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Making Democracy Meaningful

While it is widely recognized that the activists who paved the way for the Indonesian democracy have been politically marginalised and the elite that resisted are in firm control, the question remains how the third largest democracy in the world could anyway become meaningful. Meaningful as a way for ordinary people to improve their lives, and transform violent conflicts into peaceful politics.

To identify the problems and options, leading democracy groups initiated in 2003 a comprehensive national survey. The Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, *Demos*, was formed to do the job; a job that nobody had done before. Since established assessment schemes were insufficient, a framework was developed that traces the performance and scope of rights and institutions *as well as* citizens will and capacity to promote and use them. Since written sources were also insufficient, some eight hundred experienced, reflective and grounded activists within fourteen different fields of democracy work in all the provinces have instead served as experts, spending a day or more to answer three hundred and thirty one questions about the challenges of democracy. A remarkable commitment.

The full report is now being published. The results will be discussed in an international conference beginning on Thursday and a subsequent graduate course at UGM. The details are at www.demos.or.id but what are the implications of the findings for the common arguments about democracy in the country? Who is right and who is wrong? And what should be done?

One dispute is whether democracy is well under way, so that one only has to add anti-corruption and liberal economic reforms – or if democracy is rather a façade, so that there is a need for ‘real structural change’. The empirical evidence from the survey is clear: both are wrong. Freedoms like civil and political rights, elections and civil society are doing rather well; and the dominant actors play by the rules. The problem is that the vital improvements have not enhanced the working tools of democracy like justice, rule of law, representation, and responsive and accountable government. These tools are all monopolised by the established elite. While the common recommendation is better rule of law, the survey indicates that enhanced representation of people’s views and interests is the democratic key to demonopolisation.

Secondly, the pros and cons of decentralisation. The survey confirms the international trend that the new local spaces for public action and democracy are undermined by deregulation and privatisation, especially in the context of cultural and economic differences. Interestingly however, the survey also points to remarkably similar *political* problems and options. There is a new national infrastructure of potentially democratic rights and institutions; and there are emerging capacities to promote and use them. Rather than trying to save the nation by coercion, this common framework may be used to transform violent conflicts into peaceful democratic politics by allowing local political parties that do not abuse religious and ethnic loyalties. Aceh is a case in point.

The third debate is on how to counter corruption and revitalise the economy. The survey verifies that the root cause is the symbiotic relation between economic and political power. The problem is how to separate them when the elite are in both camps and would thus survive statist as well as neo-liberal measures. The old West European

road to bourgeois constitutionalism is out of context. A few enlightened leaders might of course enforce the rule of law. But who will decide about the laws, who select the leaders and keep them accountable, and what about the human rights? The survey points instead to better representation of popular views and interests. Experiences from South Africa and Brazil to Northern Europe show that this is the democratic way to facilitate new alignments. New alignments in favour of social pacts between capitalists based on production, middle classes with competitive skills, and labour with strong democratic organisations.

This relates to the fourth and most extensive debate that takes place between the advocates of democracy by elitist- and government-driven institution building and proponents of civil society based solutions. All data indicate that the achievements of the elitist path have been limited. This is an international trend from the South to the former Eastern Block. One may well promote political pacts to get a majority of the establishment aboard the ship, and one may well design a democratic infrastructure to discipline the elite and allow the dissidents to come back. But that in itself does not prevent the elite from bypassing the new system or, as in Indonesia, from colonising the new rights and institutions; and it certainly does not guarantee that the people at large have enough capacity to promote and use them.

Meanwhile however, the civil society alternative has proved equally problematic. Like in most new democracies, the pro-democrats remain vital within associational life and as pressure groups; but they are scattered, fragmented, single issue oriented, male dominated, short of a broad social base with mass organisations and unable to present a

viable alternative. In addition, most activists prioritise efforts at direct democracy, leaving the rest of the political system wide open for the established elite.

The final debate is therefore about various attempts to combine elitist institution building with civic pressure and participation, like in anticorruption campaigns and ‘participatory budgeting’. Judging by the survey, the problem is that the inevitable aggregation and mediation of different views and interests to link ‘good’ governance and civic action is left unspecified or negated as ‘dirty politics’. Beyond the neighbourhood, this is the major field for representative democracy – based on reasonably clearly defined citizens, participation, authorisation, responsiveness, specific responsibilities, transparency, accountability and solidarity. Conventional parties and demand politics are certainly not the outright solution. But if representation is set aside, who is responsible for what and accountable to whom?

In brief, the challenge seems to be to learn from previous experiences in order to develop new politics from below – combining democratic representation *and* direct participation based on joint agendas of demands *and* civic initiatives.

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