

## **Modular Parties, Customary Networks, and Constructivist Institutionalism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the practice of modular parties as a discourse strategy that underpins patron-client relationships between politicians candidates, free-agent party functionaries, and mass voters. This practice departs from the conditions surrounding activism to mobilize voters in the context of: internal conflicts, parties that are too centralistic, the lack of regeneration, the de-ideologization of political parties, discourses about closed proportional elections, and the rampant phenomenon of cadres reconfiguring political parties. This article is based on qualitative interviews with groups of people in the networks of customary collectives, incumbent politicians, free agents, and political party functionaries in Bali. During the electoral process for the legislature in Bali, we conducted four interviews in 2021 and ten interviews in 2023. Bali is a province where the customary village-based activism is particularly important. The research is framed by constructivist institutionalism. We find that the network of customary collectivities and the relationship between free agents and incumbent politicians follows patron-client patterns. Within that pattern, actors innovate and communicate discourses about cultural preservation and the welfare of the customary collective. At the same time, they position the relevant leaders or parties as central actors who can provide solutions to the problems posed. This discourse strengthens ties between the mass of voters, free agents within the parties, and politicians or candidates. Such ties mobilize family-cum-community in the collectives of the villages and customary networks.

*Keywords: Modular Parties, Constructive Institutionalism, Bali, Customary Network, Discourse Strategy*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Representative democracy is considered an ideal choice in realizing popular sovereignty (Hatherell 2014, 2019, 2021; Hatherell and Walsh 2021; Hatherell and Welsh 2017). The process of democratisation establishes

representative democracy which requires political parties. However, over time, political parties often reach a critical point when they malfunction and tend to become exclusive. The democratization process throws up several counterproductive processes as representative parties become groups of cadre, as political parties tends to become centrist and elitist, and closed caucuses displace the open fora of a mass-member party (Kadir, 2014). In some cases, such processes manifest in internal conflicts at the branch leadership level over whether to heed central party dictates (Dewanto, 2021), over the de-ideologization of political parties, and over the rampant tendency of cadres to reconfigure political parties. In other cases the internal conflicts over central policies can take place at the provincial or national level (Nurdin, 2019). All such conflict is influenced by intensive discourse about political parties per se, and one of them is the discourse about a closed proportional election system (Muslih et al., 2022).

During the institutional reconfiguration around democratization, known as reformasi, cadres who also contest as candidates for political-party seats in legislatures have to continue to mobilize the mass of constituents in their respective constituencies. Local notables are the dominant preference. They are more decisive than the ideological orientation of political parties, but villages and other communal collectives retain a strategic importance for electoral contestants. In this situation, contestants from political parties inevitably continue to deploy voter-mobilization strategies to get elected in their respective constituencies. Beyond the minimal democracy of competition between electoral contestants, culturally and economically pertinent discourses constitute important strategies for mobilizing masses of voters.

In this mobilization effort, there are often liaison actors or brokers within 'modular' parties (Novaes, 2018). These actors are also free agents who can change their support or accept a more favorable offer from another established patron. Modular parties become symptomatic of a society that no longer looks at political parties' ideological content or even at their significant

role in the formation of cadres. The process of political recruitment is weakening, especially during the post-authoritarian era since the end of Suharto's rule. Consequently, various opportunistic figures with intertwined interests have become more prominent (Duarte, 2016).

Bali is an interesting case study because it exemplifies what Novaes (2018) calls the ongoing practice of modular parties. Traditional chiefs have begun to exercise free agency as they broker voters' support for various parties in return for benefits once they win office and can shape public expenditure. In the practice of power that takes place at the local level, Bali has two power entities, namely customary villages and official villages (Wardana 2019). Customary villages control most of the daily activities of village communities, because they have the authority to regulate the birth and death of residents. The head of a customary village often has the opportunity to negotiate with free agents, mobilizing the mass of voters in return for benefits (Jordi et al., 2021; Pratama et al., 2022; Suteja et al., 2021).

