

## Olle Törnquist for Inside Indonesia, 26/4/2008

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The generally accepted meaning of democracy is popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality. To what extent does this characterise Indonesia? Is it rather an oligarchy based on Suharto's old elite, governing themselves via formally democratic elections?

There are two predominant and rather extreme answers. The first rests with the designing of a limited number of institutions during the global third wave of democracy, from the late seventies and onwards. The institutions include civil and political liberties and societies, rule of law, free and fair elections and 'good governance'. In this view, the Indonesian institutions are at hand and corruption is being addressed. The poor political representation remains a problem but may be improved through more direct elections of candidates and a 'simplified' system of major elitist parties that at least develop policies, 'pick up' demands from society, recruit people for government jobs and supervise the executive. Popular representation from below is deemed unrealistic. Rather one may 'deepen democracy' through direct participation by 'responsible citizens', unfortunately excluding 'the masses'.<sup>1</sup>

The second answer is by leftists as well as rightists saying that the structural conditions are insufficient for a decent democracy. Therefore the oligarchs have retained their power and ordinary people their poverty. Freedoms and elections have even generated more identity politics, conflicts and corruption, and less economic growth. Thus, major parts of the Left focus on fighting global neo-liberalism (saying it blocks real democracy), while much of the establishment subscribe to the new international thesis: that enlightened elite should 'sequence democracy' by building solid institutions, 'good governance', growth alliances and citizen organisations before entrusting the masses with full freedom of speech, organisation and elections.<sup>2</sup>

Both arguments are theoretically and politically dubious. The first assumes that once the elite have agreed to a few political institutions, the latter equal democracy. This is of course as naïve as stating that basic capitalist or socialist institutions would always generate prosperity. Yet, most designers have at least held on to the normative principles. That is rarely the case with the proponents of the second position. By separating the intrinsic prerequisites from their narrow understanding of democracy, they exclude by definition the chances to create such conditions through improved democracy.

In-between the two extremes one must therefore understand instead democracy as a process with many factors and actors involved. A framework for such analysis has been developed and applied in two national surveys of Indonesia's democracy, the first in 2003-04, the second in 2007. *Demos* (an organisation for research based democracy promotion in co-operation with the Universities of Oslo and more recently Gadjah Mada) asked some two times 900 senior campaigners-cum-experts on democratisation in all provinces about the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup> The major introduction of this perspective in Indonesia was only immediately after the fall of Suharto, reported on in Liddle, R. William (ed), *Crafting Indonesian Democracy*. Jakarta: PPW-LIPI, Ford Foundation and Mizan Pustaka, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief introduction, see Carothers, Thomas, 'The "Sequencing" Fallacy', in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 18:1, 2007.

existing means of democracy really supported the aims. Similarly, the researchers were also exploring whether and how both powerful and subordinate actors had the will and capacity to foster and use the means of democracy. The new comparative results are due by early May, and I should not reveal the details.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is clear that the extreme institutionalist and structuralist arguments are empirically mistaken as well.

It is true that surprisingly many civil and political rights are at hand. However, some of them are now at risk. This may be related to partially effective top-down efforts to improve the miserable performance and scope of the rule of law and governance, including by curbing corruption. Further, a nation wide political community has substituted for the crumbling nation state by even facilitating peace and democracy in Aceh. The advocates of centralist nationalism against 'inevitable' ethnic and religious local wars have thus proved wrong.

Similarly it is true that politics remains monopolised by the elite. However, the elite are wider, more localised and less militarised than under Suharto. Remarkably moreover, most of them adjust to the supposedly democratic institutions. This is not to say that there are no abuses, but decentralisation and elections have clearly enabled the wider sections of the local elite to mobilise popular support through clientelistic networks. Of course this is nourished by privileged control of limited public resources and alliances with business and communal leaders. Yet, the interest in elections is *both* a crucial basis of the actually existing democracy *and* its major drawback in terms of 'rotten politicians' and weak interest organisations.<sup>4</sup> In all these respects, Indonesia may thus begin to resemble the most stable democracy in the global South, India. By contrast however, the Indonesian civic and popular organisations that try to get into organised politics are blocked by the monopolistic party- and election system. In this respect Indonesia is very seriously lagging behind. Moreover, the same groups are also hampered by their own fragmentation and weak mass organisation. It is true that there are exciting local attempts to move ahead, but Aceh after the peace treaty is the only major opening.

