

# Birth of World's Third Largest Democracy

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*While the recent elections were free and fair, the context was not just and the substance was shallow, with a lack of opportunities to make use of the political liberties. The healthy growth of the world's third largest democracy depends crucially on the further development and consolidation of the democracy movement.*

IT was a boring election, for parachuted journalists. Too little violence and cheating to report, and too little knowledge to explain why. Comparatively democratic rules of the game forced much of the elite to temporarily compete by mobilising votes rather than manipulating in closed circles and provoking religious and ethnic groups only. That was a victory of sorts. Except in East Timor, Aceh, West Papua and a few other places, some 100 million people finally felt that their vote did matter. In a way we witnessed the birth of the second rather than the third largest democracy in the world, since so many Americans do not even bother to cast their vote.

But while the very elections were rather free and fair, the context was not so just and the substance was shallow. There was a lack of reasonably equal opportunities to make use of the political liberties and many fundamental problems were swept under the carpet. This will hit back and this is, therefore, what we should focus on, if we are interested in the prospects for stability and democracy.

First, the unjust electoral system. One single result was not delayed: that the armed forces would receive more seats in the parliament than the major 'reformasi' leader Amien Rais' party now seems to get in the open elections. Further, 36 per cent of the delegates who will later on select the new president are not elected but will be appointed by the military and by the political elite in closed smoky provincial and metropolitan rooms. Also beforehand, ex-communist as well as local parties were prohibited, and remarkably many seats were allotted to provinces where Golkar's machinery remained intact.

Second, the unjust preconditions. While Golkar made good use of the state apparatuses and control of foreign-funded credits for co-operatives and social safety net programmes, especially on the outer islands, self-asserted western democrats gave priority to stable government through instant elections of 'legitimate' rulers rather than democracy in terms of people's rule

and stability through acceptable chances for everyone to influence politics and keeping track of elected politicians. Foreign support for democratisation was limited to electoral arrangements, technical information, and some promotion of civic virtues through NGOs, while critical voters' education of the actual political forces involved was scarce and promotion of democratic organisations among labourers, farmers, civil servants and employees was almost absent – not to talk of parties on the basis of ideas about how societies work and may be changed. Such priorities may be in line with a vulgarised version of democracy where parties are just machines for the election of elite politicians and people can only make some difference through a myriad of single issue and special interest groups. But it is a bit away from a more informed understanding of the dynamics involved and definitely, for instance, from European, Indian or South African experiences where broad popular organisations and parties were essential for the birth and growth of democracy.

Predictably, on the one hand, the Indonesian outcome was, thus, top-down mobilisation of votes on the basis of populism and patron-clientism through the established political machines (Golkar, PDI-P, and PPP)<sup>1</sup> and the established socio-religious organisations (like NU with its major party PKB, and Muhammadiyah). On the other hand, the exciting attempt to form a new liberal middle class party (PAN) – with secular centre-left politics, Muslim values and reformasi-leader Amien Rais as a locomotive – proved much more difficult. The students, moreover – who forced the elite to do away with Suharto, who were in the forefront for the reform process and who put pressure on the traditional politicians – lost momentum and were marginalised. And since way back genuine development, human rights and democracy activists often say that their attempts to help people themselves to organise are now distorted by the neo-traditional political competition.

Third, then, the shallowness of the elections. This is not to agree with the many observers who talk of excited masses in support of a weak woman and a blind man without real programmes. The largest and second largest democracies in the world, India and the US, have elected and survived equally odd leaders. And even aside from PAN's educated middle class programme, certain issues did play an important role in terms of people's expectations and trust in Megawati and Gus Dur as symbols of dignified resistance against Suharto and peaceful improvement without religious and ethnic conflicts, along old ideals from the struggle for independence. No, the major problem is rather that it will be very difficult for the essentially traditional and conservative politicians now elected to live up to the expectations of ordinary people, especially of the broad and essentially unorganised social movement around PDI-P and Megawati. There might be a rather long honeymoon, especially if the economy picks up a bit, but the fact is that voters in the new instant democracy have been mobilised through old machines and traditional loyalties which do not correspond with and may not be able to handle the new major conflicts and ideas in society. Let me point to four tendencies:

(1) The grievances and aspirations in East Timor, Aceh, West Papua and certain other areas were virtually removed from the established political agenda as local parties were not even allowed in local elections. So now the problems will rather pop up outside the new democratic framework, where they may be even more difficult to solve. Fortunately East Timor may be an exception – if Xanana Gusmao prove right in "trusting the alternative institutions of the international community".

(2) Even the IMF's fundamental structural adjustment programme was kept outside the election campaign, and even the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (June 21) questions the fact that the Indonesians were not allowed to take an independent stand on such a vital issue in its democratic elections. But there seems to be a basic consensus between Washington and the Indonesian elite. So neither can the new instant democracy offer an institutional framework for the handling of people's socio-economic hardship and protests. Meanwhile genuine labour activists find established politics irrelevant, "as it does not matter much in workers' daily lives". And employers make up for the loss of outright military intervention in labour disputes by drawing on their market bargaining power in times of crisis, establishing fake 'unions' and setting up their own security forces with police and military personnel as part-time 'consultants'.

(3) In view of the irony that the western craftsmen of middle class democracy did not manage to make life easier even for the new liberal PAN party, PAN's own performance, abandoned as it was by Muslim stalwarts as well, is a clear indication of the increasing importance of urban and semi-urban intellectuals, professionals and educated business people. Some of the democratic potential of the new middle class may now get lost, however, because of the problems of making a difference within the neo-traditional political framework. 'Alternative' cynicism and preference for extra parliamentary lobbying and pressure group activities do not automatically promote democracy.

