Introduction and Executive Summary – Advances, Setbacks and Options

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Ten years ago, Suharto’s ‘New Order’ began to be replaced by the world’s largest ‘New Democracy’. It is time to evaluate advances and setbacks, and identify options for the future. By 2003-04, Demos (with this author) and leading sections of the democracy movement, developed and applied a framework for comprehensive country-wide assessment ‘from below’.¹ This is the introduction and executive briefing of the resurvey, four years later.

The re-survey is to identify and facilitate discussion of setbacks and advances over-time. The Summary Report is based on early and general results. It will be supplemented later this year by more comprehensive analysis of the full data, in view of additional case-studies and other available research.² A comprehensive and critical review of Demos’ model, as well as the full questionnaire, is available on Demos web site www.demosindonesia.org.³ The lead sponsor is the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Sida and other partners.⁴ Their commitment and support but also policy of non-interventionism in academic matters has been crucial to the success.

In brief, the re-survey reveals that in-between 2003/04 and 2007 Indonesia has developed into a consolidated elite democracy. The standard of governance-related instruments of democracy (such as rule-of law, anti-corruption and accountability) has improved – though from very low levels. A country-wide political community is evolving as a substitute for the crumbling nation-state – though the new polity is constrained by elitist and localised identity politics and economic globalisation. The military is on the retreat from politics, and a majority of the widened and localised establishment make use of formally democratic rules of the game – though clearly to their own benefit. Much of the successful democracy-building is thus on the sand. Most of the relatively impressive freedoms and rights are stagnating and backsliding. The sections of the elite that can’t win elections seem to be interested in ‘politics of order’. For most people, organised politics is exclusionary. In-spite of attempts by pro-democrats to the contrary, there is a lack of representation by people themselves and of basic issues and interests related to middle classes, women, labour, peasants and fisher-folks, urban poor and indigenous populations. While voting is free, running in elections is only for the well endowed and powerful. Since the party system is closed, there is a need for social movements and popular and civic organisations to form Democratic Political Blocks behind basic platforms on local and central levels, to thus foster and control ‘least worst candidates’.

Design versus structure

The generally accepted meaning of democracy is popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality. How far has Indonesia moved towards this ideal? And how much further will it now

² The more comprehensive analysis will be produced in co-operation with a consortium of democracy scholars at the Universitas Gadjah Mada, led by Professors Mohtar Masoed and Pratikno, and doctors Aris Mundayat and Nico Warouw. The co-operation is within the framework of a joint international research and post-graduate programme on Power, Conflict and Democracy, involving additional colleagues at the University of Oslo and at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.
⁴ Sida is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.
go? Put differently: how much of the old Suharto-era oligarchy remains in place, still governing, but doing so via formally democratic elections? What if any are the chances to advance towards more meaningful democracy, in terms of sufficiently favourable means and capacities of ordinary people to really control, public affairs?

There are two predominant and rather extreme kinds of answers to these questions. The first comes from the ‘designers’. Beginning in the global third wave of democracy, from the late 1970s onwards, some concerned scholars and practitioners placed their faith in the design of a limited number of institutions. Get the institutions rights, such people argued, and democracy will flourish. They are the institutions dealing with civil and political liberties, the rule of law, free and fair elections, and ‘good governance’. At present, much of these ideas are applied in international agencies for democracy building such as the National Democratic Institute and International IDEA. In this view and by international standards among new but often poorly advancing democracies, Indonesia is doing alright, especially given the traumatic history of the elimination of the popular movements in 1965-66, and the more than thirty years of militarised capitalism that followed. Admittedly, the achievements which have been made testify to what is possible even under harsh conditions.

It is true that the designers acknowledge that the system poorly represents the real needs of ordinary people, but they believe that this problem too can be improved through better institutional design. The measures they propose include more direct elections of government executives, and ‘simplifying’ the political party system. The latter step would result in a few major parties that, although still elitist, would at least be able to develop policies, ‘pick up’ demands from society, recruit people for government jobs and supervise the executive. The designers think that popular representation from below is unrealistic. In their view, ‘deepening democracy’ is instead limited to direct participation by ‘responsible citizens’ in civil society, unfortunately excluding ‘the masses’.

