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Indonesian democracy: Facade or under way?

Five years have passed since the activists who brought democracy to Indonesia were marginalised in elections and transition through elitist crafting of institutions gained prominence instead. It is now fair to evaluate, and to discuss the way ahead.

While the international message in favour of the mainstream model was "we give you the framework, you fill it in", critics asked for more grounded knowledge and perspectives. The research- and study organisation DEMOS initiated, therefore, a national survey to identify the problems and options. During 2003 and 2004, eight-hundred experienced and reflective democracy activists within fourteen issue-areas in thirty-two provinces have spent between four and six hours to answer three-hundred and thirty-three questions on thirteen key-variables of problems and options of meaningful Human Rights-based democracy. The work and the integrity of the team have been supported by Norway and Sweden (through the University of Oslo), the Ford and TIFA Foundations and the EU, in addition to local scholars and pro-democracy organisations. The commitment is unique, the approach is new and the result is the probably most comprehensive research-based information available. Early conclusions are now being examined at national and regional seminars, beginning in Jakarta today.

Is Indonesian democracy well under way? In view of the successful 2004 elections some say it is even irreversible; others insist it is only a facade. Our grounded informants are more nuanced. There are basic freedoms and elections but a severe deficit of the other two-thirds of the instruments that are supposed to favour democracy.

Most experts on new democracies around the world agree. The crafting of supposedly 'good' institutions has not delivered. There is a persistent dominance of the elite. The transition to meaningful HR-based democracy has reached a dead end. The problem is that experts can not agree on what deficits are basic. Some give priority to the rule of law, others to anti-corruption, yet others to people's rights and participation.

Our informants give a more clear-cut answer: the three sectors are all poor, but the most important is defunct representation. The free and fair elections are mainly of unrepresentative and unresponsive parties and politicians. This has been neglected by democracy supporters. Interest-based representation is also weak. Worst: improved representation is strategic by being the only way in which all the other defunct sectors can be improved in a democratic way.

International experts begin to agree on this as well. They ask for better party systems. Our informants say it is not that easy. Existing parties and politicians are part of the problem. To move ahead we need to know why.

The survey points to the dominant elite. The main problem in Indonesia, however, is not that the elite bypass or veto the new polity by taking the real decisions in company

boardrooms or military quarters. Formalistic democracy has become 'the major game in town'. The problem is that the elite monopolise, bend and abuse the rules of the game.

What are the root-causes for this? The survey refutes the usual structural, cultural, neo-liberal and statist positions. Freedoms and elections are there in spite of harsh conditions. With reasonable institutions such as on Election Day, people of all cultures do not fight, especially not the "uneducated masses". Neither statism (under Sukarno) nor economic liberties (from the mid-80s) made sense. The dominant elite are rather based on 'developing' the originally colonial combination of primitive and advanced accumulation of capital.

In view of international experiences, most recently in Brazil, the monopoly-breeding nexus between state and business calls instead for a social pact for *democratically regulated* de-monopolisation between growth-oriented business, professional oriented middle classes and organised labouring people, in return for social security.

Who will facilitate this? Most dominant actors would stand to lose. Independent private business and professionals are weak, and labour is both weak and poor. Struggle at this level of "raw powers" must thus be avoided in favour of democratic rules of the game. But liberal politicians with social inclinations are weak, a labour party hardly exists and elitist crafting of democracy has largely failed.

This is why committed pro-democrats are potentially important agents of change. They remain vital within civil society but continue to resemble Soeharto's 'floating mass' policy by being 'floating democrats' without social base in the margins of politics. Their presence in relation to state, business and workplaces is poor. The inclusion of women's perspectives (which may swiftly broaden the base and capacity) is neglected. And while 55 % prioritise direct democracy in civil society, only 2 % go for civil society based constitutional, representative democracy. This is a global trend but the problems are particularly serious in Indonesia.

Resurrection of democracy is thus the way ahead but calls for new priorities. If the democracy movement cannot fight the crisis of representation it will be irrelevant. Given the survey-results, the cornerstones of the movements' agenda to de-monopolise and resurrect democracy may be to widen the social base of local civic capacities, transform concrete issues and interests among emerging movements into governance agendas, federate associated political formations and foster combined forms of direct democracy in civil society and representative democracy through political institutions. The details are in the executive report at www.demos.or.id.

On cases like Aceh, finally, the survey is clear. The Indonesian 'demos' is no longer unified by a nation state project. Only 47% primarily associate themselves with Indonesia or their province or district, the others with local, ethnic or religious communities. But the new democracy is not balkanised! There are few geographical differences in the survey. Democracy rather than authoritarian attempts to "save the nation" is a potential

basis for unity – given that a democratic third force is fostered between the armed combatants.

A re-survey to trace changes over time must be made, but the available conclusions should first be followed up with corrections (from anyone with better data) and discussions towards a new agenda for meaningful HR-based democracy.

Olle Törnquist

Professor of Political Science and Development Research,
University of Oslo
Norway