

PARLIAMENT WATCH 2007 ROUNDUP

Slowly does it

This year legislators at the House of Representatives (DPR) again demonstrated their penchant for special-interest politicking rather than passing laws that might actually benefit the country. Legislators only managed to pass around 25 bills in 2007, falling far short of their intended aim of 70 at the beginning of the year.

Many of the bills that were made law concerned the country's administrative divisions and were simply "copied and pasted" from existing regulations. There were also a number of laws ratifying various UN conventions. Other more substantive bills passed included those on tourism, libraries, investment and free trade zones. Implementing regulations for witness protection and population administration were also passed.

"DPR members tend to focus on debating legislation that will benefit their own political interests, rather than those which respond to public aspirations," Bivitri Susanti, a researcher from the Centre for Law and Policy Studies (PSHK), told the *Report*.

This year, that meant a heavy concentration on bills ratifying further administrative partitions of the country and preparing the way for political parties and presidential candidates to contest the 2009 elections.

Susanti explained that partitioning was usually popular with the local elites in legislators' constituencies. "If [the legislators] support the establishment of new regencies, municipalities or provinces, they are guaranteed the political and financial support of these constituencies," she said.

Critics of partitioning point out that it does little for the local people, adds another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and results in local elites hijacking democracy to create personal fiefdoms.

Toward the end of the year, legislators turned their attention to the package of four political bills that, if passed, will impact the way the 2009 elections are fought. December 6 saw the passage into law of the first of these—the law on political parties (see our political brief). The three remaining bills—one on the presidential elections, one on the legislative elections and one on the composition of the country's main chambers—are still being debated.

Although this legislation has already been tabled for a number of months, there is now a greater sense of urgency to pass them so the National Elections Commission can prepare for the 2009 polls. However according to Susanti, as time ticks away, discussions between the government and legislators will reach fever pitch, and "lobbying means extra cash."

Looking ahead to the House's 2008 session, the official schedule of deliberations shows which bills will gain priority.

Controversial legislation on labour and military tribunals has been dropped. Susanti sees this as a move calculated to appease two groups whose support

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will be crucial for candidates in the elections—the workforce and the military.

Other legislation that is being ignored includes bills that have been championed by NGOs but that do not directly serve the interests of legislators. These include bills on the freedom of information, administrative reform and the public service. They will all be shelved until further notice.

One law which *is* set to be passed in 2008, according to legislators, is the mining bill. Of course they said that this year, and the year before, so observers are not holding their breath.

Generally, it is expected that only a small fraction of the 284 bills set for deliberation in the 2004-2009 session will actually pass. “The current crop of legislators has been even less productive than those serving from 1999-2004,” Susanti told the *Report*.

While legislators have not been able to pass many laws, Susanti thinks they have excelled in their main objective—checking the power of the government.

“The power of the executive has weakened considerably under pressure from the DPR this year,” she said. □