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What's Wrong with Indonesia's Democratisation?

Not so long ago, Indonesian democratisation seemed impossible. But the old theories that modernisation is insufficient, or international dependency too extensive, have largely been abandoned. The efforts at rapid modernisation (as in Indonesia), and extreme independence (as in Cambodia) mainly produced authoritarianism. And the third wave of democracy reached several parts of the developing world anyway. So while the deterministic schools of thought proved wrong, a new idealist post cold war truth was born: the possibility to craft instant democracies, no matter what the conditions, by the introduction of internationally sponsored minimum human rights, free and fair elections, and 'good governance'. And that, as we know, is what finally was attempted at in Indonesia as well – from late-May 1998, as the west and major parts of the domestic elite suddenly changed their loyalties and realised that the lack of legitimate governance was the root cause of the crisis. So when the economists had failed by 'getting the prices right' (ironically even triggering the end game by the reduction of subsidies on May 4), somewhat softer colleagues were then parachuted to also 'put the institutions right'. Within a year or two, it was argued, Indonesia would thus be put on the right track by the combination of, on the one hand, economic and financial reconstruction, and on the other hand, the engineering of 'appropriate' governance, decentralisation, civil societies, and rights, and liberties – as a basis for free and fair elections, plus pacts among 'moderate incumbents and realistic reformers'.

What went wrong? Why may now the historical chance to sustain the rise of the world's third largest democracy end in a similarly historical failure? Let us make a brief summary of the major factors involved and draw the general conclusions.

First, it was not the development of modernisation but a political crisis of despotic liberalism (the symbiosis between political monopolisation and economic liberalisation) that gave birth to Indonesia's new democracy. Hence, the space was limited even for the combination of elitist political pacts and the idea of 'letting the economy take care of itself'. This may make sense (irrespective of political turmoil) in less politically dominated economies, but not in Indonesia. Rather, the institutions crumbled and there were few independent and forceful actors that could take command and propel change; economically, administratively, politically. The democracy movement had been suppressed for decades, and business could either escape or was as dependent on political patronage as ever. Formally liberal politics became a battlefield for increasingly scattered, privatised, and localised military, administrative, and economic interests (like now over Gus Dur's presidency). There was a shift from centralised corruption, where the repressive godfather put some limitations to promote his own high returns, to a *laissez faire* regime – without alternative democratic co-ordination – where it is perfectly rational for symbiotic political, economic and military leaders to instantly grab and extract as much as possible. Even the enlightened establishment thesis of the need to first promote 'rule of law' and 'good governance' was out of context. For when a constitutional *rechtstaat* does not precede popular sovereignty (as it did in western Europe through rather authoritarian state and bourgeois measures), we either have to say (as many supporters of Asian developmental states used to do) that time is not yet ripe for

democracy – or discuss what social, economic, and political forces would simultaneously be able to enforce constitutionalism *and* democracy. And this is not even addressed by World Bank proponents of ‘good governance’. So while the determinists were right in stressing the insufficient preconditions for democracy, the idealists had a point in saying that one should not miss the chance to promote it anyway. But to craft democracy by only betting, then, on elementary institutions, civil and political rights, plus national elections, within a vacuum of supportive mechanisms, forces, and organisations – that was doomed to fail.

Second, therefore, let us go beyond both the deterministic and the idealist elite perspectives and consider instead democratisation from the level of the citizens, the ones that are supposed to be equals and control public affairs. Many say that this is unrealistic and a waste of time. But the same argument caused most experts to neglect basic conflicts, hidden opposition, and the potential for democracy already during Suharto. So why should we repeat the same mistake now? Rather, let us simply start with the basic questions about the substance and scope of the four fundamental prerequisites and instruments that most scholars (including of democratic audits) agree are necessary to develop if the principles of democracy (popular control and political equality regarding collective binding decisions) shall be real.

(1) Free and fair elections: The country’s most severe problems turned non-issues in elections that avoided the basic local level. Only the military, political, and religious elite with old organisations and loyalties stood a fair chance. The pro-democratic movement and the students in particular were marginalised. There was neither space for local parties in local elections or for new popular organisations and parties based

on interests and societal ideas. Worse: major foreign democracy-makers did little to alter the picture.

(2) Open and accountable government (which also require independent public knowledge, movement, organisation, and government responsiveness to public opinion): Aside from informal contacts and networks, much of state and politics remains closed for those who thus lost out, and has often turned non-operative and disintegrated in the process of fragmentation and localisation of power. Boss politicians have taken over – brokering religious and ethnic leaders with mass following, businessmen and administrators with resources, and military and militias with muscles. While pro-democratic NGOs are comparatively well funded but atomised, the new attempts at popular organisations and parties are poor and fragmented. Beyond the limited elections, there are few chances for people to influence the system other than to return to informal contacts or resort to lobbying or pressure politics. Worse (again): this is partly nourished by foreign support, limited as it usually is to urban elite circles with good international connections. Priority is given precisely to watch and lobby groups, not to the universal accepted need for mass based popular organisation to enforce open and accountable government. Ironically, even the organisation of the foreign support itself is a good illustration of lack of transparency and accountability, at least in relation to those who matter (and are supposed to learn from foreign experiences) – the Indonesian population in general and the pro-democracy movement in particular. Furthermore, the decisive public sphere that had evolved among pro-democrats during the struggle against authoritarianism has been difficult to expand locally and to ordinary people, especially when abandoned by foreign democracy-makers that bet instead on their

own NGOs and consultants. Hence, speculative media has filled most of the empty 'liberal' spaces.