Where most research into modular parties starts from a materialist focus on money politics, this article emphasizes the role of discourse in the practice of modular parties. Novaes (2018) does acknowledge the role of discourse but emphasizes the role of agency in fluid modular parties in which clientelism persists amidst various patterns of client-patron relationships. This holds true in the global south, such as Indonesia, and especially when such parties interact with networks of customary collectives (Muhtadi, 2018). Another study (Savirani & Törnquist, 2015) notes that patronage became a common means of mobilizing the voting masses during the democratization process in Indonesia, where dominant actors have much more access to capital while alternative actors have much more access to local knowledge (Savirani 2015, 67). In practice these actors combine methods of persuasive actions deploying charisma, political image formation, networking, elite support, and the cultivation of customary collective networks (Savirani & Törnquist, 2015).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses qualitative research activities. Data collection was carried out by interviewing informants from networks of customary collectives, politicians, free agencies, to political-party functionaries at the provincial level (DPD-Dewan Pimpinan Daerah) and district and city level party administrators (DPW- Dewan Pimpinan Wilayah) in Bali. In addition, this article also utilizes secondary data in previous research deploying the constructive theory of institutionalism. The choice of this theory is because it provides an important factor of discourse in the formation of institutions and in the emergence of ideas around supporting institutions, interests, and how discourse is carried out and strategized (Bowen, 2009). Such discourse is supported by elements of innovation and communication. The innovation element includes the strategy used, while the communication element includes how strategy is communicated to voters or audiences. It also includes innovating and communicating what forms of discourse are deliberately preserved or maintained continuously by the agent interacting with the voters.

Bali is the research location because its political parties exemplify the modular parties outlined by Novaes (2018), namely there are many free agents exercising power in customary, community, and religious fields. In the practice of power at the local level, Bali has two forms of power entities in customary villages and official villages. Village offices in their fields of duty are integrated or subordinated to formal state power structures vertically, for example: district, city, provincial, and even central governments. The customary village office exercises autonomous authority as the organizer and supervising implementator of local community customs including the daily activities of the village community, such as arrangements for birth ceremonies, transition to adulthood ceremonies, and the burial of customary people. In this customary village, the practice of modular parties can be negotiated by free agents for clients seeking to mobilize the mass of voters. The time period for the analysis is the legislative elections during March-November 2021 and

June-October 2023. During time we could read the influence of discourse in the practice of modular parties and free agents within them working with legislative candidates who successfully positioning themselves to become council members.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of “modular” parties looks at how existing parties fragment, or break down, into distinct modules that can be reassembled within other parties. There are two main ways of going about such analysis. First, there are studies of political parties’ institutional capacity. Authors have analysed the regeneration mechanism (Fajrina, 2017), internal socialization of party-political ideology (Mayrudin, 2017), elite circulation mechanisms in political party organizations (Septi Nur Wijayanti; Kelik Iswandi, 2021), and the social dealignment of parties (Ufen 2008). Second, there are studies of the electoral practice of political parties. Such study discusses discourse dynamics at the practical level as well as the problem of institutionalization of political parties within the electoral process. This happens when political parties seek to maintain a continuity of identity to mobilize a mass of constituents, especially in the context of winning elections (Barito & Rohman, 2023; Purnama, 2019).

This second approach has a wider range of topics, mostly based on various forms of money politics (Lukmajati, 2016)(Ufen 2008), but also including client-patron practices (Okhtariza, 2019)(Fukuoka 2012; Nordholt 2015). This article looks specifically at the institutional intertwining practices of modular parties. Cadres within political parties both take advantage of, and are influenced by, various discourses around them. In practice, there is a patron relationship between legislative candidates and clients, when free agents use discourse as an element that is innovated, communicated, and preserved in order to mobilize the masses. There are several main studies related to modular parties upon which this article draws. It's just that the two approaches above do not consider discursive power in the practice of modular parties. Discourse is communicated and innovated by free agents and political

candidates from several major parties. A modular capacity works through dominant discourse that uses the interweaving of customary networks. When a modular party's practice works, it certainly has an impact on the performance of political parties within which the politician is sheltered as a cadre. Therefore, this article investigates some of the arguments of each political party regarding the practice of modular parties because candidates emerge within the regeneration of their respective political parties. Our discursive analysis of free agents within modular parties steers a course between, on the one hand, the materialism of authors who study the organizational processes of money politics and the political economy of parties (Nordholt 2015; Hadiz 2021) and on the other hand, the Habermasian or Foucauldian analyses of discourse (Hatherell and Walsh 2021; Wilson 2015).

## **MODULAR PARTIES IN A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO INSTITUTIONALISM**

The key to modular parties is the existence of client-patron relationships (Novaes, 2018). These relationships spread to various professions or activities, such as networks of landowners, capital, or traditional leaders who assist with mobilizing a mass of voters. The client-patron relationship becomes the central concept that guides the analysis of modular parties. In modular parties, as argued by Novaes (2018), basically cadres cannot actually hold the masses because the party considers the costs and demands to be too high. Therefore, modular parties tend to recruit "connecting actors" who already have a network of voters. This makes it easier for the modular party to control its mass because the modular party only needs to ensure that its relationship with the connecting actor is always well established and intensive.

