



Challenges to Indonesia's Democratic Consolidation

by Dewi Fortuna Anwar

While there is a general consensus that Indonesia must become a democracy, consolidating the democratic processes will be an uphill struggle. As a relatively young state that only achieved independence in 1945 after a long period of colonialism, Indonesia faces numerous internal problems related to the issues of national integration and nationbuilding. Indonesia's problems are compounded by the fact that not only is the country geographically vast and fragmented, but the population is also vast and fragmented, while resources to govern the country effectively are limited.

With a population of about 210 million people, Indonesia is the fourth most populous country, spread across an archipelago of over 18,000 islands. The population is composed of over 400 different ethnic groups with distinct cultures and languages, who are further divided into five major religious groups, Islam, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Hindu and Buddhism. While Islam is the predominant religion there are areas in which the other religions are dominant or where two religions are equally represented. It is also important to note that over 70% of the Indonesian population have primary education of less, and while Indonesia had achieved the status of a middle income country immediately before the Asian financial crisis, it has now slipped back into the rank of a less developed country. In struggling to develop democracy and an orderly political transition, Indonesia has faced numerous and simultaneous threats to national unity which can seriously jeopardize the democratization process.

One of the most serious challenges to the democratization process in Indonesia since Suharto's resignation has been the breakdown of law and order. After a long period of social and political restrictions compounded by economic inequality, Indonesia was faced with a near anarchical situation in the period immediately before and after President Habibie replaced President Suharto. As the military, the police, and the legal institutions had mostly been the instruments of political power under the New Order system, their credibility has utterly been undermined with the collapse of the Suharto regime. The financial crises that had affected the urban poor most, compared to other groups in society, led to a period of lawlessness in which rioting and looting, seen as a revenge of the under-class against the economically-privileged, seemed to be the order of the day. The law enforcement body seemed to be helpless, not only because of the great number of incidents and the limited number of the law enforcement personnel, but also because they had found it impossible to act effectively due to their lack of credibility in the eye of the public. The situation has improved considerably in the past few months, but law enforcement continues to be a major obstacle and will greatly determine the course of Indonesia's democratic transition. As experience in other countries show, continuing

social unrest and lawlessness will make it difficult for democracy to take roots as democracy operates best in an atmosphere of peace, legal certainty, and economic prosperity.

Religious, racial and ethnic pluralities have also posed major problems for democracy in Indonesia. The existence of these basic social differences has made it even more compelling for Indonesia to adopt a democratic system of government where the rights of every component of society will be protected. Yet in the past it had been argued that Indonesia's heterogenous population could only be kept at peace with each other through the use of force, and by strictly forbidding any open discussion about differences in ethnicity, religion, race, and social-economic classes. The outbreak of bloody conflicts among different ethnic and religious groups in various parts of the country after Suharto's resignation and the relaxation of government control is a major cause of concern for Indonesia's future stability. It is generally recognized that the outbreak of social conflicts has mostly been due to the past policy of repression when people were not free to express their dissatisfaction against the government or against perceived favoritism towards one group over another. Democratization is seen as an important setup towards controlling the potential processes. Yet, democracy also has the potential for exacerbating differences as politicians try to attract votes among particular ethnic or religious groups by emphasizing their differences with the others.

Regional dissatisfaction with the centralization of power in the capital, which in certain areas has led to armed insurgencies and demands for independence, has also been a major problem in Indonesia since the transition to democracy took place. The lifting of the strong hand of the central government has emboldened secessionist rebels in Aceh and led to demands for a referendum in both Aceh and Irian Jaya, particularly after East Timor was allowed to exercise its right of self determination.

The fall of constitutional democracy in Indonesia after a brief experiment in the 1950's, and the imposition of an increasingly authoritarian rule dominated by the military since 1959 until Suharto's resignation, had largely been justified by the argument that this form of government was necessary to keep the country united and politically stable. The constant changes of government under the parliamentary system in the 1950's had directly contributed to a series of regional rebellions. Maintaining national unity remains a major preoccupation of Indonesians, particularly after witnessing the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and the endless conflicts that follow. Nevertheless, it is important to note that few advocate a return to repressive policy to maintain national unity. Instead, it has been generally recognized that in order to overcome regional dissatisfactions not only is there a need for a more democratic system of government but, of even greater importance, there must be substantive regional

autonomy and fairer sharing of revenues between the central and the regional governments.

While the financial crisis has forced Indonesians to realize the economic liberalization cannot indefinitely be carried out without equal liberalization in the political field, and that good corporate governance depends on good governance as a whole, the crisis has also made it much more difficult to carry out the necessary reforms in the bureaucracy and the legal system. It is recognized that a functioning democracy needs a politically neutral and professional bureaucracy, particularly if Indonesia wishes to restore and develop its economy. Yet lack of capacity to carry out major bureaucratic restructuring – due to the shortage of funds, human resources, and technology – will continue to be a major problem for Indonesia in the years to come.

The Asian financial crisis has accelerated Indonesia's transition to democracy. In a study carried out in 1995 it was envisaged that Indonesia would need at least 15 years to complete its transition to democracy by reforming electoral laws, limiting and ending the military's social-political roles, and promoting the development of civil and political liberties as a whole by allowing freedom of expression and assembly. As it turns out the political crisis emanating from the financial crisis has forced the Indonesian government to reform the political system and carry out a transition to democracy within less than a year. The lack of time to prepare for the first truly democratic general elections since 1955 was compensated by the political will and the general determination to end the political impasse caused by Suharto's fall from power.

Yet the financial crisis has also posed serious social and political problems which, while on the one hand make the need for democratization even more urgent, on the other hand make the struggle to consolidate the democratic processes even more difficult. Social conflicts, crimes, and regional rebellions caused by unfulfilled expectations, despair, and jealousies have plagued the country in the past two years since the financial crises began to unfold. Rising expectations and declining capacity to meet them have been at the roots of much of the social ills that have taken place. Democratization is considered to be an important key to resolve many of the social, political, and economic problems, but democracy alone will not be sufficient. The challenges of maintaining social harmony, national unity, law and order, and economic growth will continue to bedevil Indonesia for many years to come.

Dewi Fortuna Anwar is Assistant Minister/State Secretary for Foreign Affairs in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her comments are derived for a paper presented at an Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies conference in Honolulu and reflect her personal views only.