The Downside of Indonesia’s Successful Liberal Democratisation and the Way Ahead
Notes from the participatory surveys and case studies 2000-2016

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Abstract

Indonesia is a critical case of liberal democratisation. While most old dominant actors were included in compromises towards democracy, they were expected to turn democrats by adjusting to the new institutions, and the pro-democrats were expected to propel change from civil society. However, the recurrent participatory surveys and follow-up studies summarised here point to remarkable freedoms along with deplorable governance and representation. The major causes are biased institutions of representation and weak political capacity of the crucial actors of change within modern business and among middle classes and labourers. Advances presuppose new ways to represent their interests.

By August 1998, three months after Indonesian autocrat Suharto stepped down in the context of economic crisis and student-led demonstrations for democracy, leading scholars and experts were brought together in Jakarta by the Institute of Sciences and the Ford Foundation to discuss how democracy might be crafted. In reply to sceptics who worried about the applicability of the liberal model of agreements among the elite with roots in Spain and Latin America, comparativists concluded ‘we just give you the framework, you fill it in’. This is what was to happen. Two months later, moderate leaders turned down the pro-democracy activists’ idea of a transitional government, opening up instead for quick elections. By implication, only the leaders, parties and socio-religious organisations that had coexisted with Suharto stood a fair chance. Principled pro-democrats were advised to align themselves with the old mainstream, or to be active in civil society. The assumption was that the old leaders would become democrats when adjusting to the new institutions, and that civil society would act from below to improve the system.

From the liberal point of view, this framework proved remarkably successful. Larry Diamond has shown on the basis of broad comparative surveys that Indonesia is a success case, aside from persistent corruption and poor rule of law. Advances include demilitarisation, reduced communal conflicts and separatism, more liberties, vibrant elections, and extensive civil society. David Horowitz has argued, moreover, that one reason for success is that the decisive actors have been accommodated through laudable institutional design.

However, given that the largest of the new democracies is thus a celebrated test case for the liberal model, a critical question is how the pro-democrats that were sidelined after the fall of Suharto interpreted the dynamics. Have they anything to add?
Many of the dissidents dropped out while others linked up with the established actors and were absorbed by mainstream politics. A majority, however, joined civil society and negated ‘crook politics’. Some of the latter dissidents subscribed to the arguments that democracy is a naïve endeavour as long as the state and politics is dominated by oligarchs, or as long as politics and the judiciary are ridden by corruption. But others searched for alternatives. For example, concerned researchers and investigative journalists, along with reflective activists, revisited the state of the democracy movement. Their major conclusion was that most groups were short of social and political foundations, almost ‘floating’ as ordinary people were made to be under the Suharto dictatorship. Hence it was high time to ‘go politics’ again, but what were the problems and options?

To find out, the researchers took David Beetham’s framework for assessing the quality of liberal democratic institutions as a point of departure, adding questions of special importance to deliberative and social democratic perspectives. Thereafter, all indicators were condensed as a way to provide space for analyses of democratisation. Hence two sets of factors were added: one, the identification of the major mainstream actors that had co-existed with Suharto and the principled pro-democrats, who were labelled as ‘dominant’ and ‘alternative’ actors as time passed; two, analyses of these actors’ willingness and capacity to foster the democratic rules and develop democratic policies. The additional variables were not to invite statistical analysis, but to test crucial arguments about whether and how further democratisation would come about, such as the character of citizenship, the scope of public affairs, and the ability to put issues on the agenda, to mobilise and organise people, and to foster representation.