On the other hand, this liaison actor is analogous to the client's patron. Aspinall & Sukmajati (2018) asserted that patronage is a form of profit sharing when politicians distribute something individually to voters, workers or

campaign activists in order to gain political support. The practice of patronage is mostly carried out through the giving of cash, goods, services, and other economic benefits such as career promotions, project contracts or profits flowing to specific interests. Patronage can also take the form of gifts of cash as well as goods distributed to voters that come from private or public funds. However, it should be noted that patronage differs from the provision of goods, services or benefits that are already flowing to clients; such as services coming to someone covered by a government program. Patronage and clientelism are essentially different but they are often attached to the term patron-client. Patronage refers to the matters or other profits distributed by politicians to voters or supporters. Conversely, clientelism refers to the character of the relationship between politicians and voters as well as supporters (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2018).

Clientelism refers to personalistic power relations and material gains exchanged for political support. Clientelist relationships are face-to-face and are classified in three ways; first, the contingency or reciprocity of giving goods or service from one party (patron or client) is a direct response to the provision of benefits from other parties. It is usually a source of material exchanged for votes or other forms of political support. Second, hierarchy characterizes unequal power relations between patrons and clients. Third, the clientelist exchange takes place continuously. In this context, according to the constructivist institutionalism approach, the responses between patron and client are shaped by discourse (Vandenberg 2021). Discourse then innovated by free agents or liaison actors and communicated to the mass of voters while maintaining or promoting the practices, values, routines, or norms of the old institution (Okthariza, 2020). The theoretical framework of constructivist institutionalism is a form of new institutionalism. This theory provides an important aspect in analyzing the formation of institutions by the various elements of discourse practice (Bell, 2011; Hay, 2016). For constructivist institutionalism theory, institutions are not only seen as collections of ideas,

values, and norms / rules that are institutionalized, but are also influenced and shaped by changing discourses in wider contexts. Discourse distinguishes a series of words, considered to contribute to producing ideas, values, ideas, or attitudes that are formed in contexts affecting the way people and organized groups of people think and act. In constructivist institutionalism, consequently, the perception of any individual or group is going to always differ from other individuals or groups (Bacchi & Rönblom, 2014). Discourse is closely related to language or communication delivered intensely, and at the same time also shaped by the knowledge possessed by the agent. All of this is related to how discourse is continuously communicated, discussed, deliberated, negotiated or even contested (Bacchi & Rönblom, 2014).

This article follows Bell's (2011) approach to the duality of interactions between agents and structures in a historical context. He used the theory of constructivist institutionalism to examine international monetary policy that was strongly influenced by both structure and agency. Structure provides resources that can empower and not just limit. Agents facilitate changes that are responsive to structure. Economic crises or recessions, along with monetary policy authorities, are also influenced by changes in their environment. The two interact in producing policies that respond to each other. Consequently, changes of policy can drive structural change to a limited degree (Bell, 2011). This study seeks to understand the practice of modular parties as an institution that is constantly and continuously shaped by discourse.

The theory of constructivist institutionalism substantively allows that structures can overshadow ideas and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourse (Bell, 2011). Such discourse is open and always contains articulated ideas. When operationalizing the discourse assumed in this theory, the author describes the discursive process in two ways. First, there is the process by which ideas are articulated and transformed into discourse. Second, there is the process by which the



discourse undergoes institutionalization (Freidenvall, 2018). In the explanation of the change process, analysis of aspects of discourse is undertaken through tracing who has agency and acts, what are the supporting institutions, what interests accompany the discourse, how discourse is produced, carried out, and practiced, and how the relations in the discourse are constructed (Christie, 2005). Bell (2011) reminds us that in practice there is a space where actors can reflectively interact with their structures. The actor is not merely a passive object in the structure, and always has the opportunity to revisit their actions with the potential for shifting discourses to affect or characterize changes. Similarly, the structure will always form agents through limits or constraints within various discourses taking place continuously.

Through the application of an institutional constructivist theoretical frame, this article positions the analysis in the context of discourse that characterizes and influences the pattern of client-patron relations. The actors are taking advantage of, and also influenced by, the discursive strategies of various actors' efforts to influence the masses. This article complements studies of clients and patrons in electoral practices that have been limited to the materialist analysis of patterns of patronage in the community (Alfaz & Suswanta, 2021; Nastain & Nugroho, 2022). This article enhances previous study by emphasizing the contextual aspect of discourse in the course of modular practice, including the operation of ideas, supporting institutions, interests, and how discourse is carried out and strategized.

