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From Elitist to Popular Representation

Demos' (The Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies') national expert survey in 2003-04 on the challenges of Indonesia's democracy identified four major problems. First, that several years of important civil and political freedoms, elections, and crafting of institutions had not yet generated operational tools to facilitate the rule of law, equal access to justice, basic social and economic rights, and representative and accountable government. Second, that the most fundamental problem was not bad governance and socio-economic inequalities but poor popular control of public affairs through trustworthy representation – that is, if one prefers to fight corruption and exploitation in a democratic way. Third, that the major reason for the poor representation, in turn, was the monopolisation of the economy and organised politics by wider and more localised but still dominant elite groups. Fourth, that the main problem of fighting this was that the democracy movement remains fragmented, socially 'floating' and politically marginalised.

Since then, the problem of elitist rather than popular representation has become even more obvious. By now it is not just *Demos'* local experts on democracy who say that the parties are undemocratic and do not represent the major cleavages and interests among the population. According to a recent LSI-opinion poll, two-thirds of ordinary people agree. Similarly, when finally given the chance to express their opinion in a democratic way, the Aceh people denounced the so-called national parties and voted for locally rooted representatives. Most recently, protests are mounting in Jakarta against the moneyed political selection of candidates in the gubernatorial race.

In a workshop today and a public seminar tomorrow, the results of *Demos'* attempts to follow up the conclusions from the national survey will be presented and discussed. The aim is to facilitate alternative popular representation in subsequent *pilkada*- and the 2009 general elections.

To begin with, an extended and more readable version of the national survey report, entitled 'Making Democracy Meaningful', will be launched. This is the most comprehensive information available of the problems and options. Eight hundred local experts have answered to three hundred questions about the standard of the forty most vital instruments of democracy and the seven most crucial indicators of actors' will and capacity to promote and use these means. Hopefully, thus, the discussion on what should be done may be based on facts rather than speculation. Simultaneously, a full-scale re-survey will also be launched. This will enable comparisons over time and with supplementary data. The analysis will be done in co-operation with democracy-scholars at UGM and the University of Oslo; a team which as a bi-product is also initiating a post-graduate democracy studies programme. Democracy organisations, activists and scholars thus contribute knowledge and work; Norway (with Sweden, the Ford Foundation and partners) add financial resources.

While it was easy to conclude from the survey, that priority *should* be given to the problem of representation and that the democracy movement should use its advances in civil society to reclaim its political influence, it was difficult to say how this *could* be done. Hence, the workshop and seminar will also discuss new *Demos*-results from studies of attempts to move ahead. For instance, participatory surveys on the regency level as well as comparative studies of experiments to combine civil and political work indicate that many grassroots organisations now try to broaden their special agendas, co-operate and 'go political'. Yet, this is still hampered by elitism, money politics, special interests (including among workers) as well as by different priorities amid groups that either try to resist subordination, revitalise old customs, or reform democratic institutions. Additional case studies of attempts by pro-democrats to make a difference in *pilkada* elections point to major challenges of financing political activities, to select candidates and to keep them accountable on the basis of 'political contracts'. Some of these problems could be tackled in Aceh when it became possible to launch candidates based on locally rooted movements rather than the political elite. Yet, while the movements were strong enough to stand up against Jakarta, the organised representation of social and economic interests was weak. Hence, vital social and economic questions about the re-building of the province were set aside, thus still being confined to technocratic and corporatist arrangements.

There are a number of strategies to handle these difficulties of scaling up and building popular representation. Some prefer to build links between people and executives, thus avoiding 'rotten' politicians. Others say this is only appropriate for single issues, does not alter the relations of power and avoids the problems of representation. Hence they rather turn to politicians and parties to gather support and 'promote unity' among grounded organisations and movements. In the worst case, the former path thus sustains the separation between direct actions and representation, while the second path generates new layers of top-down political fragmentation among popular and civil organisations

What should be done? Demos' studies point to the need for pro-democratic non-party political blocks, based on participatory political mapping and thus developed local and federated mini-platforms. This seems to be the intermediary level where popular and civil organisations can engage, co-operate, develop joint political education, keep politicians and parties accountable and prevent top-down party fragmentation of their activities. Pro-democracy parties and politicians, in turn, who support the mini-platforms, can gain broad backing and compete about individual (but not organisational) members behind comprehensive programmes.

Meanwhile, however, the diminishing trust in the established parties is obviously such serious threats against the vested interests that new laws and regulations are introduced to contain rather than support efforts at more popular representation. Local parties in Aceh will be prevented from participating in national politics (so why should they then stay within Indonesia?). Popular and civil organisations elsewhere will find it almost impossible to form more genuine parties and engage in elections. The first item on the agenda for a pro-democracy block is thus obvious: As the problem is elitism, not popular participation – don't close the system, open it!

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