On 21 May 1998, people on Sumba saw on television that President Suharto’s authoritarian regime had come to an end after 32 years. It was the final result of the students’ demonstrations in Jakarta and other major cities that demanded the president’s resignation. People’s complaints about rising prices had arisen in an atmosphere of protest, at a time when students were willing to organize demonstrations for any legitimate cause and for which they could count on broad support. They demanded Reformasi, reforms and on the top of their agenda was the departure of the president and tyranny.

What would this mean for Sumba? There had never been a clear protest movement on Sumba demanding that the president step down. Sumba was governed by the New Order bureaucracy, but it was far from the centre. The state officials on Sumba were mostly Sumbanese. Although national events had their impact on Sumba, this impact was often very different from the consequences elsewhere in Indonesia. Due to its characteristics, such as, being resource poor, sparsely populated, located in the far southeast of the archipelago, Christian in majority and with a majority of the population living from subsistence agriculture, political and social events can have different consequences on Sumba than they might on Java. The Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, for example, turned out profitable for many Sumbanese, who were primary producers and who saw the prices of their products rise. Conversely, the financial crisis was hard for those earning monetary wages or salaries, most of whom were employed by the government.

In 1998 ‘transition to democracy’ was the accepted and hopeful vehicle of all changes happening in the country. Soon, critical scholars observed that there was no smooth transition after all. Instead, they argued that Indonesia was ‘in search of transition’ (Henk Schulte Nordholt 2002:3-4) without a clear direction of the process. Others even argued that the ‘old predatory interests of Suharto’s New Order regime’ have effectively captured the institutions of democracy, and consequently there would never be a real democracy (Hadiz 2003:119).

In the first part of this chapter, I elaborate on the concept and ideology of
democratization as a background for understanding how the democratization process was used by local leaders on Sumba. The second part gives a narrative of regime change in West Sumba, telling how Umbu Djima’s successor gradually became unpopular and how tension in the district increased.

Democracy and constitutional liberalism

Demokrasi is a concept in Indonesian political discourse, including that on Sumba, which is often used but usually not explained. Demokrasi is about elections, but does it also include freedom of press and speech? Western writing about democracy is often an expansion of implicit connotations of the concept. Applied to a non-European culture, however, the effects of democratization can be quite different than they were in Europe. In his seminal work The third wave; Democratization in the late twentieth century, Samuel Huntington (1991) argues that this ‘third wave’ of democratization started in 1974 with the Portuguese revolution that brought an end to the Salazar’s dictatorship. With the fall of the Berlin wall this wave reached its peak. There was growing international optimism on the necessity and possibilities for democracy all over the world. Some argued that democracy is beneficial to development; others said that it is the vehicle for international capitalism. Some have argued that the freedoms which people have in democratic countries are part of basic universal human rights, whereas others claim that a western style democracy is inappropriate in the conditions found in Southeast Asia. When Indonesia is positioned within the international debate on democratization it is important to specify first what definition of democracy is used and second which methodology is adopted to measure the extent of democratization.

The original Greek meaning of democracy is ‘rule of the people’. In the context of European history it received the more specific meaning as a form of government wherein voters choose representatives to act in their interests, with the freedom to act according to their own judgements. This form is a representative democracy, of which modern liberal democracy is a type. In the media, but also in academic writing, democracy is often not specified, but taken for granted. Amartya Sen (1999:5) argued that by the end of the twentieth century democracy has become a universal value:

While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance had now achieved the status of being taken to be generally right. The ball is very much in the court of those who want to rubbish democracy to provide justification for that rejection.

Democracy is used as a container concept, including much more than just the governance by people’s representatives. Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1995:6-7)
describe three essential conditions for democracy, based on their comparative research on experiences with democracy in a large number of developing countries:

- Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power through regular, free and fair elections that exclude the use of force;
- A highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, such that no major (adult) social group is prevented from exercising the rights to citizenship;
- A level of civil and political liberties – freedom of thought and expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and demonstration, freedom to form and join organizations, freedom from terror or unjustified imprisonment – secured through political equality under a rule of law, sufficient to ensure that citizens (acting individually and through various associations) can develop and advocate their views and interests and contest policies and offices vigorously and autonomously.