In the context of this research, the modular role is seen as being played by a free agent, that is, someone who moves as they wish, as long as there are other parties who want to outsource client mobilization. The free agent can be a broker switching to another party at any time as long as they receive proposals that are considered more profitable. The broker acts as a free agent and changes its support when there is a more favorable proposal offer. The role of modular parties includes free agents to look for support through the various wishes of their voters (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Political agents in a

modular party system tend to respond to the wishes of voters specifically in that area. The various desires of these voters are strongly influenced by the various discursive discourses taking place around. Discourse is believed by the author to be a factor that contributes to the development and shape of free agent actions in modular parties to outsource voter mobilization. Clientelist mobilization is also strongly influenced by discourse, which also includes the practice of innovation, communication, and sustainability (preservation) as important elements in the constructive perspective or institutionalism's approach.

The meaning of discourse implementation that also affects the practice of free agents in modular parties able to actually be interpreted by the author in terms of fluidity argued by (Novaes, 2018). The fluidity of modular parties is able to explain why clientelism able to persist and even be widespread even in many parts of the developing world. It because clientelist machines work relatively strong are very rare. The capacity of brokers is more to offer their services to parties who are considered capable of maximizing their interests to maintain their network. However, by relying on these autonomous brokers, the parties will not create their own direct relationships, thwarting any hope of making the parties organizationally strong.

The work of liaison actors as a free agent practice in modular parties is always relevant to be analyzed considering the potential threat of divisions between party cadres and the phenomenon of party cadres' resignation is still rife, especially ahead of the 2024 legislative elections. In this article's capacity, discourse is believed to have assisted encourage free agencies to take a role in the practice of modular parties mobilizing the masses of voters. This article also strengthens this argument and at the same time provides an explanation that political parties are not only work linearly but also dynamically. It is certainly does not reduced to the issue of money politics as a strategy of mass mobilization as well as the practice of modular parties as free agents also influencing mass mobilization.

## UTILIZATION OF CUSTOMARY NETWORKS: FROM WORKING DISCOURSE ON CULTURAL PRESERVATION TO ECONOMIC WELFARE

Free agents within modular parties can disassemble and reassemble within in eight major parties. This is especially true when bids from other political parties position legislative candidates in a more favorable range of bids. Practically, in Bali the role of free agents in modular parties involves a lot of support from the heads of customary-based collectives. In the Denpasar City area, free agents emerged among Tajen (cock fighting)-based patrons campaigning for the nomination of politicians from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (*PDI-P*) who were led by INK and became legislators in Denpasar City. We observed the conduct of Seanjang Tajen as an ancient culture of cock-fighting known locally as *Tabuh Rah*, which is deeply rooted in Balinese society. Cockfighting itself contains elements of both courage among adult men and fatigue-relieving entertainment for those watching, at the same time as it also builds group solidarity among the community in Bali (Geertz 1972).

The traditions around cock-fighting are much older than the state and serve to integrate all forms of cultural traditions among the Balinese. When the state is present, however, Tajen faces a dilemma because the formal power of the state actually considers Tajen to be illegal gambling. The way it strengthens Balinese culture means that Tajen in some parts of Bali is preserved and deliberately maintained for the sake of cultural continuity. The preservation of Tajen as important Balinese culture amounts to discursive innovation that has been communicated especially during the democratization process since 1998. Tajen has become a glue for group cohesiveness, especially since it gathers masses that can be mobilized as voters. Consequently, some senior figures in Tajen circles uphold it as a political vote winner. The discourse of cultural preservation is raised by Tajen leaders in the midst of a dilemma around the defense of traditional rituals that breach legal norms against

gambling.

Both the dilemma and the opportunity for discursive innovation are greatest at the local level of politics where politicians necessarily know all about *Tajen* and political parties are also most likely to be particularly modular. Politicians are patrons who have formal power but are also organizers or managers of *Tajen* activities. Some enthusiasts or hobbyists are positioned as both clients and party functionaries in modular relationships receiving orders from social or organizational superiors or patrons. The client and patron are in an unequal relationship, and this holds especially true in the *Tajen* domain. The patron position is held by the *Tajen* manager who's also a politician in the council, which can connect both informal and formal networks in order to negotiate what is acceptable to each other in the realms of law, religion, and cultural traditions. *Tajen* can gather many people providing entertainment during a cockfight. This offers an opportunity for politicians to win political support from the lovers of *Tajen*.