The second answer comes from ‘structuralists’ on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The ‘structuralists’ use a similarly narrow definition of democracy but are much more pessimistic. They say that the structural conditions do not permit decent democracy. As a result, the oligarchs have retained their power and ordinary people their poverty. According to some structuralists, freedoms and elections have even generated worse identity politics, conflicts and corruption, and less economic growth.

Thus, there is a new emerging international thesis: that enlightened groups should ‘sequence democracy’. While major parts of the left focus on fighting global neo-liberalism, saying it blocks real democracy, the right wants to build solid institutions, ‘good governance’, growth alliances and organisations of ‘responsible citizens’, before entrusting the masses with full freedoms. This position is gaining ground in for instance many ministries for foreign affairs, conservative think tanks and development bodies such as the World Bank.

Alternative focus on universal factors in contextual processes

Both these arguments are theoretically and politically dubious. The first assumes that once the elites have agreed to the establishment of a few democratic institutions, democracy has been

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5 The introductory text in Indonesia was Crafting Indonesian Democracy, edited by Bill Liddle, Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2001
6 For a general statement to this effect, see the Policy Paper by Matthias Catón, Effective Party Assistance: Stronger Party for Better Democracy. Stockholm: International IDEA 2007.)
7 For a review of the argument, see the Thomas Carothers’ article in Journal of Democracy vol.18, no.1, 2007.
achieved. This is of course as naïve as stating that basic capitalist or socialist institutions always generate prosperity. Yet, most designers have at least held on to their belief in democracy.

That is not always the case with the structuralists. They insist that rather narrowly defined democracy is meaningful only if certain prerequisites have already been met: for the conventional left, this usually means greater social and economic equality, workers or the poor having strong bargaining power, and the like; for the right, it means strong institutions, good governance, associations of ‘responsible’ citizens and economic growth. As a result, the structuralists by definition exclude the possibility of creating such conditions through improved democracy. Instead, they become pessimistic about the promise of democracy, or argue that it should be limited or even postponed.

In between the two extremes (both applying a narrow definition of democracy but one engineering elite institutions, the other waiting for massive social change) democracy can be understood as a contextual process were universal dimensions can only be analysed in view of contending actors' democratic will and their political capacity to relate to the relations of power over time. A framework for such an analysis has been developed and applied in two national surveys of Indonesia’s democracy, the first in 2003-04, the second in 2007, by Demos, in co-operation with leading actors in the democracy movement and the Oslo and more recently Gadjah Mada Universities. Demos twice asked some 900 senior campaigners-cum-experts on democratisation in all provinces about the extent to which the actors and existing means of democracy in Indonesia really support the universally accepted aims. The first focus was on the performance, spread and scope of the 32 intrinsic instruments to promote and apply democracy (including major dimensions of equal citizenship, international law and human rights conventions, rule of law and justice, civil and political rights, economic and social rights, free and fair elections, good political representation, democratic and accountable government, freedom of media, press and academic freedoms, additional civic participation, direct participation). Second, questions were asked about the extent to which actors actually promoted, used or abused and even avoided these instruments of democracy. Third, attention was directed at the capacity of the actors to promote and use the instruments; (by being included in politics at large, having relevant sources of power, ability to transform them into authority and legitimacy, capacity to politicise main issues and interests, organise and mobilise collective action, as well as to approach decision making and executive institutions of governance, directly and/or by means of representation). The combined results from both surveys, which are being outlined in this report, make it clear that the extreme institutionalist and structuralist arguments are not just theoretically but also empirically mistaken.

Eight major conclusions

1. Deteriorating freedom

2. The fact that they have been selected on the basis of expertise within major field of democratisation, i.e.; (1) the struggle of peasants, agricultural labourers and fisher folks for their social, economic and other rights, (2) the struggle of labour for better working conditions and standard of living, (3) the struggle for the social, economic and other rights of the urban poor, (4) the promotion of human rights, (5) the struggle against corruption in favour of ‘good governance’, (6) democratization of the political parties and the party system, (7) the promotion of pluralism, religious and ethnic reconciliation and conflict resolution, (8) the improvement and democratisation of education, (9) the promotion of professionalism as part of ‘good governance’ in public and private sectors, (10) the promotion of freedom, independence and quality of media, (11) the promotion of gender equality and feminist perspectives, (12) the improvement of alternative representation at the local level, and (13) the promotion of sustainable development