Similarly, no statistical samples of respondents were identified, relying instead on the possibly best grounded experts on democratisation in various sectors around the country. This was done with strict principles of merit and in consultation with publicly identified democracy groups and key informants. Thereby it was possible to conduct three rounds of interviews (each time) with between 700 and 900 experts on the basis of about 60 questions (with numerous alternative answers and comments) from 2003 till 2013. The results were then supplemented by case studies of the most crucial issues and deliberated with the informants. All kinds of challenges were involved, but the number of drop outs was remarkably low, despite the highly time-consuming interviews, and there was no major critique of misrepresentation beyond valid points on insufficient inclusion of women activists and union leaders among the informants. Moreover, in contrast to the often-hyped statements by pundits in metropolitan media, the fear of biased answers from pro-democracy informants came to nothing in face of their cautious and self-critical answers.

All major results and data are now available for further analyses, and a number of case studies are out or on their way. But in view of Indonesia’s importance in the general discussion about the problems of democracy, some of the main conclusions may be of wider interest.

**More freedoms than democratic governance**

There is little doubt about the liberal advances; the pro-democrats themselves confirm them. There are certainly a number of qualifications. Case studies reveal, for example, that freedom
of assembly and expression are upheld selectively; that citizen rights are used by sectarian
groups and ‘task forces’ which do not respect the rights of others; that the suppression in
school and public life of the history of crimes against humanity holds back civil rights and
democracy; that the situation remains deplorable in parts of West Papua, Central Sulawesi and
Aceh in particular. But the general assessments are positive, especially with regard to the
freedom of speech and organisation, which now only 9% of the informants deem bad rather
than fair or good. Almost the same applies to equal citizenship and human rights, where only
18% consider them to be bad. Moreover, even the pro-democracy informants say that
democratic rules and regulation are not only supported by some 61% of the alternative actors
but also by roughly 48% of the dominant actors. The serious abusers are down to 7 and 29%
respectively. So, thus defined, democracy seems to be ‘the only game in town’, and the
liberal strategy of fostering elite compromises in support of democratic rules and regulations
has no doubt been feasible.

However, the grounded experts also affirm the mainstream assessment that governance is
lagging behind. About one third of the informants deem the level of rule of law, equal rights
to justice, and impartial governance to be particularly bad, and almost the same applies to the
quality of parties and elections. Most actors seem to have appreciated freedoms but not
democratic governance. While the informants have become more positive over the years, they
now also point to stagnation: 60% say that the democratic institutions in general have not
improved or have become worse between 2009 and 2013. In other words, the liberal
assumptions that institutions are so crucial that adherence to them would make mainstream
actors democratic and that liberties and stronger civil society would generate progress are in
doubt. How can this be explained?

The accommodation dilemma

The informants’ initial answer is that the first pillar in the liberal model of fostering
compromises within the elite, and thus also including the most powerful actors, has generated
stability but also problems. In short, the informants support the thesis of leading scholars of
Indonesian politics, such as Edward Aspinall, that there is an ‘irony of success’, i.e. that the
price for achievements is that the main potential adversaries (the military, oligarchs,
ethnoregional elites, and militant Islamists) have been accommodated into the system along
with patronage and corruption. Generally, while physical force is no longer a decisive
source of political authority and legitimacy for the dominant actors (below 10% of the
informants’ responses), money and ‘good contacts’ have become increasingly important
(about 46 and 32% respectively). According to the informants, for example, almost 60% of
the dominant actors that are elected public officials own or operate large business.

Yet, the informants also state that most dominant actors do not have roots in Suharto’s regime
(only about 26%). Instead, most of them seem to be of more recent origin, at times with a
background in civil society organisations. Similarly, as Marcus Mietzner has stressed, some
potentially progressive actors have penetrated parties and public administration. Hence, the
accommodation of the powerful actors and the importance of what some scholars have called
‘oligarch democracy’ may not be the only explanations for the problems.
Unfair institutions of representation

The informants’ supplementary answer to why democratic institutions, new actors, and civil society are not doing better is that the existing parties and widespread free and fair elections, along with many participatory practices, are not only dominated by the most powerful actors but also typically fail to open up for fair representation of progressive interests and collective actors. The informants point to some improvements, but the common estimates are almost as negative as those of the quality of rule of law and impartial governance. Citizen participation but also interest- and issue-based representation are deemed particularly bad. The frequent results from other studies and media reporting about crooked politicians and elitist parties, vote buying, patronage, and clientelism are thus confirmed.

