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Problems and Options of Indonesian Democratisation

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As was pointed out in a previous article (*Jakarta Post*, January 27), a recently published study clearly show that the post-Soeharto movement for deepening the world's third largest (fledgling) democracy has lost momentum, thus also being sidetracked in the upcoming elections. The major problems seem to be fragmentation, deficient base in popular constituencies and insufficient links between civic and political efforts. These problems are not unique for Indonesia but especially serious here, due to the legacy of the 1965/1966 elimination of popular mass movements and institutionalisation of political violence as well as the then following 'floating mass policies'. Worse, while many views and proposals on what should be done are available, and while many of them have not only been well intended but also partially helpful, none has been vindicated as a way out of the general problem. What may be most useful, then, is not another proposition and recommendation but more solid empirical knowledge about the basic dimensions of democratisation that concerned scholars agree must be considered in a more fruitful discussion on how to move ahead.

In an effort to contribute such empirical knowledge, I have had the privilege of guiding the development of a framework for and the collection and analysis of such empirical information by an extraordinary resourceful team of young researchers, coordinated by AE Priyono within the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (Demos), which is directed by Asmara Nababan and chaired by Stanley Adi Prasetyo.

The first of three rounds of studies has recently been concluded. Having passed the quality test during a two day national assessment council by some of the country's most distinguished scholars in the field, as well as several of the key-informants involved, the results are now being presented to the public through a series of special reports for workshops and consultations with different concerned groups.

To begin with, the team has not primarily relied on the scarce written sources and the usually consulted metropolitan experts. With an extensive questionnaire at hand, the researchers and their assistants have instead consulted nearly 400 grounded and closely selected local experts in their capacity of being reflective and experienced democracy activists. The survey has been carried out in 29 provinces and within 7 issue-areas (land conflicts, labour as well as urban poor problems, human rights, corruption, democratisation of parties, and religious conflicts; the next round studies will include additional issue-areas).

In line with the so far best assessment scheme (based on the British democratic audit), we have first asked about the quality of the (in our version) 35 key rights and institutions that are supposed to promote human rights-based democracy. Thereafter we have added questions on how widely spread they are and to what extent they cover vital public issues. We also consider the equally essential means of *substantial* democracy in terms of

people's capacity to make use of the rights and institutions as well as questions on how vital actors relate to the instruments of democracy when favouring their own ideas and interests. This is supplemented by queries into the conditions in terms of opportunities, sources of power, ability to transform them into legitimate authority as well as values and perspectives.

Having combined and analysed the information about the state of affairs with regard to these key variables, the team has arrived at a series of general conclusions. The first is that not all rights and institutions are bad. The informants deem the public space in terms of various freedoms and an emerging civil society to be reasonably functional. However, they also state that half of the 35 rights and institutions are inadequate or worse. These do not only relate to the defunct rule of law and justice as well as violence and corruption that has so far attracted most attention, but also socio-economic rights and, most essentially, the lack of representation of people's ideas and interests. Indonesia's fledgling democracy is delegative, not representative.

Moreover, while the pro-democratic experts, therefore, do not consider democratisation a lost case, and still try to make use of and promote most of the nominally democratic rights and institutions, they also indicate that we are heading towards a crisis, as the gap between the good freedoms the bad tools have widened since 1999. This is particularly serious with regard to the means for improving the conditions in a democratic way through good representation. The danger is that this may pave the way for top-down non-democratic 'solutions' or 'direct actions' from below.

Not only do those strategic tools for building democracy need to be improved. People in general and pro-democrats in particular must also be better equipped to alter and make use of them. By now, the pro-democrats mainly relate to the freedoms and civil society where they are in a relatively strong position. They also fight injustice, violence and corruption – but they give much less priority to government and representation. Moreover, they are mainly active in the public sphere and self-managed units, outside state and business. And when navigating the nominally democratic system, almost 70% of the informants say that priority is given to 'direct democratisation' within civil society, while other pathways via law and rights and/or government and elections rank much lower.

The pro-democrats capacity is also hampered by the main focus on specific issues and interests as well as by the fact that these tend to be summed up rather than broadened into more general questions and interests. This paves the way for fragmented direct democracy plus pressure and lobbying. One interesting exception seems to be those individual cases that relate to a series of issues and interests, including on land, indigenous people, and environmental problems, that come close to a renewed interest in sustainable and participatory development. This, perhaps, may serve as a basis for a common green, left-of-centre agenda. There is, however, no similar tendency associated to the kind of broader labour movement agenda, with or without links to liberal middle class concerns, which have elsewhere paved the way to substantial democracy.

There are additional problems of moving from common interests and issues, in turn, to general perspectives and agendas for alternative governance of villages, districts or the state. There is a lack of ideologies for how various interests and issues might be aggregated in order to affect priorities for policies and governance the society as a whole (as opposed to ideologies about given truths). Rather, there are general ideas and values that bring clusters of issues and interests to a philosophical level, such as on human rights and rule of law, or that emphasise principles, such as democracy or pluralism. Finally, there is a division between community agendas rooted in human rights-based democracy and more communitarian perspectives related to joint values, customs, religion and ethnic belonging, whilst also stressing pluralism.

