

Democracy and empowerment:

# Guaranteeing more stability or triggering new conflict?

*After dictator Suharto stepped down in 1998, Indonesia embarked on the difficult path towards democracy – difficult, not least, because expectations were too high and the pace of democratization was too slow. This led to numerous violent conflicts. But not all of them should be blamed on the transition from dictatorship to democracy.*

The transition from authoritarian to democratic forms of government is often fraught with difficulties for the people in countries undergoing this major change. New democracies are susceptible to atavistic longings for stability and security. The message instilled far too long into the populations of these countries is that freedom and responsibility are an unholy alliance and the business of government is better left to a single leader or at least to a select elite. The people's low level of education and their supposed lack of readiness for democracy are the reasons most often cited to justify delaying, if not blocking, the introduction of democratic forms of government. Not surprisingly, this view generally emanates not from the «man in the street» but from the elite at the heart of government.

## Stability and government power

A similar situation arises with regard to the concept of «stability» – stability for one person often means instability for another. Dictatorships are so popular with foreign investors because the rules are clear and therefore appear to offer stability: the «first family» must be granted a share of the profits, and in return, the dictator will guarantee «legal security». In practice, this may mean that entire villages have to be resettled so that the investor can build his power station or

highways and that the local communities are forcibly evicted and deprived of their legal rights. But this type of instability rarely flows into the overall calculations. However, stability does not necessarily mean growth, peace and legal security; it can also mean stagnation, inertia and the absence of development. Too much stability can actually undermine development. The fact that in the public debate, authoritarian regimes are equated with order, stability and progress, whereas democracy is associated with instability and chaos, should give us democrats cause for concern. Perhaps the slogan should not be «fit for democracy» but «fit through democracy».

Social conflicts per se can be quite positive phenomena. Indeed, it could be argued that progress is impossible without conflict. But fledgling democracies face a serious threat if conflicts escalate into violence, into so-called «deep-rooted conflicts» (*Democracy and deep-rooted conflict*; IDEA, Stockholm, 1998), which have two key features. The first is «identity», which serves as a rallying point for the mobilization of ethnic, religious, cultural and other groups. The second is «distribution», which determines the mechanisms controlling the use of natural, political, social and economic resources in a given society. In «divided» societies with a high level of demographic diversity and unadvanced nation-building, the transition to democracy poses a particular challenge. Yet, there is no denying that many countries that have embarked on the transition

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On the way to an election rally:  
Hawkers sell masks to supporters of Megawati's party.



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to democracy face difficult periods which, all too often, may also be accompanied by violent conflict and, in some cases, the complete collapse of state structures or even state failure. While the list of «failed states» is not very long, it nonetheless sends out a warning signal. In this scenario, democracy can also be seen as a conflict management system, regulating the peaceful hand-over of power from one government to another. In a democracy, where electoral procedures are clearly defined, this hand-over process is stable and predictable, and the change of power takes place peacefully. It may result in an anti-democratic or populist group securing a role in government, but this too is ultimately dependent on voters' preferences. The «checks and balances» established in developed democracies ensure that the system remains stable. In other words, the system contains its own institutional safeguards against bad rulers and the abuse of power. One of the ongoing challenges for people living in a democracy is to protect and preserve its achievements – namely liberty and responsibility – and constantly breathe new life into them. It is hardly surprising that transition states face a number of institutional

weaknesses. Building stable, efficient and predictable democratic institutions such as parliamentary assemblies, parliamentary groups and political parties requires a well thought-out strategy and takes a great deal of time. Unfortunately, when designing their new political institutions, transition states often draw on the legacy of their (colonial) past or opt for the wrong models although ample information is available on the types and combinations of constitutional bodies and democratic institutions that are suitable for divided societies, e.g. electoral models that are particularly appropriate for «post-conflict» situations and guarantee a separation of powers. Whether a state has centralized or decentralized structures is also a significant issue. How the state deals with the victims of human rights violations and other past injustices may be just as important in maintaining peace after the introduction of democracy as the form of government, language/cultural policy, and the legal system. The political scientist Arend Lijphart, who studied 36 democracies and assessed their performance, is also convinced that consensual models of democracy are more suitable than majoritarian models (i.e. the Westminster model) and