Our case studies also stress that people without good formal education are barred from running as candidates, even locally and even though they may be experienced and knowledgeable. Likewise, active civil servants (including teachers) remain prevented from candidacy, even though their subordination to authoritarian regimes has been severely reduced and participation could be combined with strict rules on impartiality at work. This certainly adds to the dominance of actors from business and private organisations with their own special interests. Moreover, the conditions for parties to be allowed to participate in elections remain extremely stringent. Although the mission to consolidate a unified political system in the country is completed, parties wanting to field a candidate even in local elections are still required to demonstrate a physical presence in the country at large. For those without massive economic resources and exceptionally ‘good contacts’, it is thus next to impossible to build a party and participate in elections in Indonesia, especially with an alternative democratic party. The exception to allow local parties in Aceh, as part of the internationally brokered peace accord in 2005, served well to facilitate the country’s unification, but the democratic opening was soon undermined without significant critique from liberals inside and outside the country. As reformists advanced within the new democratic space, the conservative former-rebel leaders were given special benefits that undermined their reformist opponents in return for abstaining from resuming armed struggle and for mobilising votes for the president and his party in the national elections.

Instead, the main liberal strategy has been to introduce individual candidates in the context of party lists and to promote direct elections of political executives. The effect thereof has been even more personality-oriented money politics and that only a few progressive candidates have been elected as members of mainstream parties and to the powerless Regional Representative Council and also as village leaders, regents, mayors, and governors. However, the particular challenge of winning direct elections for political executives by way of traditional individually oriented patronage has given rise to what James Manor has identified as ‘post-clientelist’ methods. In Indonesia this is mainly by way of populism, including by gaining personal popularity as being against the establishment, and by building supposedly direct relations with broad unspecified sections of the population. These efforts have no doubt opened up new avenues for alternative actors that can help provide popularity and popular support, as in the case of activists’ cooperation with the current reform-oriented president Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo – but also for conservative and religious leaders, as well as
for established parties that may rally behind popular independent candidates. Moreover, in both cases there are few if any democratic institutions for representation and negotiations. We shall return to the implications.

Meanwhile Suharto’s state-corporatist system of top-down appointed and thoroughly controlled ‘functional groups’ was effectively broken down, but the results of the attempts at instead promoting direct participation at the local level have been mixed. The typical critique is of elite dominance, even in the context of the new village-level governance reforms. There have also been exciting attempts at initiating commissions and central and local advisory boards on issues such as corruption, human rights, and planning. These are potentially important institutionalised linkages between state and society that adds to general elections and may weaken the importance of ‘good contacts’. A major conclusion in this essay is that they should be expanded but also democratised, since the members tend to be selected in their individual capacities and appointed in accordance with the vested interests of the parliamentarians and executive politicians. Hence, the members cannot act as representatives of democratic issue and interest organisations and other communities.

**Weak democratic capacity**

The informants’ third answer to why democratisation has stalled is that the freedoms and emphasis on decentralisation and civil society (of which there is little doubt) have not significantly improved the political capacity of potentially progressive actors. The more recent movements in response to the uneven economic development point to advances in terms of collective action but also come with problems of populism.

While the dominant actors are able to rely on superior economic resources and ‘good contacts’, the alternative actors have rarely developed any collective counter-powers of sorts, such as protests and mass organisation, but have relied on culture and knowledge. Moreover, the importance of the latter has been reduced (from 37% of the responses in 2009 to 25% in 2013); and the role of ‘good contacts’ and economic resources have increased (from 32 to 52% and 10 to 15% respectively).28