In fact, the informants clearly indicate that the democracy movement has not yet been able to take much advantage of the new opportunities after Soeharto. The more open political system, divisions between opponents and possibilities for alliance-building have been a mixed blessing for the movement. Aside from the new possibilities, there is also a lack of a clear enemy, decreasing critical awareness and problems of gaining popular support. Potential sources of power by way of mass following largely remain untapped.

This paves the way for problematic shortcuts by relating to popular figures in the vicinity of the movement and attempts to enter into mass organisations and parties without a clear constituency and strategy of one's own. According to the informants, the democracy movement mainly try to mobilise support by using popular leaders and various forms of support and rewards while networking ranks second and generously defined comprehensive organisation tails behind. One must qualify this, but generally speaking, pro-democrats still seem not to have been particularly successful in developing alternative ways out of the 'floating mass' politics, which turned them almost equivalently into 'floating democrats'.

On the other hand, the fragmentation of the democracy movement may not be the end of the story. The answers to open questions do not only reflect divisiveness, specific issue and interest orientation and a lack of connection to broad collective aspirations in the society. There is some potential common understanding within the movement as to the state of affairs and what should be done. This is not the same as a strategy and an integrated programme and many of the problems seem to be purely organisational. But in terms of a broad common agenda, it is way beyond what most of the leading actors and candidates in the coming elections have been able to produce.

Some problems are particularly difficult to handle. It is interesting to note, for instance, that while the informants express strong concern over continuous state authoritarianism and associated conflicts around the country, they also indicate a similarly strong wish for and trust in the potential of pluralism. This point to the deterioration of the nation state project born out of the liberation struggle and signals a reaction against the authoritarian regimes that have captured and turned it to their own interests. Beyond the wish for pluralism, however, there are few signs of emerging alternatives. A federal alternative is not likely to be a productive solution, given the sharp conflict with the unitarianists. But if pro-democrats in favour of pluralism and strong minority rights and representation are

interested instead in decentralisation and some version of the kind of consociational arrangements that are frequently recommended under such circumstances, additional considerations need to be made.

To facilitate broad negotiated representation, coalitions, compromise, and strong minority rights, proportional elections may be necessary. Then the party system must be democratised and genuine alternative parties must be given the chance to emerge and run in local elections before trying to enter the national level. Since consociationalism, moreover, also tends to conserve the predominance of existing identities such as ethnicity and religion, countervailing policies in favour of bridging ideas such as human rights, and common interests such as those of farmers and labourers are necessary. Moreover, our data indicate that decentralisation has not thus far generated strong identification with the major unit for decentralisation, the *kabupaten* (districts). Rather, decentralisation has not only been positive but has also paved the way for corruption, collusion and nepotism as well as boss-rule on local level. This calls for strong policies and popular movements to alter the balance of power at that level.

The future of Indonesia's democracy, of course, does not only rest with the pro-democrats. It is common to speak of an ongoing transition to a better democracy through the improvement of rights and institutions, based on a negotiated pact between reform-oriented sections of the elite and an autonomous civil society, in addition to international support. Our informants suggest otherwise. There may still be some scope for improving the checks and balances by way of pressure from civil society, but overall the elite has captured the momentum of transition to democracy. This is also associated with the declining international support for democratisation while giving priority to the struggle against terrorism.

According to the pro-democratic informants, the dominant actors are evenly spread within the political terrain and dominate not only business but also state and government as well as the judiciary, both at local and central level. They rarely, however, bypass rights and institutions systematically. While not promoting them, they rather 'use' or both 'use and abuse' them. (In fact, the latter even include militia and paramilitary groups). In contrast to the pro-democrats' focus on civil society, the dominant actors also make their way through the legal as well as parliamentary and executive parts of the system. In addition, they are not only confined to the top level as they also have roots in society. So given that the dominant actors' abundant sources of power are sustained and remain a basis for money politics, this is a clear signal that they should also be capable of dominating more personality-oriented elections in one-person constituencies.

In other words, according to our informants, the dominant actors have adjusted and taken over control of most of the vital rights and institutions, and have made democracy their own. They speak the appropriate language, they have altered their way of legitimising their actions, and they use government and administration to protect and promote their interests. It is true that the close connections and collusion between the dominant actors are retained, but that does not mean, according to our informants, that the New Order regime has survived, minus Soeharto. While the previous symbiosis continues, it is now

inclusive of the elite as a whole *and* embedded in elected parliaments and various decentralised, informalised and privatised units of the previously so centralised state.

In conclusion, Indonesia has a fledgling democracy but the results from the survey clearly indicate that the momentum of transition is over. The dominant actors are in firm control and retain their symbiotic relationships, not least locally. Meanwhile, the democracy movement is largely confined to self-management, participation, lobbying, advocacy, empowerment and rather isolated attempts at interest based organising in civil society. The movement may still be present in the public space, and that is important. But vital parts of the democratic system, including state and local government, have been set aside by the movement – and firmly occupied by the dominant forces. As concluded by the team, and strongly supported by the national assessment council, the democracy movement will be easily defeated without a renewed agenda for substantial democratisation.

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