

# No shortcut to democracy

Post-Suharto, the opportunities are wide open. Time is short. But a democracy that lasts must be built on solid ideas rather than popular individuals or religion

Olle Törnquist speaks with Gerry van Klinken

### What first drew you to Indonesia?

In the early 1970s I wasn't interested in Indonesia but in what was missing in Marxism and why many radical popular movements in the Third World were failing. So what actually drew me to Indonesia was the destruction of its huge communist party.

But even studies of general theories have to be contextualised. And since empirical exploration rather than old theories have been points of departure in my efforts since the late 1980s to analyse popular politics of democratisation, Indonesia 'in itself' has gradually become more important to me. But as an Indonesianist, I remain a fake!

**Few expected Suharto to resign as quickly as he did. What really brought him down?**

Let's look back. Because actually expectations have varied over time and with the theories in vogue. Till the late 1970s or so, most radicals kept on analysing the New Order regime in terms of an unstable neo-colonial and parasitic dictatorship.

But the regime didn't fall, and many realised that the 'parasites' did invest some of their rents. So both students of the rise of capital and of clientelism began to emphasise continuity instead — this thing might last forever. They tended to look on studies of popular movements for political change as idealistic and a waste of time.

And then, of course, there was the West's lack of interest in supporting democratic forces 'that couldn't even offer a realistic alternative'. So yes, in

many circles the crisis and Suharto's resignation was somewhat unexpected.

What really was to oust him became apparent to me only with the crack-down on the democracy movement in mid-1996. That wasn't 'business as usual', as many would have it.

The regime, on the one hand, proved totally unable to regulate conflicts, reform itself, and prepare an 'orderly' succession. When the financial crisis spread to Indonesia a year later the regime could not restore the confidence of investors, regardless of what economic prescription it tried — since that would have required fundamental political reforms.

The dissidents, on the other hand, were too poorly organised to make a difference on their own, and they were still neglected by the West. Instead, the West entrusted the problem to neo-classical IMF economists and their colleagues in Jakarta.

On May 4 1998 the political illiteracy of the economists combined with Suharto's attempt to prove that he was in control, caused the regime to increase prices even further than the IMF had sought.

Unorganised public anger thereupon gave a new dimension to the student demonstrations that had hitherto been rather isolated. Factions of the army tried making things worse to get an excuse to regain control by afterwards restoring 'law and order'. The rats began abandoning the sinking ship, and the captain had to choose between going down with it or resigning.

So in essence the problem was political: the inability of the regime to handle conflicts, to reform itself and thus restore confidence in the market place; the inability of the democracy movement to organise the widespread discontent among people, relying instead on student activists as organic spearheads; and the inability of the West and the IMF to boost reform and democratic forces that may have prevented social and economic disaster.

**How would you describe what has happened in politics since Suharto's resignation?**

To keep it brief, most actors focus on how to alter the old regime. Everybody is busy repositioning themselves, consolidating their assets, and forming new parties and alliances. Incumbents (and their military and business allies) are delaying changes and forming favourable new political laws in order to be able to adapt, making whatever concessions are necessary to be able to steer their course. Established dissidents, meanwhile, trade in their reputations and, occasionally, their popular followings, for reform and 'positions'.

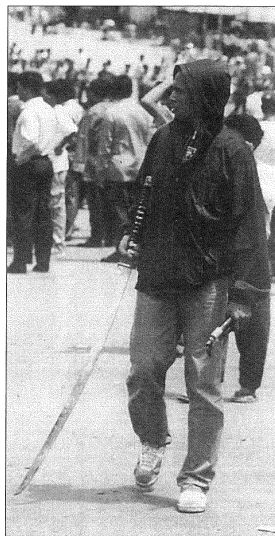
There is a shortage of time. Even old democrats go for shortcuts like charisma, populism, religion, and patronage in order to swiftly incorporate rather than gradually integrate people into politics. Radicals try to sustain popular protests to weaken shameless incumbents who might otherwise be able to stay on.

Of course the markets and the West are mainly interested in anything that looks stable enough to permit the payback of loans and safe returns on investments.

