

## The political system needs to be opened, not closed

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What are the major problems of Indonesian democracy? In *Jakarta Post* December 14, Marcus Mietzner points to the political parties. That is laudable. The crucial role of parties to facilitate aggregation and representation of people's views and interests has been neglected. While the establishment have focused on governance and election of leaders rather than representative parties, dissidents have brushed aside 'rotten' politicians in favour of direct democracy in civil society. In the most comprehensive survey of the challenges of democracy (by *Demos – The Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies*) 800 grounded experts around the country conclude that the fundamental problem is defunct political representation. This is worse than the almost equally poor standard of the rule of law, basic needs and 'good governance'. It is worse because there is no other *democratic* way to real improvements but representation.

Indeed, many experts say that democracy has only increased corruption and created indecisive government. But that is a dangerous generalisation. All aspects of democracy are not bad. *Demos'* survey shows that the freedoms of democracy work rather well and that the problems are because representation is so poor that people can not really control public affairs on the basis of political equality – the universally accepted aim of democracy. In fact, the only alternatives that the critics of democracy offer are authoritarian struggle against corruption, like in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, today's Singapore and China, or religious Iran.

So Mietzner is right: since the party system is crucial for democracy, it simply has to be improved. The only question is how. And that is where the disagreements begin. While Mietzner says that the party system is too open, empirical evidence from *Demos'* survey show that it is too closed. While Mietzner contends that the party system needs to be disciplined by effective electoral thresholds, *Demos* 800 grounded experts contend that we need more popular participation to de-monopolise politics.

Let us look at the details. Electoral thresholds are important. There can't be too many small parties. As Mietzner says, presidential systems are in special need of stable coalitions in the parliament. If it is too easy to start a party and get into parliament, the formation of broader parties and agreements on joint platforms are undermined in favour of 'exit'. Debates and hard decisions are avoided in favour of new divisive factions. Further, the present rules and regulations are almost ridiculous. The three percent threshold does not prevent representation below the threshold but only requires that the party re-establishes itself with a new name in the next election. The unfavourable effects cited by Mietzner are confirmed by *Demos* survey. Eighty percent of the informants say that the parties' ability to govern is poor.

However, Indonesia has not opted fully for the US presidential system, in spite of its powerful advocates. Indonesians obviously wish to retain elements of European parliamentarism, with programmatic political parties. Devastating bossism and personality-oriented politics in cases like the Philippines may have been instructive. Hence, our point of departure should not be to streamline the party system in line with presidentialism but to promote the best possible compromise, to thus allow for more voices and more interests in a plural and diverse society.

What is most important to recognise then, is that the parties' governability (which calls for thresholds) is not the only pillar of a democratic and genuinely representative party system! In fact, Mietzner's threshold thesis prioritises strong presidential governance (and the equivalent by governors and regents) at the expense of the other five prerequisites for party representation that scholars tend to agree on.

This would be acceptable if the other conditions were at hand, but they are not. In fact *Demos*' survey shows that most of the other pillars are in an even worse state of affairs. Ninety-one percent of the informants say that parties are not reasonably independent of money politics and powerful vested interests; 84 percent states that membership control and accountability to constituencies is poor; 82% say that people's contact with political representatives is insufficient; 81 percent are equally negative with regard to parties' reflection of critical issues and interest among people; 66 percent say that parties do not abstain from abusing religion and ethnicity.

These are alarming figures. Of course, there must be priorities. But it would be devastating for democracy if top priority is given to reducing the number of parties as long as the dominant ones are not reasonably representative.

Mietzner is right that there are demanding thresholds in my own part of Europe. But he avoids the fact that our parties (in spite of huge weaknesses) remain comparatively democratic, autonomous and grounded. It would be a serious mistake to take our thresholds out of context and export them to Indonesia where there is an even larger need to reform or build new and significantly representative parties from below after more than thirty years of repression.

In conclusion we do not need a discussion of how to close the political system but how to open it up! To democratise the political parties it is essential, for instance, that people can participate in local political elections with local parties, as in Aceh, and then form national coalitions. India, for one, has not fallen apart in spite of such possibilities; quite the opposite. There must also be substantive and not just formal authorisation of parties. For instance by way of incentives like public support and access to public media in exchange for well documented and impartially verified internal democracy, accountability to constituencies, independence of money politics, preferential representation of women, and non-abuse of religious and similar sentiments. Similarly, there is a need to promote broad interest based organisations such as trade unions, peasant organisations, urban poor movements as well as employers associations. We know from history that they are the best foundations for genuine representative parties.

It is only when such measures are seriously discussed and implemented that one may add more effective thresholds – that is, when they are not contradicting the very building of democratic representation.

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