Similarly, the dominant actors have sustained their ability to decide the political agenda with wide sets of values, issues, and general promises. By contrast, the alternative actors retreated in 1999 from their previous overall focus on resisting the Suharto regime, often on the basis of a combination of class interests and demands for democracy, to anti-state and self-management in civil society, plus advocacy and campaigns on single issues such as human rights, gender, governance (including corruption), the environment, and separate attention to the plight of farmers, urban poor, and workers. Much of this tendency is still present, as is the lack of long-term policies for stepwise change. However, there is one crucial change since the second survey. The previously prime emphasis on the just mentioned single issues and focus on self-help and self-management has given way to much more emphasis on welfare issues and quests for public governance. By now, 55% of the informants say that social welfare such as health and education are the most important public matters while governance scores 30% and citizenship 14%. Moreover, 66% say that state and local government should manage the welfare issues. Similarly, according to the informants, the
most important actors also focus on welfare, especially the dominant actors (40% of responses) but also the alternative (33%). Actually, the alternative actors’ preoccupation with human rights and governance is down to 22 and 14% respectively. Interestingly, however, politicians, along with state and local government, do not seem to deliver, because the answers to where people turn with their problems point more in the direction of citizens’ own engagement and, for example, socio-religious organisations.

Our case studies too point in this direction. There are signs of counter movement against the drawbacks of the uneven economic development and deficits of public welfare and services. Most of the activists who used to negate the state and ‘dirty politics’ and celebrated the liberal emphasis on civil society and self-management now ask politicians and governments to consider more decent wages, the development of a welfare state, and environmentally responsible compromises to handle chaotic urban growth. The best illustration is the successful broad alliance between 2010 and 2012 for a universal public health reform among unions and civil society organisations together with urban poor and informal labourers as well as supportive politicians. Similarly, the current president Jokowi advanced to power much thanks to efforts at public welfare and urban development while also negotiating with urban poor organisations. Yet, other populist-oriented politicians too have tried similar methods of attracting broad support, often by employing transactional money politics and by exploiting religious identities. So, in spite of the growing importance of demands for public welfare, the dominant politicians have managed to stay in command and retain hegemony, whereas the movements based on popular interest and activists remain short of alternatives and are tailing behind. In fact, the alternative actors’ capacity to develop long-term policies remains weak, so the struggles for the health reform did not continue in favour of more comprehensive welfare policies.

The previous focus on single issues tends to be associated with methods of mobilising people such as lobbying and networking plus alternative patronage of vulnerable people rather than broad membership-based organisations. However, the increasing focus on the interests of labour in particular as well as social rights and welfare have come with greater mobilisation and organisation in this sector and behind populist-oriented politicians and their parties. Frequent methods include populism, mainly characterised by anti-elitism and supposedly direct relations between charismatic leaders and notoriously undefined ‘people’. This is most common among dominant actors (59%) but also with alternative actors (41%). Meanwhile clientelism and patronage are still in use (17 and 24% respectively) as is networking (6 and 10%), but movement coordination is trailing behind (6 and 10%). Related information adds the role of social media and confirms the limited importance of organisation as compared to mobilisation. For example, only 5% of the actors in general turn to democratic organisations or institutions as means of overcoming problems of exclusion.

The grounded informants’ experiences are particularly worrying when it comes to the alternative actors’ strategies and related means of representation to gain influence and foster policies. The main method to address problems is still to turn to institutions of self-governance and private governance (51% of responses). It is true that actors also turn to institutions for stakeholders to advance their claims (24%) and to the judiciary (10%), but
these are ridden with problems of representation and corruption, and the political institutions are tailing behind (10%). In terms of mediators, moreover, civil society organisations and media remain at the top (49%) along with informal leaders (13%) while interest organisations and political organisations come far behind (between 10 and 12% each).