**Habibie and most of his ministers are New Order people. Yet they do not enjoy New Order powers. Doesn't that make this post-Suharto period 'somewhat' democratic?**

Yes, the rulers are weaker. For some years, even sections of the Habibie's association for Islamic intellectuals Lemahave had limited democratic reforms on their agenda, like their friend Anwar in Malaysia. By now, any new regime will have to be legitimised in terms of rule of law and democracy. There are continuous negotiations over new rules of the game. And there are a lot of opportunities.

Genuine democrats, however, are short of capacity to make use of them. They now cannot rally opposition against an authoritarian ruler. They need instead to mobilise people in



Goon politics: fears that local political violence will increase as central power becomes weaker and more divided.

FORIN KEADAN

society on the basis of different interests and ideas. But that is much more difficult.

Incumbents and others with economic, military and political resources prefer elitist and limited forms of democracy. Sections of the middle class may well support ideas about a rather authoritarian but enlightened law and order state. Especially if actual democracy will mean that local strongmen and religious, military and business leaders mobilise the voters with the use of God, gold, goons and guns, only to divide the spoils among themselves.

**These are risky days. What is the biggest danger? What are the signs of hope?**

The danger I'm most afraid of is the

historical tendency for local political violence to increase as central power becomes weaker and more divided. Less efficient top-down suppression of all the latent conflicts on the local level, centering on food, land and other vital resources, leaves space for not just democratic forces but also for devastating conspiracies and manipulation. As we talk, the killings in East Java, for instance, are still going on.

The best signs of hope, on the other hand, we rarely notice. They are difficult to extrapolate from what we know of Indonesia until the fall of Suharto. The so-called political opening structure is changing.

Three brief examples. First, it is no longer possible to simply repress angry workers. Even the most stubborn hardliners realise that it's better to negotiate with representative unions. So it may be possible for labour activists to take the initiative and cautiously enter into this field with a rather good bargaining position, since their opponents really need genuine representatives with whom to strike solid deals.

Second, after the financial crisis even sections of the IMF and the World Bank realise it's time for improved regulations. Neo-liberalism is on the retreat. Hence, there are ample opportunities to continue the struggle for democratisation and so-called 'good governance'.

Third, there will be comparatively free elections on all levels. And though there are many constraints those are opportunities for hitherto rather isolated activists (including 'liberated' journalists) to reach out, link up with grass roots initiatives, and build genuine mass organisations, including democratic watch movements.

**What kind of reform is the most crucial, and the most feasible, right now? What should outsiders be supporting?**

In Indonesia (as some ten years ago in Eastern Europe) the state and organised politics are seen as bad, and 'civil society' as good. When authoritarian politics have to be undermined there is much to this idea, but now there is less. Now it's high time to mobilise strength in negotiations by organising people and building a democratic culture.

I do not share the view that support for civil society is always the best way of doing this. In many cases, such as the backing of free journalists, there are no problems, but all civil society associations do not necessarily promote democracy. And what is political culture but routinely practised remnants of yesterday's rules, institutions, and organised politics? Hence, it's on the level of formal rules and institutions on the one hand, and of organised politics on the other, that change and improvements have to start.

It is essential for the democratic forces to give priority to organising constituencies based on shared societal interests and ideas. They should not go for tempting shortcuts. Without well-anchored politics and unionism there will be no meaningful democracy.

Equally important, all efforts — including ours from outside — must be made to oppose new political rules of the game that make such efforts increasingly difficult, and to mobilise support for better alternatives.

One example is the need to back up genuine labour groups and unions by involving them in the distribution of support for the unemployed. Another is the new electoral law. Not only does it retain corporate military representation. It is also tailor made to promote local boss-rule in one-man constituencies and to prevent proportional representation of small but potentially genuine parties.

Finally, of course, in the run-up to the elections there must be massive support for independent voters education and electoral watch movements. The objective should be to build constituencies for the future among genuine democrats at the grass roots level.

*Olle Törnquist commutes between Sweden and Norway where he is professor of politics and development at the University of Oslo. He is the author of Dilemmas of Third World Communism and What's wrong with Marxism? (Based on Indonesia and India), and the new textbook Politics and Development — A critical introduction.*