3. For the full list of the 32 instruments, see Ch. 1 Box 1.1 and Table 1.1.

A first conclusion from these surveys is that while surprisingly many civil and political rights are being upheld, the advances have somewhat deteriorated since 2003-04. Informants say that in addition to major problems of the ‘freedom to form parties on the national or local level (or teams of independent candidates) that can recruit members, and participate in elections’ – to which we shall return –, the ‘freedoms of religion, belief, language and culture’, ‘freedom of speech, assembly and organisation’, ‘freedom of the press, art and academic world’, ‘citizens’ participation in extensive independent civil associations’ and ‘public access to and the reflection of different views within media, art and the academic world’ have also backslided.\(^\text{11}\)

(2) Improved governance
The second conclusion is that there has been a general improvement since 2003-04 in top-down efforts by government institutions to improve the miserable performance of the rule of law, particularly the control of corruption. These improvements are particularly noticeable with regard to the ‘subordination of the government and public officials to the rule of law’, ‘the equality before the law’, ‘the transparency and accountability of elected government and the executive’, ‘government’s independence from strong interest groups and capacity to eliminate corruption and abuse of power’, and the capacity of the government to combat paramilitary groups, hoodlums and organised crime. It is true that the improvements are from very low levels, but they remain commendable.

(3) Country-wide political community
Third, the disintegration of the centralistic New Order has not led to balkanisation, characterised by separatism and ethnic and religious cleansing. What has developed instead is a unitary political (rather than ethno-nationalist) community with extensive space for local politics. It is true that this space imply huge inequalities among the provinces and regions, and that it has often been occupied by powerful groups. The attempts to develop democratic politics on the basis of real issues and interests on the ground are under the threat by elitist and localised identity politics and economic globalisation. But in Aceh, where foreign donors have so far contained the military and big business and where separatists have been able to substitute political participation for armed struggle, decentralisation also paved the way for peace and potentially fruitful democracy; we shall return to the challenges.

(4) The relative stability of democracy rests with elitist inclusion of people
At the same time, politics in general continue to be dominated by the elite. Yet, the elite groups are more broadly-based, more localised and less militarised than under Suharto. Remarkably, most of them have adjusted to the new, supposedly democratic, institutions. This is not to say there are no abuses, but decentralisation and elections have enabled more diverse sections of Indonesia’s elite to mobilise popular support. Of course, elites often mobilise such support by making use of their clientelistic networks, their privileged control of public resources and their alliances with business and communal leaders. Yet, the interest of such elite groups in elections is both a crucial basis of the actually existing democracy and its major drawback. Without elite support, Indonesian democracy would not survive; with elite support, it becomes the domain of ‘rotten politicians’ who prosper and entrench themselves through corruption. (The research programs ‘Renegotiating Boundaries’ and ‘In Search of Middle Indonesia’ at the KITLV institute in the Netherlands ([www.kitlv.nl](http://www.kitlv.nl)) are providing comprehensive case studies in this area.) In short, beyond a number of freedoms, democratic institutions and people’s capacities remain weak. Yet, much of the required infrastructure is now in place. And in spite of their weaknesses and biases, Indonesia’s institutions are solid enough to accommodate powerful actors and at least partially alternative actors as well.

\(^\text{11}\) For the details, see Ch. 1, table 1.1.
Theoretically, this is the bottom line. It is the reason why Indonesia may be called an emerging democracy. In all these respects, Indonesia may thus begin to resemble India, the most stable democracy in the global South.

(5) Monopolisation of representation
So what would it take to make the most of this democratic potential? The major problem as compared to India is that Indonesia’s system of representation and elections is not even open enough for the possible inclusion of major interests among the people at large and also erects high barriers to participation by independent players. Civic and popular organisations are prevented from getting into organised politics. Moreover, these groups remain hampered by their own fragmentation and weak mass organisation. In this respect Indonesia still seriously lags behind. This is both in terms of what people and what issues and interests that are excluded.

First, the survey reveals that the powerful actors in society dominate politics and the political economy. Politics (including the executive) and ‘good contacts’ are their primary sources of power; ‘pure’ economic bases are less crucial. Alliances are mainly within the elite. Legitimacy is related to the ability to connect people and gain authoritative positions. The major issues on the agenda include hard issues of governance and economic development. Ordinary people are brought into politics primarily through clientelism and populism. Media is getting increasingly important as compared to comprehensive organisation.