(4) The achievements of the PDI-P, the PKB, the PPP and to some extent PAN is likely to be interpreted as the return of alirian politics based on the old cultural-cum-religious pillars of the syncretic 'prijaji-abangan' combine and the traditional and modernist Muslim 'santris', respectively. This seemingly stable pattern, however, may rather be an hangover from the past in terms of the only available political machines and mass organisations, while the socio-economic fundamentals have changed. For instance, while the nationalist party behind Megawati's father, president Sukarno, had its major base among the rulers, administrators and educators of the state on each and every level (and their capacity to capture votes), this stronghold has since long been captured by Golkar, which also monopolised the military and big business. So below the surface, Mega's PDI-P now seems to be more rooted in general anti-monopolistic sentiments, often led by small and medium business people (including many ethnic Chinese) who did not benefit much from privileged political contacts under Suharto. And partly this may also be true of Gus Dur's PKB. So some of those new leaders are now likely to develop into local private bosses in close contacts with religious leaders and military commanders. Their resources are still scarce, so contacts with the centre, and democracy in terms of mobilising mass support, will also make sense. Over the years, moreover, they may not be able to retain their popular support in face of the great expectations and the possible emergence of groups that try to substitute for the old communists by catering to the less privileged. And the most vital immediate issue, of course, is if and how PDI-P, PKB and their allies will try to 'de-golkarise' the administration, the military, the public companies and the educational system. A compromise, as in the Philippines, would hardly promote stable and democratic

development but rather an elected oligarchy. A very first test, therefore, is if the 'pro-reformasi' parties will come together and make use of their popular electoral mandate to promote genuine democratic reformists and prevent manipulations and money politics in the appointment of the 200 representatives from various sections of the society and the provinces who will join the parliament in electing the next president.

To a large extent the outcome of those four tendencies rests with the capacity of the genuine democracy movement to regain the initiative, exert pressure and offer a political alternative to the neo-traditional politicians and their so far successful top-down incorporation of ordinary people by way of old machines and loyalties. The prospects are not the best. Despite all advances there is still no unified democratic front. While some leaders prefer to work within the established parties, others have been marginalised. The movement remains fragmented, focuses on single issues or general propaganda and often fails to link up with grass roots activities in civil society.

Leading activists often say that such local actions stand and fall with their own political advances at the centre. Of course, the fall of Suharto was critical. But the central structures of authoritarianism are crumbling and the economy is in shambles. Politics will be more localised and the economy more privatised, if not demonopolised. So a stronger democracy movement may now grow from below. In the central Java village of Gebjock, for instance, in Karanganyar regency right after the fall of Suharto, a few dissidents asked democracy activists in Solo for help to sue their corrupt 'lurah' (village head). The advice, however, was that nothing would change unless they themselves linked up with others and sought the support of the villagers in general. So this they did. A 'komite' reformasi was formed to fight the lurah who had appropriated money for a fresh water project, over-charged people for land certificates and privatised public land in favour of his cronies. Demonstrations, for instance, were held at the lurah's and regent's offices (the lurah is still legally responsible to the 'bupati' rather than to the villagers). The lurah's office was occupied for two weeks, and an absolute majority of the villagers came forward to prevent the military and the police from intervening. When the lurah was brought to trial and temporarily discharged, the committee continued its work with regular meetings and public gatherings, initiated a co-operative to support agriculture, added the disclosing of local Golkar leaders' usage of the public

social safety net for its own political purposes, and now discusses how to gear up by demanding total reformation of the local administration. And this is not dependent on the ups and downs in the rate of foreign-reported demonstrations in front of Hotel Indonesia.

The committee members are hardly revolutionaries. The chairman is a local factory mechanic in his mid-20s. Other members include a retired schoolteacher who used to hunt communists in the 1960s, a properly dressed local businessman and a farmer-cum-agricultural worker. Their party affiliations vary, some support PDI-P, others the small NU-based PNU and one the conservative Muslim PBB. "But it doesn't matter", they say, jokingly picking at each other. "That's just general and traditional affiliations. The important thing is our list of what should be done here."

My fear is that they will be co-opted and divided by the newly elected politicians on the regency level. Their own response is that they do not know what will happen but that they want to hold on to their own programme and relate to similar committees in nearby villages, and if possible on 'higher' levels too. I asked if they knew of any such committee 'up there' – but of course they did not, since almost none exists.

Between hope and reality one may wonder, thus, if it is really beyond the capacity of the politically more 'advanced' pro-democrats at the more central levels to learn from Gebjock, unite on more aggregate but yet concrete minimum platforms (rather than acting as isolated pressure groups or ideological spearheads only) and thus help provide links between committees on different levels (before they too are infected by neo-traditional politics)? At any rate, the healthy growth of the world's third largest democracy depends largely on the further development of the democracy movement.

## Note

1 PDI-P is Megawati's Democratic Party of Struggle (which may get some 35 per cent of the votes but less mandates); Golkar is the incumbent party (about 21 per cent of the votes but a much larger share of the mandates); PPP is the old established Muslim United Development Party (around 10 per cent of the votes); PKB is the new secular National Awakening Party (about 15 per cent of the votes but much less mandates) that is based on the traditional Muslim *Nathladul Ulama* (NU) organisation led by Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur); PNU is a minor Muslim party that is also based on NU; PAN is the new National Mandate Party with Amien Rais as its leader (some 7 per cent of the votes); PBB is the conservative modernist Muslim Crescent Star Party (perhaps 2 per cent of the votes).