

C'mon, *Bung*, Let's Get It Back

Dr. Olle Tornquist*



THE basic recipe for a transition to democracy is based on experiences in South Europe and Latin America. International pressures facilitated a compromise, namely, restraining the power of the masses and allowing authoritarian, capitalist bureaucrats and officials to keep their capital. In return, the bureaucrats and officials agree to accommodate human rights, good governance, fair and open general elections, and an independent civil society.

This recipe was tried in Indonesia. What can we learn from the Indonesian case?

According to a number of political experts and observers, democracy in Indonesia has failed, thus allowing a government intervention that is more authoritarian. However, the democracy actors in parts of Indonesia seem to have a better perspective that is worth considering. On the one hand, the basic recipe has been followed; for example, many rights and freedom can be enjoyed—except in Aceh and Papua.

Additional tools of democracy can be developed, such as decentralization and privatization. As such, radical political aspirations can be neutralized. The elites have also performed reconciliation and in general do not violate regulations; they are even taking advantage of new regulations in the democracy “game.” Unfortunately, the democracy tools are seldom capable of encouraging the achievement of the main purpose of democracy, the control by the masses over all public affairs based on equal political rights.

This problem is experienced not just by Indonesia. Many scientists agree that, although it is important to develop freedom in countries, foreign intervention and neo-liberalism on a global scale have shaken the principal democracy prerequisite; for example, bad public service and mass organizations. Consequently, civil society does not look capable of fulfilling the public's hope. What happens next is a semi-authoritarian regime flourishing again. Corruption, abuse of power, and backwardness will continue.

It seems that the development of democracy requires the old powers to be beaten totally, before it can be accommodated again. It is still difficult for the people to use and encourage the use of the existing democracy tools to oppose oppression, poverty, and looting.

In South Europe and Latin America, former people in power succeed in fleeing to the private sector and allowing the other elites to take over the political world. In Indonesia, not only are these former masters safe, but the old economic, bureaucratic, and military powers have even formed a symbiotic relationship. Not only is the political world still in their clutches, they have even succeeded in hijacking the new democracy infrastructure.

The civil democrats cannot provide an alternative. The reason is their “undecided” attitude; they do not have a

strong base at the mass organization level or a comprehensive program. What seems to be happening is the elite are allowed to dominate state politics and the public, including general elections. The failure of representation of the people's interests and principal ideas through political parties is the most urgent problem. As long as there is no representation, there is no hope to improve conditions in a democratic manner.

The recipe for democratization does not work; in addition, an increasing number of scientists agree that the awakening of the elite and the elimination of the pro-democrats are the sources of the problem. Is there a theoretical perspective that can help us understand the hijacking of democracy in Indonesia?

A democracy concept that is not liberal is not appropriate, because there is real freedom in civil society. The most general thought, from Latin America and Africa to Asia, to comprehend why good-intentioned institutions are not capable of supporting democracy, is that the historical culture of patrimonialism, patronage, and clientelism is too overwhelmingly strong.

Besides, the relationship between state and society proceeds unevenly. Added to that is the political institution relationship and lack of quality in elections are hindering the actors' efforts to capture state resources and ability. That becomes the platform for the key to the awakening of the “boss-ism” culture in the Philippines that is spreading to Indonesia—although the general elections system is already proportional and hardly receives intervention from those in power.

It can also be added here the indirect legacy of colonialism—through people in power, the law, and local subjects—together with the use of semi-private political violence under Suharto's centralistic regime. Today such violence is part of the renegotiation of the dominance of the elite at the local level. Keep in mind also that, the lack of political character of a mass-oriented pro-democracy is a pre-condition behind the success of various dominant groups aiming to hijack democracy.

However, there is hope and better opportunities. The problem is clear enough: the opportunity to build a better institution has diminished. Therefore, it is time to wrestle democracy back. Better representation of society's interests through democratic political parties must be improved. For that, the agenda must be renewed, both within the pro-democracy movements and the supporters' movements.

**Researcher at Oslo University, Sweden, observer of democracy movements in Indonesia, India, and the Philippines*