Second, the ever-resourceful elites prevent ordinary people and their small parties from entering politics. Independent local parties are only allowed and functional in Aceh. Participation in elections in other parts of the country (even of local parliaments) calls for ‘national presence’ with branch offices virtually all over the country. Hence, it almost impossible to build more representative parties from below without having access to huge funds. (For those with such funds, however, it is rather easy to set up an eligible party and get represented, thus causing problems of efficient governance among squabbling elite politicians with special vested interests.) Further, only big parties or extensive coalitions may nominate candidates for elections of governors, mayors and regents. Aside from the elections of individual representatives from the provinces to an insignificant national assembly (DPD), independent candidates have been prohibited – and the newly announced ‘openings’ call again for huge resources on part of the candidates. In addition, candidates to various positions must have comparatively advanced formal schooling, thus excluding leaders from the labouring classes. Those running in village elections usually even have to share the substantial administrative costs. Similarly, there are no efficient measures to counter vested interests and private political financing or to promote internal party democracy. And the guidelines to foster equal gender representation have generated little result.

Third, there are no substantive efforts to foster direct democratic representation in public governance through local representatives and popular organisations based on interest and special knowledge such as trade unions and environmental movements – only privileged contacts and top-down selection of figures and groups. Hardly anywhere in Indonesia can we see substantive representation of crucial interests and ideas of the liberal middle classes, workers, peasants, the urban poor, women, or human rights and environmental activists.

(6) The risk: return to ‘politics of order’
The defunct representation is not only bad for democracy as such. It also undermines ordinary people’s chances to use it to foster their views and interests – and the possibilities to alter the unequal division of power that prevent socially and environmentally responsible development. In addition, the monopolisation of representation nourishes a general lack of trust in democracy. Most
worrying, upper and middle class groups who do not manage to win elections may well use this
discontent with elite democracy to gain wide support for alternatives to democracy and to promote
‘better preconditions’ through ‘politics of order’. Supporters of ‘middle class coups’ typically say that
they aim to prevent disruptive populist rule and to build stronger preconditions for democracy. Their
views find an echo in some of the previously mentioned international support for proper
‘sequencing’ of democracy. Indonesia has been down this path once before, in the 1960s, and it
gave rise to Suharto’s New Order regime; and similar dynamics has more recently been at work in
Thailand. In contemporary Indonesia, Vice President Jusuf Kalla’s statements on Poso and
similarly disturbed areas are cases in point. The message was that too early democratic elections
were behind the conflicts and that profitable business-driven development would be the best to
handle them. Other illustrations include the quest for presidentialism and stronger executives, the
‘streamlining’ of the party system towards a majoritarian two-party system, and general admiration
for Singapore and China’s attempts to introduce promote stability and economic growth ahead of
‘excessive’ democracy. Meanwhile religious activists argue for the need to reduce the public
sphere, but this time in favour of religious values, communities and leaders.

(7) The potential: popular representation
It is imperative, therefore, that civic and popular organisations are able to scale up their ideas and
alliances. By connecting communities and workplaces, and local and central levels, they can
challenge elite control over politics. Demos’ survey and case studies suggest, however, that the
scaling up into organised politics is not only hampered by elitist monopolisation of politics but also
by civic groups and political activists themselves.

First, the survey reveals that even if many alternative actors now try to enter into politics to not just
be confined to civil society activity, many challenges remain ahead. One is the poor presence within
state, politics and business as well as in related workplaces. Another is that the sources of power
and the ways of gaining authority and legitimacy remain focused on knowledge and public
discourse at the expense of organisation, attempts to gain public mandates and win elections.
Moreover, the issues that are put on the agenda typically focus on specific rights and complaints,
neglecting broader perspectives of how to promote better governance, development and public
welfare. Finally and in spite of advances, civic groups remain poorly connected to social
movements and popular organisations (and vice versa); collective action is mainly based on
individual networking, popular leaders or alternative patronage as against broad and representative
organisation; and attempts to approach elections, parliaments and the executive remain primarily
by way of media, NGOs and pressure and lobby groups.

Second, comparative case studies show that the problems in these respects are typically
addressed instead by either bringing together people on the grass-roots level or by top-down
organising – or by attempts to facilitate issue-specific direct connections between people and the
executive or leading politicians. In many instances, these efforts are quite impressive and
stimulating. To mention but one, the local peasants’ organisations in Batang in Central Java, have
rallied behind broader agendas and won a number of village elections. They now wish to scale up
to the regional level. But so far the only major opening has been in Aceh, thanks to the unique
possibility of building parties from below and of launching independent candidates after the peace
treaty.

