

# Problems and Options for Democratisation

*Indonesia needs a renewed agenda of 'substantial democracy'. Its fledgling democracy is still dominated by players from the old elite who retain their presence in most institutions of governance. The pro-democracy movement is active in pockets and remains confined to isolated attempts at organising civil society.*

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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, beginning from the clamp down of 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 most 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 30 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 side-tracked 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 democratic 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 de-centralisation 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.

## Deficits of Democratisation

The recently published results from a four-year research project (co-ordinated by Stanley Adi Prasetyo, A E Priyono and the author) on and with the democracy movement point in another direction. (*Indonesia's Post-Soeharto Democracy Movement*, Demos, Jakarta; also available in an Indonesian edition.)<sup>1</sup> 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 focused 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 they have almost immediately been 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, has made 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 appear to carry any meaning. Among the middle classes, many are utterly cynical; they regard corrupt politicians and judges as the major problem but, ironically, they thus 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.

However, while many views and proposals on what should be done are available, and while many of them have not only

been well intended but have been 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 A E Priyono within the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (Demos), which is directed by Asmara Nababan and chaired by Stanley Adi Prasetyo. The approach and results may be of interest also beyond the Indonesian framework. (The full executive report is available at <http://www.sum.uio.no/research/democracy/network/>)

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 scarce written sources or 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 seven 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 how vital actors relate to instruments of democracy when favouring their own ideas and interests. This is supplemented by queries 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.

### **Towards a Crisis**

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 Indonesia is heading towards a crisis, as the gap between the good freedoms and 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 per cent 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 on land, indigenous people, environmental problems, etc, 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,

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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 when popular figures in the vicinity of the movement attempt 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 tries 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 points to the deterioration of the nation state project borne 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. In addition, 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, which sections of the democracy movement have argued in favour of.

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. [E27](#)

## Note

- 1 More details on preliminary international distribution at [office@demo.or.id](mailto:office@demo.or.id).