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## **Indonesian democracy: advances, setbacks, options.**

*Olle Törnquist*; Jakarta and Oslo

Ten years ago, Suharto's 'New Order' began to be replaced by the world's largest 'New Democracy'. It is time for an evaluation. By 2003, *Demos* (The Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies), with the University of Oslo, developed and applied a framework for comprehensive democracy assessment by senior activists around the country. Four years later, a full scale resurvey has been concluded. Thousands of grounded experts have been involved. Indonesia has thus a unique set of data to discuss changes over-time. A comprehensive analysis will follow in cooperation with the University of Gadjah Mada. The early and general results, however, are presented in a seminar in Jakarta today.

First, the expert-surveys reveal that while many civil and political rights remain at hand, the freedoms of religion, belief, language, culture, assembly, organisation, media, art and academia have backslided. The same goes for civic participation and access to and the reflection of different views in the public sphere. This is worrying. On the positive side, however, the miserable standard of governance-related instruments such as rule-of law, anti-corruption and accountability have picked up. Even if from very low levels, this is commendable.

Another positive sign is that the crumbling of the New Order has not led to sustained separatism and ethnic and religious cleansing. What has developed instead is a unitary *political* (rather than ethno-nationalist) community with extensive space for local politics. It is true that this space has often been occupied by powerful groups. But in Aceh, where foreign donors have so far contained the military and big business, and where the political system was made more open than elsewhere in the country, separatists could substitute political participation for armed struggle and opt for peace and democracy.

Generally, however, politics continue to be dominated by elites. Yet, these are more broadly-based, more localised and less militarised than under Suharto. Remarkably, most of them have adjusted to the new, supposedly democratic, institutions. This is not to say there are no abuses. Of course, elites often mobilise support by making use of their clientelistic networks, privileged control of public resources and alliances with business and communal leaders. Yet, the interest of such elite groups in elections is *both* a crucial basis of the actually existing democracy *and* its major drawback. Without elite support, Indonesian democracy would not survive; with elite support, it becomes the domain of 'rotten politicians' who prosper and entrench themselves.

In all these respects, Indonesia begins thus to resemble India, the most stable democracy in the global South. The major problem as compared to India is that Indonesia's system of representation and elections is not open enough for the possible inclusion of major interests among the people at large. Actually, it rather erects high barriers to participation by independent players and ordinary people without high education and immense resources. The surveys reveal that the system of representation is the weakest point. The freedom to run in elections has deteriorated most sharply among all indicators. The elitist monopolisation of representation is not only about the exclusion of ordinary people, especially women, but also the marginalisation of vital issues and interests. Hardly anywhere can we see substantive representation of crucial interests and ideas of the liberal middle classes, workers, peasants, the urban poor, women, or human rights and environmental activists.

Worst: upper and middle class groups who do not manage to win elections may well use discontent with elite democracy to gain support for the promotion of 'better preconditions' through 'politics of order' and 'middle class coups'. Indonesia has been down this path once before, in the 1960s, and it gave rise to Suharto's New Order. Similar dynamics has more recently been at work in Thailand. Vice President Kalla's statements that democratic elections have been behind most conflicts in the country and that profitable business opportunity would be the best to handle them are cases in point. Other

illustrations include the quest for presidentialism and stronger executives, a majoritarian two-party system, and general admiration for what is called Singapore and China's 'stability and economic growth ahead of excessive democracy'. Meanwhile religious activists argue for the need to reduce the public sphere in favour of religious values and communalism.

It is imperative, therefore, that civic and popular organisations are able to scale up their ideas and alliances. By connecting communities and workplaces, and local and central levels, they can challenge elite control over politics. However, *Demos*' research reveals that even if many groups now try to enter into politics they are both prevented by the monopolisation of representation and constrained by their own fragmentation. Civics remain poorly connected to social movements and popular organisations (and vice versa); and collective action is mainly based on individual networking, popular leaders or alternative patronage as against broad and representative organisation. Most attempts to approach elections, parliaments and the executive remain by way of media, NGOs and lobby groups.

These problems have so far been addressed by bringing people together on the grass-roots level or by top-down organising. However, unity from below has proved difficult because of the myriad of issues and contending projects and leaders. Politics aiming at majorities behind common platforms calls for the combination of specialisations and interests, such as among peasants and plantation labourers. Networking and polycentric action are not enough. Yet, to compensate for this by way of ideologies, central organisations or charismatic candidates offering support in return for popular votes tend to preserve top-down structures and generate divisions among movements and civic activists.

Hence, popular and civic organisations must instead form democratic political blocks on an intermediate level, between the specific grass-roots issues and the top-level perspectives. This is to define joint platforms, gain wide support and alliances, and foster genuine politicians – rather than being the victim of fragmentation and dominated by parties or populist leaders. This way it may be possible to build genuine representation in spite of the present monopolisation of the party system.

*Olle Törnquist*

The author is Professor of Political Science and Developing Research at the University of Oslo and academic co-director of *Demos* (The Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies). He can be reached at [olle.tornquist@stv.uio.no](mailto:olle.tornquist@stv.uio.no)