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REFLECTIONS ON THE 1997 INDONESIAN ELECTIONS JUNE 1997

The 1997 elections in Indonesia seemed to produce two rather contradictory results. On the one hand, the elections demonstrated the continuing dominance of the ruling party, Golkar. With 74 percent of the vote, Golkar increased its majority in the House of Representatives and surpassed its much-publicized internal target of 70.02 percent. Golkar's victory was achieved in part because the election law limits political competition, in part because of the reality of a powerful political-military apparatus, and in part through the mobilization efforts of the Golkar party, which remains in control of the political expression of much of the population.

On the other hand, despite the overwhelming -- and predictable -- Golkar victory, the elections provided further evidence that the Indonesian public is indeed becoming increasingly dissatisfied with political restrictions and increasingly willing to voice that discontent. In a country where symbolism and consensus matter, the importance of the openings that did emerge during these elections should not be dismissed.

The Golkar victory provides a chilling demonstration of the ability of the Soeharto regime to successfully limit and neutralize opposition. During the three years before the election, a new, popular challenge to Golkar appeared in the form of Megawati Sukarnoputri, who led the reform-oriented Indonesian Democracy Party until she was removed in a government-backed ouster in June 1996. Megawati remains an important figure in Indonesian politics and her ouster was not without negative repercussions for the government, but on balance the regime is in a stronger position than it would have been had she remained in politics and challenged Golkar at the polls.

The elections also demonstrated the degree to which the party continues to assert control over political expression in Indonesia. Civil servants were obliged by presidential decree to vote Golkar, evidence exists of election officials being paid for votes, and stories abound of schoolteachers threatening to fail their students unless they voted Golkar. Whether through intimidation, vote buying, or successful political organizing, Golkar mobilization succeeded despite local resistance even in the politically significant regions of Jakarta, Central Java and East Java, where party support had begun to erode in the 1992 elections.

Finally, the election results provided a *de facto* victory for Golkar against a potentially threatening boycott movement, referred to in Indonesia as *golput*. Since the first election in the New Order period in 1971, less than 10 percent of Indonesians have expressed opposition to the tightly controlled political process by rejecting the elections and failing to vote. Many analysts

expected that with the ouster of Megawati the percentage of nonparticipants would increase to a number that could not be easily ignored. Official figures indicate, however, that only 11 percent of the Indonesian electorate did not vote or spoiled their ballots. While it is likely that multiple voting and other fraud organized by Golkar served to decrease the official abstention figures, there is little hard evidence of widespread *golput* across the country.

Golkar chairman Harmoko declared that the election results proved that the people of Indonesia are satisfied with the current system and thus legitimized the New Order. While it is true that the official results demonstrated overwhelming support for Golkar, the results must be considered in light of accompanying accusations of election fraud.

Notwithstanding accusations of fraud, the election process provided several indications of possible openings for democratic opposition and democratic reform in Indonesia. The first of these signs is the emergence a stronger, more reform-oriented Unity and Development Party (known by its Indonesian acronym, PPP) within the context of a new *de facto* two-party situation. In 1975 Indonesia's political parties were merged into two government-sanctioned opposition parties, which controlled and limited formal opposition to Golkar. The government's move against Megawati has brought an end for the time being to that carefully constructed system. Indonesian voters rejected the government re-engineered PDI party, which scored a dismal three percent of the vote, and now in reality Indonesia has only two official political parties, Golkar and PPP. The PPP gained 23 percent of the vote, a significant increase over its 1992 total of 17 percent.

Of equal significance to the increase in numerical support is the expansion in party platform that the PPP undertook in order to attract new voters. The PPP has traditionally been viewed as a conservative, Muslim-oriented party, more concerned with Islamic social issues than democracy and political liberalization. In 1997, however, the PPP made political reform and good governance a central part of its platform and gained popular support by resisting administrative bullying from Golkar-affiliated local officials. Certainly some of the Megawati supporters who voted PPP did so because there was simply no other choice, but most were drawn to the PPP because the party presented itself as a new vehicle for pro-democracy, pro-reform voters. The party therefore emerges from the election with more seats in parliament, an expanded constituency and a more aggressive, reform-oriented posture.

Nevertheless, there are at least two important questions ahead for the PPP. First, as Megawati's ouster indicates, it is not easy for Indonesian party leaders to maintain an independent and aggressive posture, and so much will depend on the ability of PPP leaders to resist pressure from the top. Secondly, good leadership will also be necessary to prevent internal divisions between traditional party loyalists and the new, more secular, more progressive converts. But if the PPP can survive these challenges and pursue its reform agenda, support for the party is likely to increase.