Horizontal rivalry within *Tajen* can serve to regulate hostility between villages, friends, and relatives. This actually strengthens the existence of *Tajen* among Balinese because it strengthens the identity and prestige of each collective. Patrons acting in their modular capacity can see that they have the opportunity to maximize the mass mobilization of voters to support politicians who have candidates for representatives in the ongoing process. Unsurprisingly, actors who can negotiate sensitivities around *Tajen* tend to retain ongoing positions. Although there is no state legalization and no government or police permits related to organising *Tajen*, beyond the general prohibition of all gambling, *Tajen* is still held on the grounds that it is part of a deeply rooted culture in customary communities. All this is purely maintaining the balance of customary peoples. The concepts of balance and wisdom are negotiations that mediate aspects of legality and illegality intersect as well as have intertwined through the tradition of *Tajen*.

INK is a senior patron whose has a central role in *Tajen* activities in

Denpasar. He positioned himself as an important person in these negotiations by building bridges between his informal position in the customary realm and his formal role as a politician. He negotiated the enforcement of normative rules within modern state law in his capacity as a politician. He communicated the existence of policies that make it always necessary to maintain and negotiate *Tajen* given the danger of evil spirits and considering that INK also organizes the funding of the evil-spirit cleansing Piodalan ceremony at many temples. Of course, *Tajen* also has a positive value for the organizers and enthusiasts because it brings a windfall income for food vendors, stall tenants, parking, fruit traders and other services at the *Tajen* location. For these reasons, patrons' interests are often protected and win client support among the larger mass of supporters. Consequently, the discourse communicated to the audience covers both welfare and preserving traditional Balinese culture.

INK does not articulate explicit political messages, but the discursive context is always apparent to the public when he provides space for the *Tajen* and makes it clear that he is seeking strong support among *Tajen* hobbyists. Consequently, the patron-client become firmly cemented between INK and the *Tajen* community. The client's position as a free agent sees him both advance the interests of *Tajen* hobbyists and mobilize their voice.

Gede Agus Siswadi (2023) notes that when INK wins votes among the *Tajen* participants, they then encourage their families to vote for him too. Thus, people who do not know INK directly know that there are *Tajen* supporters who run for office. This has a positive effect on the *Tajen* community and they feel represented. As a result, they will give their votes to INK. Party cadres will then encourage the wider *Tajen* community in the rest of Bali to to promote the hobby and to accommodate the aspirations of local groups. As a modular practice understood from the perspective of constructivist institutionalism, the free agent framed discourse as a means to characterize issues and bind them to the mobilization of political voices. As a *Tajen* figure, INK mobilizes

directly by informing actors, campaigning with other actors and requiring direct meetings with figures and actors in the *Tajen* community.

The *Tajen* community still gets the attention of actors and parties after it has succeeded in bringing victory to the politician concerned. The discourse used by free agent in his modular role frames the patron-client relationships as being of ongoing interest for the running of *Tajen* in Bali. This discursive pattern of communication frames sustainability as cultural preservation. Negotiating the norms of a modern state that regards *Tajen* as a form of gambling is necessary to include the cultural traditions position. The preserving cultural traditions discourse is used by free agent to reach the mass of voters and then it is deployed by supporting actors and various related discourses.

INK is one of the figures who mobilizes the interests of the *Tajen* community, with a plan to express the voice of *Tajen* issuing regional regulations that render *Tajen* an enterprise with economic turnover. This builds a positive image of *Tajen* through allocating the proceeds of *Tajen* to fund the *Piodalan* ceremony at Tanah Lot and also contribute to upkeep for the temple, which is a strong tourist drawcard. If *Tajen* can be legalized through association with customs, governors, mayors and Regional Representative, this will be a breath of fresh air to preserve traditions, increase socio-economic welfare, and increase a local source of revenue.

Another modular practice is the support of the Banjar customary councils in the neighbouring villages of Pesanggaran and Ambengan. These two villages supported one of the legislature candidates in the electoral process. Bonds within the Banjar are strong because they are based on custom and ancestors (*Semeton*) associated with temples. There were other Banjar involved in similar actions elsewhere in the Denpasar City area. *Bantas* is a mass organization (*ormas*) formed by the Banjar in Pesanggaran and Ambengan. It developed its own political stance in resistance against the flagging hegemony of *Golkar* and in support of the Indonesian Democratic

Party, and later its successor the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (*PDI-P*). When the New Order collapsed in 1998 and was replaced by a reform order, Bantas support became dynamic, less programmatic and more modular. In Novaes's (2018) terms, Bantas changed into a group that provided support to whichever politicians offered the most attractive benefits.