To put it bluntly, the main strategy seems to be to establish linkages with friends in influential positions rather than with people with similar problems. Strategies to widen one’s base come to 24% while campaigning via media, advocacy, and lobbying totals to 44%. In short, the major effect of liberal democratisation is that there are few reformist strategies in the first place – that is, plans for stepwise advances like building an alliance in order to promote a particular public reform, which in turn may enable a wider coalition of actors to implement a follow-up reform that may promote more inclusive development, better welfare systems, improved education, and greater democracy. Most of our informants instead conceptualise strategies in terms of calculations on how to gain the best-possible contacts within state and politics, to thus gain access to influential political positions and as much public resources as possible in effort to foster their own interests, projects, and organisations outside the state and government. In short, the idea of developing reform proposals, and to mobilise the widest-possible support for them, and for their impartial implementation through improved state and government services, seems to be almost absent among alternative actors. Under liberal democratisation, most alternative actors are simply so weak that the rational prime focus is lobbying and ‘getting access’ to resources for their activities outside the state and government, rather than trying to win elections or building mass organisations and broad alliances.

The way ahead

In conclusion it is true that advances have been made during recent years, primarily in the context of the broad alliance of unions, civil society organisations, and progressive politicians for the public health reform. There has also been mobilisation behind and in favour of reformist populists like Jokowi – mainly along his route to the presidential palace, less when in office. In fact, our empirical studies indicate that the so-far fragmented and weak actors of change in Indonesia might be able to build the kind of broader counter movements against the tortuous liberal economic development that Karl Polanyi identified during the 1930s. The chaotic urban growth has fostered compromises between sections of business, middle classes, and urban poor. Many of them wish to build more liveable cities by fighting capital accumulation based on dispossessing citizens of land and other resources rather than on production. The most well-known cooperation was brokered by Jokowi in Solo on Central Java and in Jakarta before he was elected president. Moreover, some organised workers have begun to realise the necessity of linking up with the growing number of contract and self-employed labourers in order not to lose out under the global reign of flexibility and subcontracting, but stand a chance when fighting for more and decent jobs and better welfare schemes. This was the background for the broad movement for the national public-health insurance. Numerous middle-class people who work under precarious conditions are also worried and in favour of public welfare. Their willingness to pay taxes for such services
(instead of seeking private solutions) certainly presupposes trust in actors advocating effective and impartial public administration. But the same demand for impartial public administration also applies to the coalitions for liveable cities as well as to the wider alliances among labourers in favour of better work and welfare schemes. Therefore, all these movements may add demands for better governance. The signs of such potentials in Indonesia are somewhat similar to the recent dynamics that carried the Indian Common People’s Party (AAP) into local government in New Delhi.44 Most importantly, such broad unity in favour of well-implemented reforms towards decent work relations and welfare may foster wider and better-organised collective action. And well-organised actors, in turn, are fundamental for democratic routes to economic improvements through the historical social-growth pacts that preceded comprehensive welfare states.

As concluded in a recent study on ‘Reinventing Social Democratic Development’, this would thus be an upside-down scenario. By way of comparison, the Scandinavian history of broad labour movements countered the global economic crises via pre-Keynesian public works and investments, and then engaged in social-growth pacts between well-organised representatives of capital and labour, which generated capacity and interest (even among employers) in welfare reforms that also fostered economic development. In contrast, the possible scenario in countries in the Global South, where uneven development prevails and organisation is weak and fragmented, is that struggles for rights, welfare, and impartial implementation pave the way for more unified strong organisations and social growth pacts.

But the basic problem for alternative actors remains that of building such broad alliances and then sustaining them. Moreover, the actors also remain fragmented because of poor popular- and interest-based representation. As previously noted, this makes it more rational for actors to gain access to good contacts and resources within state and government (and the private sector), rather than mobilising and organising as many as possible behind joint demands and public policies that step-by-step could improve democracy and people’s capacity to use it, and foster social equality combined with inclusive and sustainable economic growth.45

Hence, there must be more institutions of representation that foster democratic collective action behind long-term gradual policies to transform the troublesome conditions. The present actors in control of decisions on electoral reforms have their own fingers in the pie and are unlikely to proceed. Moving on seems to call instead for more social aspects of democratisation and better representation of those interests that historically have proven more engaged in fostering equal inclusive development.