It is worth noting that the PPP's increased strength is more symbolic than practical. Despite its increase in parliamentary seats, the PPP is still removed from participating in policymaking, even as a dissenting voice. In practice, most Indonesian law is simply issued by ministerial or presidential decree. The legislative body in which the PPP now has larger minority representation serves primarily as a forum for debate over a few government initiatives that are invariably passed without amendment. Yet even the PPP's essentially symbolic role has importance in Indonesian politics. The PPP can, for example, exert influence by offering or withholding the support that is necessary for Golkar to maintain its claim to government through national consensus.

Another sign that the 1997 elections may not in fact represent an unequivocal victory for Golkar was the emergence during the campaign of a level of popular political innovation that was unusual in the carefully scripted Indonesian electoral process. Tight government restrictions on campaign rallies were blithely ignored by PPP supporters who took to the streets with such enthusiasm that Golkar was forced to follow suit and itself violate the campaign restrictions. Golkar was also shown to be responding to popular developments when the widespread discussion of corruption and political reform prompted the ruling party to put forward its own anti-corruption promises. The most striking popular initiative was the "Mega Bintang" phenomenon: a demand that started in the streets of Jakarta and Central Java for Megawati to join forces with the PPP ("Bintang" or "star" is the ballot symbol of the PPP). In the end, the desired alliance did not take shape formally, but the fact that people put forward the suggestion is a noteworthy indication that, despite government efforts to the contrary, Megawati is still popular and Indonesian politics is not entirely predictable.

A further indication that Golkar's control of Indonesian politics is not as complete as the party would like people to believe is the scale of election-related civil disturbances that took place. Beginning with the riots in Jakarta on July 27, 1996 that were sparked by Megawati's ouster, and culminating in massive rioting on Madura Island in response to allegations of vote rigging, the election process was marred by a series of violent encounters that resulted in hundreds of deaths and substantial destruction of government and private property. These problems represent the continuation of a plague of sporadic unrest that has intensified in Indonesia over the last two years. The deaths and violence have resulted from many different causes, ranging from traffic accidents to direct clashes between party supporters and riot police, so it is difficult to generalize about the political content of the civil disturbance. Yet it is clear that at least some of the violence was rooted in frustration over the lack of political openness under the current regime and was directed at government targets. Not surprisingly, members of the government have blamed third-party infiltrators, usually naming the banned student movement PRD as the leading suspect, but many Indonesians do not view this explanation as being credible.

Another blemish on the elections was widespread, conspicuous fraud. Although fraud has long been a part of Indonesian elections, 1997 appears to be unusual in terms of the extent and flagrant nature of the fraud and most significantly in terms of the response from political actors to that fraud. In the days following the elections there were widespread reports in Indonesian

newspapers and elsewhere of various acts of blatant polling station fraud, including multiple voting by civil servants and polling station officials, ballot-stuffing by polling station officials and ballot-counting in secret. Thanks to the efforts of Indonesia's first independent monitoring group, KIPP (the Indonesian acronym for the Independent Election Monitoring Committee) and other groups, better documentation of electoral violation is available for this election than for previous elections. The allegations of fraud prompted PPP to a long internal debate about whether it would participate in the ceremonial signing of the final results. In the end, party leaders did sign the results, but they also plan to press forward with court action against alleged perpetrators of fraud.

The PPP does not expect to win these cases (the extent of political influence on the legal system makes that outcome highly unlikely), but the court actions may nevertheless be an important step in increasing public attention to election violations.

Taken together, the electoral fraud and the anti-government campaign violence detract from the image of the election as a popular endorsement of Golkar and the New Order. They also represent material that can be used by the new, more dynamic PPP to argue for reform in the laws governing the electoral and political systems. It is likely that these arguments will be made and that they will gain support from the increasingly vocal Indonesian public. Whether or not they will be accepted is a different question. The balance of political power remains so strongly in favor of Soeharto and Golkar that they can easily reject appeals for reform, until those appeals start to issue from the power elite itself. While it is unlikely that dramatic political reform is near at hand in Indonesia, it is likely that a coherent argument in support of reform will be presented. That, in its own way, is a significant step forward.

This analysis of the elections leads to two implications for the prospects for democratic reform in Indonesia. First, despite the fact that Indonesia remains under tight government control, the elections demonstrated the reality of fluidity in Indonesian politics and the possibility that political organizing can make a difference in the long term. For this reason, the prospects for long-term democratic development are good. Second, democratic reform must occur with a focus on incremental change, and with recognition of the value of achievements in the arena of symbolic politics.