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Megawati's Indian lessons

In face of the elections, Indonesia is at a crossroad. Several 'formal' freedoms and rights may still be used in struggles to make them real. But increasingly many people deem politics and actually existing democracy a dirty river. A river so polluted by reckless business interests and corrupt bureaucrats that only crooked politicians and parties can survive the positions water. Worst of all: the interests and ideas among middle and labouring classes that can alter the situation are largely absent in the public discourse and are not represented by the symbiotic parties which are eligible to run in the elections.

In this context, an additional major worry seems to be that PDI-P leader Mrs Megawati might run again for president. In other words, she would not be prepared to give way to the only potential candidate that carry some promise of change and improvement, Mr. Jokowi. At best, Mr. Jokowi would only be allowed the role of subordinate deputy. If so, pundits convincingly argue, Mrs Megawati is bound to lose and would actually pave the way for the re-emergence of Indonesia's dark past, with still authoritarian former General Prabowo and still active business tycoon Aburizal Bakri in the forefront.

However, this line of thinking rests with the biased assumption that Mrs Megawati is a selfish, dynastic politician who is unable to make rational political decisions. Yet there are good reasons to assume that Mrs Megawati is instead less provincial than her critics and better read than they into relevant international experiences!

Possibly, for instance, she knows of her sister Sonia Gandhi's wise decision a number of years ago to abstain from the role as prime minister of India. This was because Mrs Gandhi then, like Mrs Megawati now, was bound to be unsuccessful; Mrs Gandhi because of her Italian origin and Mrs Megawati because the new generations associate her with old politics. Instead of being stubborn, Mrs Gandhi focused, then, on reforming 'her' Congress party's policies. For example, she chaired a National Advisory Council of development- and social rights scholars and activists. This Council fostered quite remarkable reforms for the right to information, guaranteed employment among the rural poor and food security. Thus Mrs Gandhi gained widespread respect and increased authority; and she nourished a number of successes for her battled party.

Most possibly, moreover, Mrs Megawati has also followed the international news last Sunday about the humiliating defeat of her sister's Congress Party in the capital region of New Delhi. This catastrophe for the Congress was because Mrs Gandhi had not yet been successful enough in altering 'her' party's organisation. While Mrs Gandhi herself and the social reforms she fostered were appreciated, the party itself continued to be associated with political corruption and elitism. Hence, by default, the conservative Hindu fundamentalist party BJP returned to the forefront with 32 of the 70 seats. But most remarkably: voters primarily abandoned the Congress-ship in favour of the new Aam Aadmi Party, AAP, the Common People's Party. The AAP made unimaginable advances. Only about one year ago, it grew out of the sections of the anti-corruption movement and the pro-democracy and social right

groups that realised they had to go beyond civil society activism by engaging in politics too. Moreover, they did not follow the anti-democrats in the streets of Bangkok. On the contrary, each of AAP's most committed followers engaged in a remarkable campaign to select the party's candidates by knocking 30 doors in most neighbourhoods around the huge city to ask nominations. The proposals were then aggregated in a transparent process by respectable leaders. Thus the AAP transcended the same kind of seemingly invincible patronage and money politics that ravage Indonesia – by advancing from zero to 28 seats, i.e. they got 30% of the seats in one go!

In short, it is more likely that Mrs Megawati is better read into relevant international experiences than her critics. Hence she probably realises that she, like her sister Mrs Gandhi, should wisely and gracefully abstain from running and rather pave the way for Jokowi. She, like Mrs Gandhi, may then focus on strengthening 'her' party by supporting innovative welfare and economic policies, assisted by an Advisory Council. Instead of losing out this will even give her more legitimacy and authority as a senior political leader. Equally important, she may learn from Mrs Gandhi's mistake by genuinely democratising 'her' party to avoid a similar humiliating defeat as that of the Indian Congress during last week.

In any case, Indonesia's anti-corruption campaigners and emerging labour movement (potentially broadening itself by transcending a narrow focus on wages through the additional engagement in universal welfare policies for inclusive economic development) is now getting a shoot in the arm by the stunning victory of the Common People's Party in New Delhi. Indonesia's electoral system is certainly unfair enough to prevent such positive experiments – but there are alternative roadmaps. This too, for now, speaks in favour of Mr. Jokowi.

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