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that parliamentary systems with proportional representation are infinitely preferable to a presidential system based on majority voting (Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999). No two societies or democracies around the world have completely identical political systems. If a new democracy restricts its citizens' participation in decision-making and social responsibility to voting in regular elections, such systems are often referred to pejoratively as «electoral democracies». Undertaking efforts to further develop democratic systems and models is an ongoing challenge for both established and new democracies. The common objective must be to create institutions which are robust enough to guarantee a stable democratic order while offering sufficient flexibility to respond to



Photo: Adam

Before the parliamentary elections in spring 2004: Street parades and mass rallies mobilized hundreds of thousands of people.

changed preferences, needs and other framework conditions.

Breaking open the dominant pre-democratic value system and replacing it with genuinely democratic principles that offer long-term viability is a time-consuming task. In practice, the social transformation processes required for democratization take 20 to 30 years and in some cases even longer.

### Indonesia's path towards democracy

With a population of 210 million, the Indonesian archipelago is the world's fourth largest country and third largest democracy. Around 85 percent of the population are Moslems; the rest are Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists and members of several other religious groups. The islands have a very high level of ethnic diversity; more than 300 local languages are spoken by its many different communities.

Since the Asian crisis, the flow of bad news from Indonesia has not abated. The headlines are full of disasters: forest fires, terrorist attacks, quasi civil-war conditions (in the provinces of Aceh, the Moluccas, Irian Jaya, Central Sulawesi and East Kalimantan), violence, nepotism, corruption and the abuse of power. Yet there are also successes to be reported. One example is the decentralization of the country's structures – which has been underway since 2001 and is one of the world's most ambitious and comprehensive programmes of renewal – and of course, Indonesia's democratization. After more than 30 years of authoritarian rule, Indonesia embarked on the difficult path towards democracy in 1998 after dictator Suharto's resignation. In 1999, the Indone-

sian people elected a parliament in free, equal and secret elections. Just two months ago, its 148 million voters turned out to elect their representatives in the parliamentary assemblies for the second time. As expected, these elections were held peacefully and revealed some measure of maturity on the part of voters, who – in just five years – have obviously learned which politicians and parties represent citizens' interests and fulfil their pledges, and which have failed to live up to expectations.

There were major changes in political personnel after the April 2004 parliamentary elections. In all, 70 percent of elected representatives either failed to regain their seat in the new parliament, did not stand again, or were not re-selected as candidates by the political parties.

For many countries, the transition to democracy is not a deliberate and strategically planned step. Often, it happens more by chance and is linked to the collapse of the old order. In many cases, the key actors in the transition are not committed democrats but opportunists who have yet to be persuaded of the overriding merits of a democratic system of government and social order. This is certainly true of Indonesia. The situation in Indonesia is complicated by the fact that the representatives of the old regime under Suharto – which described itself as the

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«new order regime» to distinguish itself from the previous administration under Sukarno – have not been prosecuted or expelled.

If Transparency International is to be believed, ex-President Suharto amassed a fortune of some US\$ 15-35 billion during his 32 years in office (*Global Corruption Report 2004, Transparency International 2004, London*). He still lives in his comfortable private residence in Jakarta. Very few of his followers have been prosecuted and properly sentenced in a court of law.

The legacy left by Suharto is a highly asymmetrical wealth and distribution structure. This poses major problems for the representatives of the new democracy. The entire government apparatus is still permeated with adherents of the old order. The situation is similar in the military, which is a state within the state and whose interests do not always coincide with those of the democratically elected government.

### Upholding democratic rules, managing conflicts

As in many new democracies, in Indonesia, the «empowerment» of the people through the adoption of democratic principles has initially been confined to the right to vote and stand for election, freedom of organization and assembly, and freedom of speech, information and opinion. Suharto's surprise resignation in May 1998 was followed by euphoric, unrealistic and overly optimistic expectations of the new democracy, especially by the so-called reform movements. The introduction of democracy was expected to solve all the problems facing the country instantaneously. This soon gave way to

the painful realization that electing a new government did not necessarily mean more economic growth and less poverty and unemployment.