At the same time, the bonds of communal prestige and local identity that is different from nearby *Banjars* maintained a non-materialistic value system inherited from the ancestors that needs to be preserved. In this position, the discourse that is often communicated and innovated by modular parties is a discourse that leads to socio-economic assistance with activities that preserve the prestige of the Banjar collectivity. One example of how a battle for prestige plays out in Bali is the kite festival competition among Banjar. This competition known as Rare Angon is an ancient tradition that aims to maintain the bond of internal solidarity among local people in one Banjar and win prestige among other Banjars. This festival is held annually and has its own place in the ranking of traditional *Banjars* in Bali. The discourse of traditional rivalry is both proffered and challenged by actors in the Bantas organization which appraises political candidates according to who offers the greatest assistance in the kite festival. The fluctuations in support given by free agents, such as in the Bantas case, no longer centre upon candidates from any one party. Contrary politicians from various parties can act as patrons offering competitive benefits.

In the modular practice pattern around the Tajen discourse shows that agents are free to provide support to their patrons, during the voting period and encouraging family support too. The discourse that mobilizes solidarity around a collective voice is not limited to customary communities, such as Banjars, but also extends to groups with economic interests. Economics in the form of social-welfare assistance figures in candidates' seeking patron-client bonds through free agents. The discourse of socio-economic welfare for the mass of voters or constituents readily parlays into support for the candidate.

## **FREE AGENCY: DEPLOYING DISCOURSE AMONG FRAGILE CADRES AND DISAPPEARING POLITICAL PARTY IDEOLOGIES**

Each candidate utilizes available discourses as a considered strategy to mobilize mass support. In the network of customary collectives, a discourse about cultural preservation is prominent. This discourse can consolidate the mass of voters, who are actually Tajen hobbyists, through communicating the importance of cultural traditions that need to be integrated or preserved. Tajen does face prohibition, but intense communication and vigorous innovation has seen it become a rallying call to support the Balinese cultural traditions discourse amid the onslaught of modern culture and liberal-democratic norms of the modern state. This discursive strategy takes the perpetuation and preservation of ancient values, adds innovation and effective communication, and reaches out to the masses. Agents hawking voters' support are free to bind voters within available collectives and confront the threat of massive cultural change.

In the second case of the Bantas Banjar becoming a political actor, a pattern quite similar to the practice of INK working with the Tajen community sees a formal actor interact with a local customary collective. The practice of modular parties creates various possibilities for formal actors interacting with customary collectives. The cohesion of customary groups is very important for mobilizing mass-level support in politics, especially when free agents operate within modular parties. According to most informants, who were functionaries of political parties at the level of the provincial management council, the branch management councils, and the Regency and City levels in Bali, modular parties have become a prevailing condition in the era of political liberalization that brought competition between rival political parties.

The conditions that prevail outside the institutions of political parties have shaped the strengthening of modular parties, including the emergence of free agency among brokers between clients and their patrons who pitch



competitive proposals. Some political party informants also foresaw problems for modular parties should openly competitive elections were actually replaced by closed proportional party-list voting. This possibility was concerning among politicians who worried about the threat of individually financed candidates replacing candidates proposed by their political parties at both the Regional Leadership Council and Branch Leadership Council levels.

Most informants thought that the most important condition to have contributed to encouraging politicians as well as cadres from the political parties came from political parties' central leadership councils making decisions or issuing instructions about the weighting for candidates' self-assessment of their track record as party cadres (Joko Purnomo et al., 2023). They worried that the the lack of human resources in political parties would see the circulation of cadres and regeneration of candidates suffer from the consequences of elitist dictates.. In this view, the practice of modular parties has the opportunity to democratize and strengthen the patronage of their respective clients, namely politicians and free agencies, even though the proposals offered have to compete against those coming from other candidates in the same party (Mardiana et al., 2023).

In the competition between politicians who propose themselves as candidates in the era of open rivalry, what become more prominent is the candidate's program rather than the ideology or the political party that carries it. In this condition, it stands to reason that politicians who are also candidates in the modular parties will readily move to other parties. The cadres bring proposals to their prospective constituents and these are then seized as opportunities for free agency. Such free agency is latterly interpreted by most informants as being a sound broker. The practice of modular parties is supposed to provide opportunities for free agents to seek out bids, moreover, at the same time it plays out a discourse that is considered strategic for the interests of the voters (Mardiana et al., 2023). Novaes (2018) noted that the relationship between the sitting politician or the candidate and the mass of

voters and constituents is more matter of patron-client relationships. This relationship includes the agent's ability to maximize its community's interests on behalf of potential voters. Of course, the power of a discourse deployed by a free agent is related to the material resources of its patrons, namely politicians, and their social-assistance funds.