Moreover, the results point to a number of problems. Unity from below has proved difficult because
of the myriad of specific issues, approaches and contending projects and leaders. Politics aiming at
majorities behind common platforms calls for ways of combining different specialisations and
interests, such as among peasants and plantation laborers. There must be convincing agendas for
necessary alliances and equal-citizen-based governance. Loose networking and polycentric action – the methods favoured by most Indonesia’s NGOs and pro-democracy activists – are not enough.

However, attempts to compensate for this by way of socialist or other ideologies, centrally co-ordinated new or established organisations (some with charismatic figures at the helm), or simply the creation of a joint political vehicle or individual candidates offering support in return for popular votes, tend to preserve top-down structures and generate divisions among social movements and popular and civic organisations.

The alternative attempts to by-pass ‘dirty politics’ by facilitating direct linkages between ‘people’ and the executives (inspired by for instance participatory budgeting) are no doubt important supplements but have little to say on how to co-ordinate different sections of ‘the people’, scale up the operation beyond the local and facilitate fair representation. Elsewhere, in fact, the latter has called for top-down measures through for instance the office of a governor or mayor.

(8) The recommendation: Democratic Political Blocks

Hence, there are two major lessons: First, basic popular and civic groups must co-ordinate instead on an intermediate political level, between the specific grass-roots issues and the top-level perspectives. This is in order to define joint platforms, wide support and alliances, and control genuine politicians – rather than being the victim of fragmentation and dominated by various parties or political actors. Second, this may also be the level on which it is possible to combine parliamentary and extra parliamentary activity, as well as representative and direct participation. Demos’ recommendation is thus that democratic social movements, popular and civic associations wishing to engage in politics should build co-ordinated Democratic Political Blocks on local and central levels.

Such political blocks call for leadership and commitment to the building of democracy through popular mandates and accountability, both within and between organisations and in relation to elections. Unfortunately, many democracy activists are unlikely to become involved in democratic representation and electoral politics so long as it easier for them to lobby and network. Organising constituencies and winning majorities in elections takes hard work. Further, party-political activists need to realise that there will never be one party only among pro-democrats. Hence they need to avoid dominating and dividing basic social movements and popular organisations. (Politicians may well participate in building Political Blocks, but as members of the movements and associations, not as party-leaders and candidates.)

Yet, such efforts are not impossible. The Acehnese even proved that progress is feasible in spite of very poor preconditions – if the party system is de-monopolised to allow for local parties and independent candidates, and if civic and political organisations are willing and sufficiently well-organised to win votes and thus take advantage of the democratic openings. It is true that Aceh at present are up against the lack of firmly and democratically organised interest and issue based movements that can put vital problems on the agenda and keep parties and leaders accountable. There is a risk, therefore, that clientelist and populist means of political inclusion (and associated favouritism and corruption) will dominate, as elsewhere in Indonesia. This must be countered by creating broad demands from below for political facilitation by the newly elected leaders (and supportive donors) of participatory democratic institutions.

Moreover, it is also true that the situation beyond Aceh is even less favourable. The chances of building political representation from below have been almost totally blocked. According to the recent legislation, participation in elections in other parts of the country (even of local parliaments)
calls for ‘national presence’ with branch offices in 60% of the provinces, 50% of the regencies and municipalities, and 25% of the sub-districts. Even the heroic attempt by social and political activists in PPR (Partai Perserikatan Rakyat) to measure up to the demands has failed. Similarly, the demands on the mobilisation of signatures of independent candidates in direct elections are so high that one needs to be a local equivalent of Italy’s Berlusconi to stand a chance. Women, moreover, still tend to be subordinated. And no ordinary workers, peasants and fisher folks can run in even village elections because of lack of supposedly ‘sufficient’ formal education and demands to pay for the basic administrative costs.

In short, it is true that all people are allowed to vote, but women (who are not well connected) and poor and subordinated people are de-facto prevented from standing as candidates and trying to develop popular representation. Hence, the immediate need to develop well organised and non-party-dominated Political Blocks – to foster independent popular influence within organised politics in-spite of elitist monopolisation.