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# Indonesia's democratization stagnant but not lost

**F**ifteen years after Soeharto's New Order, what of the efforts to create a democratic order? According to mainstream political scientists, democracy equals institutions for freedom and fair elections. Indonesia is a success story and liberal democracy is evolving.

For radical political economists who say that such institutions are subordinate to material resources, Indonesia is ruled by oligarchs and shock therapy is needed. What would a more nuanced analysis look like?

Today, emerging results can be found from the third comprehensive assessment of Indonesia's democratization. Previous studies (2003-2004, 2007) were conducted by Demos (a research-NGO), together with the University of Oslo (UiO). The current survey is within a broader study titled "Power, Welfare and Democracy" at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), supported by UiO.

The questions remain the same: To what extent do institutions and actors really contribute to the development of democracy in terms of the popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality; and what are the problems and options?

The method is also replicated: collecting information by systematic in-depth interviews (six-eight hours each) with the best experts on the ground among more than 600 committed scholars and experienced activists around the country as well as in Jakarta.

What do the early results reveal? There are three key words: stagnation, openings and excitement.

Stagnation, most obviously, is about the persistence of corruption, poor rule of law and political inequalities. This is the ironic outcome of the impressive combination of stability in a coherent political system and extensive elections, freedom and citizen organizations. Powerful actors have not just adjusted to the new rules of the



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game, they have also decided the details of these rules to their own advantage, such as by making it very difficult for new parties to participate in elections.

Similarly, they have retained their political capacity to dominate the game as such; a rich soccer team tends to win against a poor one even if they follow the same rules.

The media speaks at length of corruption and of the agencies fighting it, but the basic problem is a lack of representation of those who really are against the abuse of power and could make a difference.

Indonesia has not allowed people to form a small pro-democratic anti-corruption party on the basis of social movements and participate and win elections, as recently in New Delhi.

Such a victory is certainly not enough, it takes more than a party of discontent to develop alternative policies. But in Indonesia, scattered civil society activists and other informal leaders have only been able to "go politics" individually by invitation from elite-dominated parties, even without coordination through broad social movements and interest organizations.

Yet democratization is not lost. The assessment identifies two openings. One is post-clientelism. As in other parts of the Global South, many Indonesian leaders cannot win elections by patronage politics only.

People now have better information and multiple identities and sources of income. It is increasingly difficult to buy their votes through

clientelistic networks. This calls for populism, direct links between leaders and people.

Fortunately, Indonesian populism is less focused on identity than it is on well-being. Another supplementary method is that leaders invite their preferred leaders in civil society to commissions, "stakeholder participation" etc. to gain support from middle classes and NGO-sponsored poor people.

Both methods are certainly undemocratic but make it possible for smart actors of change to negotiate transformative reforms, which may strengthen the social and political capacity of ordinary people and institutionalize democratic representation from below. There is much to learn from other countries.

The second opening is the dramatic shift among citizens from trying to solve their problems through patrons, civil society and the market to instead demanding welfare, services and inclusive development through public programs.

In short, people themselves want to go beyond populism and invited participation; they wish to see a democratic welfare state.

But can progressive actors really take advantage of populism, elitist invitation and the quest for a welfare state and thus improve the representation of those who can foster more democracy? Won't politicians co-opt scattered pro-democrats, movements and unions?

Excitement comes in the form of four processes (identified in follow up studies), which may break this negative pattern.

First, many poor people are now as dependent on public services and regulations as middle-class people and thus are similarly frustrated with corruption. Likewise, many middle-class people realize they cannot force themselves upon the poor to set up new factories and houses and build livable cities with better environments and infrastructure.

Rather, they need to negotiate with the increasing amount of people who protest against the accumulation of capital and at the dispossession of their land, forest, water and residential areas.

Third, more scattered groups and movements pose similar demands for public social security and welfare policies.

But who can build strong enough political unity for welfare that acts against corruption and plunder? Attempts at coalitions and blocs have failed. Fragmented groups have agreed on some issues and then returned to their projects.

The ultimate excitement comes with the informalization of employment relations (including through outsourcing) under neoliberal development. Many workers in formal and informal sectors agree they have had to turn to the state and local governments as there are fewer employers to protest against and negotiate with.

To make a difference, then, strong broad alliances are needed. As we know from recent efforts at social security, labor laws and minimum wages, such broad struggles have even been propelled by unions in modern sectors.

Together with a few politicians and civil society activists, they may thus play a most important role in building broad fronts from outside elite politics for better representation of the interests and actors that really can fight injustice, corruption and inequality.

This would alter the stagnation of Indonesian democratization and if democratic avenues for representation and negotiations are set up, there is no need to block the toll roads.

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