The practical consequences of free agency are widely believed to be shaped by a capacity to mobilize the masses, the maintenance of an ongoing discourse, and the decline of political parties' ideologies. Understanding the political party ideology is still a factor for most informants. They acknowledge that cadre capacity is weak or fragile due to overly bureaucratic and centralistic determinations and articles of association. At the same time, ordinary voters cannot readily interpret the ideological character of political parties, which ultimately encourages the prioritization of factors that do influence voters. Such factors are considered more important among pragmatic candidates and agents even if they can damage cadre professionalism and how functionaries relate to their political party. The fragility or weakness of the ideology of a political party (Romli, 2018) undermines every political party because they are formed by the ideology to which its members aspire. As a set of ideas and value systems, party ideology is the identity that characteristic a political party.

Ideology can be identified from the principles and goals of the party. Political parties in the reform era were marked by the interpretation of respective ideologies as they were operationalized into real and concrete platforms and programs. The emergence of genuinely competing political parties seems to make no difference, however, and voters cannot differentiate among political parties, even if party ideology should depend heavily on the interests of constituents who are the core supporters. The social base of party supporters (Rodriguez et al., 2021) has some effect on the modular practice of parties interacting with networks of customary collectives and groups. In the case of modular practice, a supporting social base becomes intertwined with a

material base for collective benefits and rival patrons (Kirchheimer, 2015). Given the de-ideologization of political parties and the end of catch-all parties, modular parties can garner support from various kinds of community groups and interests while they also confirm the end of ideology. The ideology of political parties becomes a kind of camouflage that can legitimize the interests of certain elites who thereby acquire distorted influence. The unclear relationship between party ideology and the philosophical basis of society and the state muddies the role of ideology as a strategic guide for party struggle. The strength of the party no longer lies in the coherence of its ideology and program and depends more on the personal charisma of the party leader, the wealth and authority of his patrons, and the extent of money power (Romli, 2019).

In the practice of modular parties, Novaes (2018) identified a new and widespread form of clientelist politics. Clientelism—the exchange of goods for votes—requires substantial organization, where the assumption is that only the dominant party or a solid political machine can engage in clientelist mobilization. One of the arguments put forward by Novaes (2018) was that political parties whose politicians carry out modular parties tend to threaten the integrity of their organization from one election to the next, even if incumbent politicians can still mobilize voters through patron-client relationships. We saw this tendency in practices among our informants, especially where available discourse can be deployed by rival politicians as they compete to mobilize voters who are tied to customary networks and are willing to listen to the discourse of cultural preservation.

#### **NETWORK BUILDING ABILITY: FREE AGENCY NODE**

A discourse shapes the formation of issues used by free agents in forming bonds that can mobilize the masses. Modular parties do not have clients, but "rent" or outsource the networks they use. Long before the elections, community chiefs, leaders of community organizations, ethnic

leaders, landowners, local officials, and other types of local figures build up considerable political capital through their private clients. Politicians entering electoral competition found modular parties, or change formerly programmatic parties into modular parties, as they seek to connect with these networks. In this sense, modular parties consist of two levels: one, higher, level is responsible for obtaining state resources and liaising with other actors at the subnational or national level; and a second, lower, level consists of several modules, each with a local figure who runs local politics and operates as an intermediary for the upper level (Novaes, 2018). For example, Novaes (2018) addressed the existence of local figures in Brazil who are usually candidates for mayor and diligently broker votes for parties that offer most state resources or direct payments. From time to time, these local leaders may adapt and take on new roles, such as union leaders, bureaucrats, and local politicians but they remain responsible for the construction and maintenance of patron-client networks.

In Bali, we found several ways in which the node of free agency arose intensively in the head of a local customary collective such as the *Banjar* or affiliated community organizations (*Sekaa*). The head of such groups makes a good liaison actor or broker because he has daily contact with a network of voters and can connect with actors in modular parties offering the allegiance of a mass of voters. They are beholden to parties only in so far as they can deliver voters when their choices can be fickle and more anchored in opportunistic interests. Based on these findings, the arguments of this article show that discourse is very influential in the formation of bonds among mobilizable voters. The outsourcing of the organization of patron-client relations to the authority of customary collectives can both facilitate faster voter mobilization for politicians in modular parties, and prevent these politicians from building reliable support bases. Brokers within modular parties act as free agents, and switch sides if they get a better offer. As long as other parties also outsource clientelist mobilization, brokers can switch

whenever they receive a more favorable proposal.