In short, aside from the beleaguered freedoms, the democratic institutions and people's capacities remain weak. Yet, much of the infrastructure is in place around the country. Moreover, in spite of weaknesses and biases the institutions are important and substantive enough to make both powerful and alternative actors apply and promote them. Theoretically, this is the bottom line. Hence, Indonesia may be called an emerging democracy. In fact, by international standards among new democracies Indonesia is doing reasonably well, given the elimination of the popular movements in 1965, followed by more than thirty years of authoritarian and militarised capitalism. The relative advances testify to what is possible even under harsh conditions. Hence, we may turn to the problems and options of really defending and developing the democratic potentials.

The major deficit is the monopolisation of political and interest based representation. The resourceful elite do not only prevent ordinary people from entering politics. Worst, there is

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<sup>3</sup> For the approach and first survey, see Priyono, A.E, Samadhi, Willy, P. and Törnquist, Olle *Making Democracy Meaningful. Problems and Options in Indonesia*. Demos and PCD Press with ISEAS, Jakarta and Singapore 2007. The general results from the resurvey will be published on May 6, 2008 (see [www.demosindonesia.org](http://www.demosindonesia.org)). A comprehensive analysis in comparative perspective is forthcoming later 2008 in co-operation with a research team at UGM.

<sup>4</sup> The results in this respect are supported by comprehensive case studies within the two major research programmes on the new local politics 'Renegotiating Boundaries' and 'Middle Indonesia' ([www.kitlv.nl](http://www.kitlv.nl)). C.f. Nordholt, Henk Schulte and van Klinken, Gerry (Eds), *Renegotiating Boundaries. Local Politics on Post-Suharto Indonesia*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007.

hardly any substantive representation of crucial interests and ideas related to liberal middle classes, labourers, peasants, urban poor, women, human rights- and environmental activists and more. All together they constitute a clear majority of the population. This prevents reforms towards more decent and sustainable development.

Most urgently, it nourishes a general lack of trust in democracy and ‘rotten politics’, especially among liberal oriented upper and middle classes. With the new international support for ‘sequencing of democracy’, it is thus not far to the resurgence of Huntington’s old idea (and the rationale behind Suharto’s new order) of preventing disruptive populist rule by promoting strong institutions through ‘politics of order’ and ‘middle class coups’, ahead of democracy. Thailand, for instance, was heading in that direction.

It is imperative, therefore, that civic and popular organisations are able to scale up their ideas and alliances and connect communities and workplaces – to challenge the monopolisation of politics and initiate an alternative to ‘politics of order’. This is difficult. Case studies through *Demos* suggest that the scaling up and attempts to enter into organised politics are not just frustrated by the monopolisation of the political system but also hampered by another layer of non-trustworthy representation – between the civic and popular groups themselves and related political activists.<sup>5</sup> Shortcuts through ideologies and charismatic figures have proved as unsuccessful as attempts to link specific issues and communities on the ground. Basic groups must co-ordinate instead within joint blocks on an intermediary political level, to be able to agree on more aggregated agendas and be strong enough to foster genuine politicians.

Yet, this calls for leadership and commitment to the building of democracy on collective work, wide public interest and popular mandates rather than loose networking and polycentric action. And such a commitment is not likely to materialise as long as it is easier for the leading activists to lobby and network than to nourish voluntary work and organise constituencies. However, it is not impossible. It is important to recall again that there was no need to ‘sequence democracy’ even in ‘hopeless Aceh’. Rather it proved feasible to pave the way for gradual and substantive improvements within Indonesia’s emerging democracy. First, all parties involved (including foreign partners) agreed to de-monopolise the system of representation. Second, civic and political organisations (even those until recently not being very democratic) were willing and sufficiently well organised to win votes and thus take advantage of such openings.

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<sup>5</sup> One set of case studies (co-ordinated by AE Priyono and directed by this author) focuses on attempts by civic groups to ‘go politics’. The second (by this author) employs a comparative and theoretical perspective on pioneering attempts to scale up and promote popular representation. Final and tentative results from the first and the second project respectively are due at [www.demosindonesia.org](http://www.demosindonesia.org) by mid-2008.