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Dilemmas of the Post-Soeharto Democracy Movement

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In 1999, Indonesia became the world's third largest (fledgling) democracy. Should it stabilise and develop, it would be an historical victory for democracy and of vital importance beyond the boundaries of the country itself. Should it deteriorate and at worst collapse, this would be the fourth time, taken from the clamp down of the parliamentary democracy with roots in the liberation movement in 1959, the political and physical elimination of popular mass movements and the institutionalisation of political violence in 1965/66, and the collapse of efforts to liberalise the early New Order regime in 1971. At present, there is almost general agreement that much of the post-1998 attempts at democratisation have also failed. In face of the upcoming elections, one of the parties eligible to run has already declared that it aims at taking the country 'back to the basics' of the Soeharto regime, with his daughter 'Tutut' (Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana) as president.

It is true that the more than thirty years of 'liberal despotism' came to an end due mainly to its own internal contradictions and because of changing external conditions. But the democracy movement was also vital, most visibly in the overthrow of Soeharto. And democracy was widely regarded as the only way out of the crisis. The roadmap since 1998 has been dominated by internationally promoted attempts at crafting negotiated pacts within the elite at the expense of broader involvement of the popular oriented democracy movement, which has been deemed a potential risk should it engage in the question of state power. In the face of the 1999 elections, this movement was largely sidetracked and confined its activities to working with civil society. Some believed it would thus be able to regroup and consolidate until the next elections. In the face of the upcoming 2004 elections however, very few political parties - and hardly any significant ones - include any organised representation from the democracy movement.

Why is this? Perhaps the movement barely existed, beyond some high profile intellectuals in Jakarta and a few other cities in addition to the temporarily mobilised students. And even if it did exist, why has it been so weak and unable to make a difference? The mainstream 'democratic consolidation' thesis of crafting 'good' institutions and, quite separately from that, de-politicising civil society, strengthening it against the state and avoiding conflicts, is short of good answers. The institutions are in shambles, political corruption is increasing and decentralisation has in many cases contributed to the rise in local-boss rule, in addition to semi-privatised violence. The pro-democratic forces have largely followed the standard recommendations, but have failed to unify the *pro-reformasi* forces and to become politically significant. Yet, the advocates of the consolidation thesis have little to offer but more of the same.

The recently published results from a four-year research project (co-ordinated by Stanley Adi Prasetyo, A.E Priyono and Olle Törnquist) on and with the democracy movement point in another direction. (*Indonesia's Post-Soeharto Democracy Movement*, Jakarta: Demos; also available in an Indonesian edition). On the one hand, surveys and case studies in this book reveal that the movement still exists and that many of the genuine activists are alive and kicking. On the other hand, it is clear that the movement has not only been marginalised by the mainstream elitist politics of democratisation. It also continues to reflect Soeharto's 'floating mass' politics by being fragmented, poorly organised and rather isolated from ordinary people. It has not focussed on altering power relations – which have thus undermined its efforts at building new institutions and associations. It largely continues along the same anti-statist line as during the struggle against the authoritarian regime. Its efforts at affecting politics remain confined to lobbying and to the exertion of pressure on the one hand, and to self-management and 'direct democracy' on the other. Those who have occasionally tried to switch to outright politics and, for instance, join political parties, have lacked an organised constituency as well as strategy – thus almost immediately being co-opted and silenced, or found themselves isolated in the wilderness.

Meanwhile people are increasingly disappointed with democracy. For ordinary people who were looking for an alternative way of building a better society, democracy, thus far, makes little sense. Many look to strong leaders instead and remember Soeharto's regime with nostalgia. For radicals, there is a need for drastic changes to the power relations by way of social movements and mass organising before rights and institutions may be deemed to carry any meaning. Among the middle classes, many are utterly cynical, regard corrupt politicians and judges as the major problem and thus, ironically, pave the way for 'enlightened' authoritarian solutions.

As against the predominant perspective and in face of growing disinterest in democracy therefore, the results of the study call for a re-politicisation of civil society in order to alter power relations and for the development of a new popular politics of democratisation based on improved links between civic and political action.

There are no blueprints for this. What I have elsewhere called the 'political deficit of substantial democratisation' is a universal phenomenon that also causes problems in showcases such as Porto Alegre and the Indian state of Kerala. The Indonesian situation is worse and the challenges are enormous. There is an obvious need for renewed priorities and an improved democratic agenda to regain the initiative. As no political vehicle or concept seems to represent a good solution, there is a need for both a focussed and open-ended framework – for further analysis and deliberation based on the primacy of the argument rather than the dominance of certain actors, assumptions and hypotheses.

What is required, then, is an alternative framework for analysing and deliberating those

problems by combining institutionalist perspectives and social movement theses about the primacy of power relations. In addition, this must be based on empirical information from grounded experts with the best possible knowledge of the problems of using and improving rights and institutions in addition to what top leaders and experts in metropolitan air-conditioned rooms have already told us.

The just concluded project on the democracy movement itself has generated a new programme to develop and try out such a framework, co-ordinated by the Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, *Demos*, and with academic support from the University of Oslo. During the first round assessment study in 2003, close to 400 carefully selected local democracy experts within seven issue-areas around the country have been interviewed based on an extensive questionnaire. The results will be deliberated at a national assessment council in Jakarta (as well as forthcoming regional councils) and presented at a public seminar on the 28th of January. The salient conclusions will be discussed in a second article.

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