In the practice of modular parties, variation in resources causes patrons—in this case incumbent politicians and prospective legislators—to expand or contract the number of modules and free agents who work for them. Modular fluidity explains why clientelism can survive, adapt, and become widespread in many parts of the developing world. The ongoing client-patron pattern is both fluid and relational. In some ways, this research shows that some do not last long because free agents will choose program proposals from politicians who are considered to offer the highest bids, moreover, they can negotiate their interests to maintain their networks. However, by relying on free agents and autonomous brokers, political parties will never be able to create direct relationships based on deeply entrenched, ideological and programmatic relationships which thwarts hopes of making political parties organizationally strong (Novaes, 2018). It is realized by political party organizers in Bali, where modular practice is prevalent.

The practice of modular parties was a kind of new form of post clientelism that fills and adapts the working of new spatial patterns from the practice of client patrons which in fact classically has long dominated political practices in the South (Muhtadi, 2018). Discourse is an important factor that maintains continuity while preserving the authority of customary collectives and becomes an important aspect of this pattern. From a constructivist perspective, institutionalism shows that modular parties utilize populist discourses to attract and bind the mass cohesion of voters' support for them. Populism and clientelism are different but in practice modular parties practice a political style (Moffitt 2016) rather than an ideology (De Raadt et al., 2004; Savirani & Törnquist, 2015). Populist style well describes a relationship without clear borders between rival politicians who position themselves as populist leaders before citizens or a mass of voters.

In these circumstances, legislative candidates and incumbent politicians brand themselves as figures who have answers for all problems of

the public imagination related to welfare issues, including the preservation of Balinese cultural traditions, in their efforts to mobilize mass voter support (Savirani & Törnquist, 2015). The more populist discourse that politicians deploy as free agents strengthens, the more the charisma of the politician concerned becomes more important and deeply rooted in the customary collectives. This therefore is what free agents tend to maintain in their practice of modular parties as they interpret economic interests, such as improved welfare among customary collectives. The deployment of discourse among free agents within modular parties is a matter of mobilization method. Organizing support also utilizes charismatic leadership through networks of authority in customary collectives (Schneider et al., 2021), involving family networks as a form of support, and ties of loyalty between patrons, politicians and clients, even if they are also free agents working in party modules.

From the constructivist perspective on institutionalism, the relevance of discourse has increased in the era of post-clientelism as relations among various actors have also strengthened. A dominant actor, such as a dominant incumbent politician in our research, can also draw upon strong economic and social support. The alternative actors are free agents offering support for of each politician. In this modular practice, discourse becomes an important factor as each free agent constantly communicates and innovates the needs of the mass voters in their respective constituent areas.

## CONCLUSION

The practice of modular parties using networks of customary collectives is considered strategic by politicians and their independent supporting agents. In the midst of political conditions that include a torrent of discourse related to closed proportional elections, the fragility of party regeneration, and the de-ideologization of political parties, the practice of modular parties is considered an opportunity, especially given the character of Indonesian society, including Bali. In the network of customary collectives,

the relationship of free agents and politicians takes the pattern of patrons and clients deploying discourses related to issues of preservation, local culture, and welfare. This positions the political actor concerned as a central figure whose can solve the problems of the discourse concerned. This discourse, which conciliates and ensures the strengthening of mass ties between voters and free agents as well as politicians, is solid. It includes mobilizing extended family members in the collegiality of their respective customary networks.

The argument of this article has drawn upon Novaes's (2018) study, but adds an emphasis that there is an important role for discourse in the practice of modular parties. Discourse becomes instrumental or influential when the agent's role is modular and fluid. Patronage and clientelism practices tend to survive, adapt, and become widespread in various patterns of client-patron relationships. This holds true especially in the global South or developing countries. The argument of this article complements studies that focus on the client-patron pattern in electoral practices limited to the exchange of benefits. This article confirms the findings that the use of discourse is an intensive strategy in the practice of modular parties, especially in the era of post-clientelism. Further research might investigate the public-interest imaginary about a liberal-democratic order delivering goods and benefits like the proverbial free lunch.

In the current era of strengthening relations among voters and incumbent politicians who have strong socio-economic support and many benefits to distribute, modular free agents have become alternative actors who can negotiate on behalf of various interests. This negotiation draws upon charisma, the strengthening of networks, the support of elites, and the use of networks of customary collectives and their families. The practice of modular parties depends largely on the choice of discourse chosen and what is considered best able to maximize the maintenance or preservation of the clientelist network involved.

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