The third condition for democracy concerns constitutional liberalism. It is taken as part of the democratic package that civil liberties must be guaranteed by law to make democracy a system of governance beneficial for all people within a state. What will happen if democratic institutions are introduced in a society where there is no constitutional liberalism? What if people vote for their representative not based on rational choice for who represents their interests best, but based on kinship ties or religious affiliation? In Sumba, people are always regarded as part of a larger totality and first and foremost as part of their kinship network. The larger part of agricultural land is clan property, not registered as individual land property. Individual rights may be guaranteed by a constitution, but what counts in practice is often the rule according to local customary law.

If democratization is ‘political change moving in a democratic direction from less accountable to more accountable government, from less competitive elections to fuller and fairer competitive elections, from severely restricted to better protected civil and political rights, from weak (or non-existent autonomous associations to more autonomous and numerous associations in civil society’ (Potter 2000:368), it encompasses much more than just elections. If democratization is limited to electoral democracy alone, then elected governments who believe they have absolute power to act according to their own wishes and for their own benefit can easily take advantage of the system. Fareed Zakaria (1997:30) argued that ‘the tension between constitutional liberalism and democracy centres on the scope of governmental author-
ity. Constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power, democracy about its accumulation and use’. Most demands of the reform movement in Indonesia in 1998 reflect constitutional liberal ideals, but the result up to 2005 could also be regarded as ‘illiberal’ democracy, denoting a particularly authoritarian kind of representative democracy, in which the leaders and lawmakers are elected by the people, but tend to be corrupt and often do not respect the law (Zakaria 1997:22). In the upcoming chapters I will examine how democratization is interpreted and implemented in West Sumba.

Demands of Reformasi

In 1998 the financial crisis in Southeast Asia caused steep rise in prices in Indonesia. The cost of living had gone up and, moreover, many people lost their jobs. It caused unrest in society, especially in the urban areas. Social inequalities became more obvious than ever, and increasing prices fuelled the anger and frustration of the masses. Protesting students in 1998 voiced two clear demands: Suharto’s resignation and Reformasi. They desired an end to the authoritarian regime and something drastically different to replace it. Toppling the dictator was a clear point of action. Reformasi, however, was much more complex. Crawford and Hermawan (2002:205-12) summarized the main items on the reform agenda which they ‘distilled from the views of a range of commentators, drawn from secondary sources and interviews’ as:

- Military reform to establish civilian supremacy over the military and to end the dual function of the army, where the military acts both as agent of security and defence and as an important social and political force. The most concrete demand is the army’s withdrawal from politics and civil service;
- Legal action against perpetrators of human rights violations and corruption in the past;
- Constitutional reform to provide a legal framework for establishing a democratic state and its institutions;
- Decentralization to distribute more authority to local and regional governments so that they can take their own initiative in response to local problems and demands;
- Checks and balances to enhance the accountability of the government, such as independent political parties (opposition), critical mass media and responsive legislative bodies.

These demands were the starting point for a wide range of different actors to interpret and discuss. The proposed reforms were highly political in the sense
that they concerned arenas of power and conflicting interests.

The demonstrations in Waikabubak in October 1998 that will be discussed in Chapter VI were real Reformasi protests: the demonstrators demanded the end of corrupt practices and legal action against the civil servant who was responsible for the nepotism in the civil servants' admission tests. They also demanded that Bupati Malo to step down, which corresponds with the more general demand for the army's to withdraw from politics and civil service.