(3) Civil and political rights: The liberalisation of civil and political life is vital and a relative success, but remains of limited significance for major parts of the population. Political violence is localised, semi-privatised, and nourished by instigation and manipulation of ethnic and religious loyalties. The lack of social and cultural rights is part of the problem. This became established state policy already during the massacres in the mid-60s but is no longer controlled by a supreme godfather. Truth and justice is a precondition for reconciliation but primarily a topic for NGO seminars.

(4) A reasonably democratic society for citizens to be sufficiently self-confident: The elements of a democratic culture, and the interest and ideology-based popular organising, that grew out of the struggle for freedom and national liberation, have been thoroughly undermined by decades of 'floating mass politics' and boosting of feudal-like customs. In fact it has even affected the pro-democracy movement which continue to suffer from divisive elitism (nourished by equally elitist and divisive foreign support), while many people have to weather the crisis before they can make use of the new democratic options.

So the picture is quite clear. There are important freedoms, but the civil and democratic rights and institutions are poor, often malfunctioning, and usually difficult for ordinary people to make use of. The politically marginalised but resourceful sections of the elite would probably have turned to non-democratic methods anyway. But what's really wrong with Indonesia's democratisation is that it does not make

much sense even to its major potential pro-democratic force – the people at large – as a way of promoting ideas and interests, solve conflicts, and agree with others on how to handle issues of mutual concern. Rather they usually have to find non- and anti-democratic methods and avenues. For instance, they have to pay or bargain for protection and contacts within administration, government and elite circles as well as ethnic and religious networks. And if nothing helps, they may have to take to the streets or end up burning down a police station.

The obvious solution, then, is to start from the point of view of these people and support processes and attempts among them at making democracy accessible and meaningful. Of course, the fashionable reply is that such efforts are naive and almost ridiculous. Patrimonial cultures and systems, it is argued, are so old and strong that they will capture whatever instrument of democracy that is introduced. But the role and importance of these elements of patrimonialism and clientelism rarely have that deep and strong roots. In Indonesia, they primarily gained renewed importance as a result of the authoritarian rule and exploitation from the late 50s and onwards. So if one focuses on *that* enemy – not on some seemingly irrevocable cultural traits – the favouring of democracy cease to be impossible. However, of course, that calls for more than idealistic promotion of shallow institutions, rights, and election packages. Rather one must focus exactly on how it would be possible for common people to improve and make use of democracy under specific conditions and opportunities in various settings. What are their capacities and opportunities? How can people improve them? How can they make use of rights and institutions? How could these in turn be altered in favour of people's chances to apply them?

Among the key areas of concern that stand out from this brief essay are the rise of interest and ideology based popular movements, organisations and parties, as well as mass based campaigns for truth, justice, and the rewriting of history; which would also promote popular education. For one example only, pro-democrats might wish to consider giving more emphasis to local level actions and public discourse, including demanding legal changes that would enable new parties to stand a chance by emerging from below, from the grass roots. Otherwise even the best of local reformation committees or action groups, or unions, would be captured by the few 'national' big parties and politicians, or limited to pressure and lobby groups that at worst would not even bother about democracy. Further, the activists might also wish to modify their campaign for simple majority elections in one-man constituencies. Without some proportional representation, it might not just be difficult to govern democratically a diverse society but more importantly: the chances for new alternative parties to emerge from below will be very slim – while resourceful local bosses tend to benefit. This is textbook knowledge! And those who do not read or trust them may learn from the uphill struggle for new popular rooted politics next door, in the Philippines.

In short, Indonesia's democratisation is at the brink. To prevent collapse and move ahead there is an urgent need for a third path, between determinism and idealism; a third path that aims at substantial democratisation – not in terms of good outcome for everyone (that remains an open question) but the promotion of citizen's actual capacity to make use of and further improve civil and democratic rights and institutions. One of the main puzzles to me is why, in a case like Indonesia, northern Europeans, for instance, come down so floppily, and suppress their own experiences

(not to talk of those of the South Africans, for example) of the need for social and economic preconditions and popular organising in processes of democratisation, in face of the predominant idealistic and often shallow betting on institutions, rights, and election packages. In fact, most foreign democracy-makers do not just tend to avoid the promotion of those additional conditions for substantial and therefore sustainable democracy. The support for open and accountable government is generally also dispersed through exclusive elitist circles and not organised in a transparent and accountable way with regard to the demos, the people, that are supposed to develop democracy (occasionally the support is even favouring foreign consultants-cum-NGOs at the expense of pro-democratic Indonesian efforts). One cannot but recall the so-called Berkeley Mafia promotion of New Order technocrats in the 60s. So in spite of good intentions (and nice and skilled persons), the fundamental problems of divisiveness and economic patronage among Indonesian pro-democrats are thus nourished, at the expense of the desperate need for unity on the basis of democratic ideas and collective interests. /END.