

Consolidating Indonesia's Democracy by Educating Civil-society Leaders in Democratic Politics

Michael Hollaender

Executive Summary

The consolidation of democracy should be a process that unfolds at various levels – the level of representation, the level of political institutions, and the level of integrating potential veto powers. This process should be supplemented by the formation of a democratic civil society whose concrete contribution towards democratising a country is indispensable. Further groups of particular importance in this process include the elites that hold governmental and political powers and functions, the business elites, and those leading elites of civil society that are friendly towards democracy. All these elites must share three features – a normative minimum consensus, an immanent pluralism, and active participation in public politics.

Civil-society commitment, no matter of what kind, is always supported by groups and organisations that are designated internationally as non-governmental organisations or NGOs. In Indonesia, they multiplied rapidly after the end of the authoritarian 'orde baru' regime in 1998, although civil society had become increasingly politicised even before the change of system in this far eastern country. After the overthrow of Suharto, the total number of NGOs increased to about 70,000 today.

At the same time, Indonesia's civil-society players suffer from a number of weaknesses that result from the limits imposed on voluntary commitment by the authoritarian regime. In Suharto's time, for example, any political activity outside the governmental framework was risky. Another reason for the NGOs' weakness lies in the fact that in recent years, international donors have been making more stringent demands regarding the professional qualifications and organisational efficiency of their local partner organisations.

There are a number of concrete problems confronting Indonesia's NGOs: Many of them, though registered formally, exist only on paper. Others lack financial and human resources. High staff-fluctuation rates often imperil the success of their work. People are less and less willing to engage in social and political activities. Regular group memberships are rare. Pronounced fragmentation along traditional social fault lines limits the NGOs' access to decision-making processes. Many groups are self-centred, give themselves elitist airs, and have hardly any support among the population. NGOs with sponsors and financial resources for their activities are the exception rather than the rule in Indonesia. Many Indonesian activists speak English only badly, a grave problem because competence in foreign languages is so important. Many also lack practical experience in project management. Reflecting development gradients within Indonesia, regional disparities negatively affect the NGOs' work. Another obstacle on their way is the ethnic, cultural, and religious fragmentation of the country's own civil society.

However, Indonesia's NGOs also have their own strengths and potentials, such as the large number of groups that are active in the country and the large number of persons working for these groups whose social, political, and cultural experience is highly valuable. Through numerous campaigns in all parts of the country, NGOs have been noticeably cushioning the negative consequences of the system change for those in a weak social position; most of the space available for individual self-fulfilment today was opened up by NGOs. Another asset lies in the NGOs' eagerness for reforms and their receptiveness towards change which, particularly in

Indonesia, is supported by a marked talent for improvisation. Another positive aspect is the sheer number of local, regional, and national NGO networks. Some urban and academic NGOs cultivate international contacts, giving them access to global networks. And, finally, the NGOs, being the schools of democracy, as Tocqueville put it, know 'what is up in Indonesia'.

One of the fundamental elements in democratic-policy education is a consistent focus on the living world and its problems. Learning targets may be reached only by giving consideration to the concrete biographies of the learners themselves who, in turn, bring along their own individual knowledge and practical experience. This being so, training units must address subjects of current interest as well as new issues. After all, the strengths of an individual constitute a societal potential and must therefore be promoted.

To be truly comprehensive, a training programme for civil-society leaders should cover structural and political fundamental rights, the issue of personal and socio-cultural identity, and management competences. Such an ambitious inter-disciplinary project is practically impossible to implement in a single training course. What is needed instead is a triple learning strategy: Next to education in democratic policy, contents must be promoted and developed by diverse educational institutions, and a culture of emancipated learning must be built up in a knowledge-based society that is able and willing to learn.

The importance of far-reaching civil-society commitment in Indonesia was recognised years ago. Thus, the SATUNAMA Foundation organised events to strengthen NGOs as early as the eighties. Now in their ninth year, the courses run by Civic Education for Future Indonesian Leaders (CEFIL) aim to strengthen democracy by educating civil-society leaders in democratic policy.

SATUNAMA's courses are distinguished by the open and pluralist way in which participants are recruited. While transfer, attendance, and accommodation costs were paid for by the Adenauer Foundation in the first two years, participants have been paying their own travel expenses since 2001. Since 2003, SATUNAMA has been demanding that participants contribute towards the cost, for obvious reasons: Such a contribution testifies to the quality of the training and the interest of the participants. In addition, it enhances the participants' expectations, making recruitment more difficult because programmes are scrutinised more critically, but ultimately contributing towards a wider training portfolio.

The goals and contents of the training programme may be subsumed under the three headings named above – structural and political fundamental rights, personal and socio-cultural identity, and management competences. Next to background facts, there is an increasing demand for specialist knowledge, such as technical knowhow about renewable energies, approaches to strengthen micro-enterprises, legal knowledge, and the skills necessary to write press releases and self-descriptions. Another issue of growing importance is globalisation, a phenomenon that must be addressed with great care, as it is often regarded in Indonesia as an external factor that is responsible for many of the country's problems which has already caused many to adopt a purely defensive mind-set.

The success of such educational measures depends largely on method selection and pluralism. Questions should be asked, for example, about the teaching concept and/or orientation of the educational institution, the presentation technique of the trainer, the response of the participants, the attainable learning effect, and several other subjects. It goes without saying that such a programme is not simply about transplanting Western democratic principles and values, nor about 'stuffing' the minds of the learners with a set of immutable rules. Instead, educational

institutions should integrate trainers as well as trainees in the very process of module formulation, create situations that invite learning, and avoid one-sided 'chalk-and-talk' teaching. In Indonesia especially, careful preparation and sensitiveness in controlling the dynamism of training are as indispensable as an awareness of the need to strike a balance between cultural localism and global learning. After all, the ultimate goal is to develop a culture of emancipated learning and, within that culture, to transform participants into empowered citizens and self-confident activists.

And there are obstacles as well: In Indonesia, democratic-policy education is not guided by an integrated learning strategy. Schools and universities are badly equipped, and the priority of mass education and democratic political awareness is low. Many non-governmental institutions are neither independent nor commonweal-oriented. There is a general lack of funds, knowhow, and media access. Further fatal factors include the general apathy of the population and its disinterestedness in social policy as well as the fact that some civil-society players are interested in social welfare campaigns rather than in political participation.

One might well be discouraged by the problems and ambitions described above, but this is not the right way. What is needed are those virtues that characterise an active civil-society leader: A sense of justice and proportion, courage, and wisdom.