that time had increased after marrying President Jokowi's daughter in November 2017. The increase in popularity was reflected in various electability surveys conducted by PDIP prior to the election. Party administrators at the sub-district level understood that although the PDIP was formally a cadre party, the role of the cadres was limited to proposing names only for electoral candidacies, while the authority to actually determine the candidacy is the prerogative of the general chairman. A party official at the sub-district level reported that:

"At that time the party at the sub-district level did not know who Bobby was. What determines [his candidacy] was the DPP (Central Leadership Council) of the party. So, what[ever] has been determined by the party, whether we want it or not, and whether we like it or not, we must win. The PAC (Party Sub-branch Committee) does not have the authority to determine candidates. Our job is only to support and win" (interview with JGS).

However, in fact a number of PDIP cadres at the local level did not agree with PDIP's move to nominate Bobby as a mayoral candidate. This was because the PDIP still had cadres who had ascended through all the stages of cadre development to become eligible to become mayoral candidates. The local attempt to reject Bobby's candidacy resulted in the party's replacement of four party chairmen at the sub-district level (Sinaga, 2020a). Their rejection of Bobby was based on him not being a PDIP cadre at that time.

At the initial local stage, the sub-district level party administrators proposed around 10 names as mayoral candidates. One of the most qualified potential candidates from among the local PDIP cadres was Akhyar Nasution. He has been a long-standing PDIP cadre from the 1990s, and in 2015 won the Medan mayoralty with Dzulmi Eldin. Akhyar then rose to become mayor after Dzulmi was arrested in a corruption case in October 2019. Akhyar served as Deputy Chairman of PDIP North Sumatra at that time.

Akhyar said that initially he received support from the PDIP for the candidacy. He together with the North Sumatra provincial party management then went to Jakarta to conduct a fit and proper test at the PDIP DPP. At that time, apart from Akhyar, only Bobby also participated in the fit and proper test. The fit and proper examiners consisted of three PDIP DPP administrators, namely Bambang Wuryanto, Djarot Saeful Hidayat, and Mindo Sianipar. The PDIP DPP invited Akhyar to look for a deputy mayoral candidate freely, whether from within or outside the PDIP, while Bobby was directed to choose a deputy mayoral candidate from the PDIP because he was not a PDIP cadre. However, Akhyar later realized that the fit and proper test had merely been a formality of the PDIP nomination process because he discovered that the PDIP had actually already determined that Bobby was to be the party's mayoral candidate. The PDIP's decision to nominate Bobby had come from a request from President Jokowi, which was later accommodated by General Chair Megawati Soekarnoputri. As a result of the exposure of these internally restricted dynamics, Akhyar decided to leave the PDIP after nearly two decades and look for another political party that was willing to nominate him.

Bobby married President Jokowi's daughter, Kahiyang Ayu, in 2017. When preparing for his daughter's wedding, Jokowi expressed dissatisfaction with the mayor and deputy mayor of Medan, Dzulmi and Akhyar, because many of the roads in Medan had potholes. Observers at the time suspected that the criticism was an early attack on the mayor. At the end of 2019, Bobby then took a first step into the political arena by registering as a mayoral candidate with parties that have seats in the Medan City DPRD (Sinaga, 2020b). Bobby registered as a PDIP cadre in March 2020. The PDIP then announced Bobby as the mayoral candidate who was promoted in the Medan City regional election on August 11, 2020, just six months after registering as a party cadre (Maharani & Erdianto, 2020). The PDIP Secretary General revealed that the reason the PDIP did not nominate its older cadre, Akhyar, was due to his perceived unhealthy ambition for power and having potential legal issues related to corruption cases (Nainggolan, 2020). On September 4, 2020, Bobby and Aulia officially registered themselves as candidates for mayor of Medan to the Medan City Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU), or election commission, with the support of 39 of the 50 seats in the Medan City DPRD. Meanwhile, on the same date, the PKS and Demokrat parties, which had 11 seats in the Medan City DPRD, decided to support Akhyar and Salman as mayoral candidates (Sinaga, 2020a).

Akhyar said that his defeat in the election was because there were "invisible" forces at play. He said that these forces were very influential on the election results. A political observer in North Sumatra concluded that Bobby's victory was influenced by PDIP party leaders, political figures, and ministers who often visited Medan during the campaign period (Sinaga, 2020b).

The 2020 regional elections marked the beginning of the Jokowi family's efforts to build a political dynasty in Indonesia. Jokowi's strong influence as president in influencing the ongoing candidacy and most likely also the ongoing campaign process gave an advantage to his son-in-law, Bobby, in the 2020 Medan City election. This supports Schaffer's inherited incumbency advantage thesis. The challenge of fragmentation and the high level of elite competition was successfully overcome by Bobby by buying the support of eight of the ten political parties that have seats in the Medan City DPRD. This condition is similar to the situation in national politics where Jokowi's government is supported by the majority of political parties in the DPR. At that time, only the PKS and the Demokrats were not in coalition with Jokowi's government. The two parties also did not give their support to Bobby in the Medan City election.

The emergence of the Jokowi family's political dynasty among other political dynasties at the national level of Indonesian politics was also made possible by the weak

institutionalization of political parties in Indonesia. This weakness is evidenced by the ease with which Bobby was able to get support from eight political parties in Medan. It also implies that these parties did not have cadres who were ready to be promoted in the regional elections as party candidates. The weakness of party institutionalization mainly lies in the aspects of *systemness* and *decisional autonomy*, where regulations concerning Indonesian political parties give too much power to party administrators at the central level leaving systems and branch decision making autonomy weak. The nature of regulations results in *systemness* that leads to a de facto undemocratic decision-making process, because the aspirations of party officials at the lower level can be easily ignored with the actual decision-making being at the central level of the party management. Meanwhile, the nomination of Bobby by the PDIP, which actually had its own cadres more suitable for the nomination, also shows that this party does not have complete decisional autonomy. The intervention and requests from President Jokowi strongly suggest a lack of party independence from the institution of the Presidency. The involvement of lower-level party officials ought to be prioritized when it comes to the selection of candidates for regional heads. The case of the selection of candidates for mayor of Medan in 2020 shows that this involvement is minimal. Party officials at the lower level are only given the opportunity to propose names, without participating in making the decisions about who will actually be nominated by the party. Thus, this non-organizational decision-making has provided an opportunity for the emergence of political dynasties. This finding also supports the theory that there is a tendency for candidate selection in political parties in Indonesia to be highly centralized and more likely to nominate outsiders to win seats.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to discuss the emergence of a political dynasty by investigating the candidate selection process within a party. The article contends that genuine rules-based procedure has been circumvented due to the fact that an informal process takes precedence which may be called, following Gallagher and Marsh (1988), “the secret garden of politics”. This article reveals “the secret garden” in the context of Indonesian centre-periphery politics or national-local politics and finds that the influence of the president effectively makes his affiliated political party powerless to maintain its autonomy and its leaders willing to sacrifice the cadres and the voices and votes of its party managers at the lower levels. The case of the selection of Bobby Nasution for mayoral candidate shows a correlation between the weak institutionalization of political parties and the emergence of political dynasties. The phenomenon of the political

dynasty decisively affected and ultimately undermined a party's rules-based process of candidate selection. A core function of a political party is to conduct a screening of its best cadres to select the best placed candidate to contend for the winning of power. Allowing the central party leadership or outside influential figures to make pragmatic interventions for the candidacy of extra-systemic figures for reasons of kinship or network membership ends up undermining the function and position of the party as a vessel for the chairmanship and the process of selecting candidates fairly and transparently and turns the party into merely a legitimizing tool.

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