Learning how to deal with the new freedoms outlined above is a laborious process. And

there are two sides to the democratic coin: more freedom comes at a price, namely more responsibility, and this too must be painstakingly learned. By electing their own representatives, citizens also have to assume the responsibility for their choices.

The violent conflicts that have flared up in Indonesia in recent years have severely damaged the country's image. Even setting aside the issue of terrorism, which poses a major challenge to other democratic countries as well, there is no denying that since Suharto's dictatorship ended, the number of violent conflicts has risen. Yet this wave of violence cannot be blamed solely on the new democracy. An analysis of the history and origins of the conflicts reveals that many of them are rooted in Suharto's dictatorship, and sometimes even in the colonial past.

Even under Suharto, conflicts erupted and briefly gained an airing through violence. But they were then swiftly crushed by brute force, and their leaders were killed, interned or expelled from the country. The marginalization of specific population groups as a result of Suharto's policies, his confiscation of land for ambitious development projects and his ill-fated transmigration policies triggered ethnic, religious and economic conflicts which have claimed millions of victims and cost billions of dollars.

The democratically elected governments under Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri were ill-prepared and lacked the determination to solve these problems. The inadequate instruments of a weak legal system, a disloyal government apparatus and especially the vested interests of the security forces,

compounded by many other factors, all combined to doom many of the government's efforts.

The new democracy has thus proven unable, so far, to identify viable solutions to the violent conflicts which it inherited from its autocratic predecessors and which still plague the country and its people today. So in answer to the question posed in the title of this article, it could be argued – for Indonesia, at least – that under the new democracy, there is less stability, but that the current violent conflicts are old conflicts in a new guise.

It cannot be ruled out that democratic processes, such as the planned direct elections for the positions of governor, regent and mayor at the sub-national level, will be exploited by ethnic and religious groups in future, in a bid to assert their own particular interests against other sections of the population. It is still too early to draw any firm conclusions. Indonesia admittedly has achieved remarkable success so far in making the difficult transition to democracy. The new government which has been elected in October 2004 will have a high level of legitimacy and an even clearer mandate to tackle the country's numerous problems efficiently. Restoring domestic peace, combating terrorism and organized crime, establishing a functioning rule-of-law system and, above all, triggering the economy will be the main challenges facing the new President. It remains to be seen whether Indonesia's efforts to build and consolidate democracy will be successful. Setbacks may be unavoidable but will hopefully be surmounted. For after all, optimism is also a democratic responsibility.

### Political foundation's contribution to democratization in developing countries

Many different organizations operating in the international arena are committed to democracy-building. They include not only the German political foundations (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation and Heinrich Böll Foundation), which make a major contribution to political education, dialogue and the provision of policy advice to the developing countries, but also the American political foundations which are modelled on the German organizations, notably the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). They also include European bodies such as the cross-party Westminster Foundation for Democracy from the UK and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (IMD), and, in Asia, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. The Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) also supports democracy-building and the establishment of political parties. In addition, a number of specialized organizations are committed to promoting specific aspects of democracy. In the new democracies themselves, local education institutions are rapidly emerging which, via their international networks, are able to draw on external expertise, experience and information which are useful for democracy-building in government and society.

The work of the German political foundations has two main features. First, they operate on the basis of partnership, committing themselves to long-term cooperation (20-30 years) with a partner organization in the host country in order to support democracy-building. This approach is based on the recognition that a relationship founded on trust and partnership is the most favourable basis for the development of appropriate solutions. Most of the foundations are also represented locally by their own teams of staff, so that a sound and reciprocal understanding of the two sides' strengths and weaknesses can develop through day-to-day cooperation.

As no two societies have absolutely identical democratic systems, their experience also varies. The strategies and options devised must therefore be as creative and diverse as humankind itself. The German political foundations have an important role to play as intermediaries in the quest for these solutions.



Photo: Adam

Young people paint their bodies in their party colours and parade through towns and villages.