In short, the coordinators of the participatory research conclude that the main priority of democratisation should now be the promotion of social democratic representation of issue and interest groups to complement liberal democratic elections and direct citizen participation. As already mentioned, a first step may be to demand democratisation of the current commissions and central and local advisory boards that so far involve top-down selected civil society leaders. In addition, there is a need to expand the institutions by the inclusion of democratic unions, employers’ associations, and civil society organisations in the development and
implementation of reforms towards effective governance and welfare schemes that promote inclusive development. The policy areas are a matter of priority and must certainly be decided by politicians elected on the basis of citizens’ preferences. But Suharto’s top-down appointment of delegates as well as the current selection in accordance with the vested interests of crooked politicians should be replaced by impartial and transparent public facilitation of representatives selected by and accountable to those who build nation-wide democratic issue and interest organisations. One step in the right direction is that civil society organisations that advise President Jokowi’s Chief of Staff Teten Masduki have been allowed to appoint their own representatives. But popular mass organisations remain on the outside. Further sources of inspiration may include the possibilities to widen the International Labour Organization’s principles of tripartite labour-market negotiations to other sectors and actors. The democratic representation of the crucial but neglected issues and interests may also address the abuse of powers among politicians and bureaucrats, as well as enhance the political capacity of actors of change. But would this be politically feasible in Indonesia?

Reform-oriented leaders who are less elitist, such as Jokowi, need support from not just powerful actors but also citizen organisation, unions, and other interest organisations. As we have seen, there are signs that the latter can come together behind demands for decent work relations, welfare reforms, and efficient and fair implementation of related services. The crucial question that calls for more research is whether or not they can also agree on demanding democratic representation in the development and implementation of such policies (to thus also increase their own capacity), and whether or not political leaders and employers with an interest in inclusive development would realise, then, that such agreements might be in their favour too. This has not yet materialised. For the time being, political leaders such as Jokowi’s ally the present governor of Jakarta (Basuki Tjahaja ‘Ahok’ Purnama) have downgraded the importance of negotiating with the urban poor, thus opening up for other powerful politicians and even Muslim extremists to gain their support. And potentially progressive actors such as unions have returned to transactional politics and rally behind the leaders that promise the best patronage in return for popular support with whatever means, at worst engaging in religious identity politics.

Internationally, support for the alternative route may be provided by development, labour, and prodemocracy organisations in favour of broad agendas and agreements. Such partnership need not be politically partisan to particular parties. (But democratically stronger issue and interest organisations are of course also the best base for the development of less elitist and oligarch-driven parties.) In terms of democracy studies, we believe it is time to abstain for a while from making huge assessments (such as ours) and correlations of factors involved and focus instead on whether and how the problems of moving ahead can be met and how the options can be best analysed and fostered.

2 Expressed by Alfred Stepan. (Törnquist’s notes from the meeting).

Discourses in research and policy remain unresolved.

Their lack of a popular base and transformative policies remains unresolved.

Their new Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), and are able to effectively convey their bold women leadership and certain social democratic ideas, succeed in mobilising sufficient financial support to establish chapters of Pro-democracy Actors through a Welfare Political Block. Ongoing projects in Indonesia, Kerala, and the Philippines."


34. Savirani, A. and Törnquist, O. (eds) *Reclaiming the State*.
36. Savirani, A. and Törnquist, O. (eds) *Reclaiming the State*. 83-90, incl Table 5.4B.
37. Savirani, A. and Törnquist, O. (eds) *Reclaiming the State*. Tables 5.4 and 5.4A.
42. Savirani, A. and Törnquist, O. (eds) *Reclaiming the State*. Table 6.5 (per cent of responses).
44. For further analyses and references, see Törnquist, O. and Harriss, J, with Chandhoke, N and Engelstad, F. *Reinventing Social Democratic Development: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Comparisons*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).