Suharto's successor, President B.J. Habibie, responded to these demands and openly supported reform. Although he was not trusted by many, being Suharto's former vice president, during his short time in office very important laws were formulated and passed in the national assembly. The Habibie government made democratic elections and regional autonomy two of the cornerstones of its legislative agenda (Aspinall and Fealy 2003:3). Law 22 of 1999 on regional government introduced the devolution of political authority from the centre to the kabupaten (districts), circumventing the provincial level. The national, central government kept its authority in the fields of foreign policy, defence and security, monetary policy, the legal system and religious affairs. Law 25 of 1999 on Central Regional Fiscal Balance concerned the financial arrangements of decentralization and dealt with the division of regional revenues, providing the regions with a far larger share of these revenues than before.

Changing local regime

At the end of the 1990s there were still no newspapers in Sumba. The only authors who recently published about this period of Sumbanese political history are David Mitchell and Tuti Gunawan (2000a). They describe the ways the New Order period was beneficial to Sumba:

New Order blessings for Sumba

The great strength of the New Order establishment in West Sumba was not its capacity for repression, but its record of successful development and maintenance of civil peace over a 30-year period. Its monopolization of power had meant that any civilian who wanted to contribute to the developmentalist project at the political level had to do so through the Golkar organization. In this way Golkar had the service of many able and idealistic men and women at its disposal and it earned legitimacy in office from a long record of achievement. [...] West Sumba had many reasons to be pleased with the developmentalism of the New Order. Being a relatively poor and undeveloped District it had been the recipient of substantial subsidies from the central government year after year to fund its development, and having no great natural wealth it had not attracted the predatory interests of outsiders. (Mitchell and Gunawan 2000a:2.)
This explains why on Sumba there was no movement for Reformasi. While the effects in material terms were positive for the two districts as a whole, by the end of the 1990s the island’s highest government officials were not popular among the people in West Sumba.

Prior to this period in this New Order period, Umbu Djima was the West Sumba’s *bupati* for a decade from 1985 until 1995. At that time district heads were assigned by *Jakarta* at the proposal of the governor in Kupang. The military and Golkar were the parties that brought forth candidates and in the province NTT they had an agreement on the number of district heads each of them would provide. Thimothius Langgar was Golkar’s candidate when Umbu Djima’s term ended in 1995. He was a young promising bureaucrat from Waijewa in West Sumba. Yet, the outcome of the provincial fight between the military and Golkar over the division of *bupati* seats, was that the army supplied its own candidate for West Sumba. And so the office was given to Rudolf Malo, born in Waijewa and a son of commoners. He was a colonel in the Indonesian air force, and had not lived on Sumba after he had moved to Java to attend secondary school. He married a woman from Java. He had been in charge of the logistics of a large air force base in Baucau, East Timor, and then had served a term in the provincial representative council (DPRD-I) in Kupang (Mitchell and Gunawan 2000a:4).

At the start of Malo’s term in office there was no problem in leadership. Umbu Djima praised his successor and West Sumba’s Golkar chairman, T.L. Ora received the new *bupati* well, perhaps influenced by the fact that T.L. Ora’s sister is married to Umbu Djima. Tensions between *bupati* Malo and the local elite, most of them Golkar members, increased when it became clear that Malo applied a military type of leadership in the District where Uma politics were the common way of handling matters of political interest. Mitchell and Gunawan refer to this difference as ‘command politics versus relationship politics’. Malo’s authority was based on his status as member of the army, and his support came from traders and people outside Sumba. When the national regime collapsed in 1998, it also put an end to the era in which ‘command politics’ could be implemented without criticism.

**Uncertainty after May 1998**

There was uncertainty in Indonesia in the first months after the demise of the New Order. Suharto was gone, and his successor Habibie was only supposed to head a transitional government. No one knew where the transition would lead to (Henk Schulte Nordholt 2002:3-4). The existing political framework had lost its legitimacy, and so president Habibi, who was regarded as the last representative of the old regime, lacked a supportive base for political power.
The euphoria surrounding the fall of Suharto was only short-lived. The economic situation did not improve immediately. Despite all of the rhetoric about Reformasi total (total reform) that was broadcasted on television and fed hopes that Indonesia would be the newest liberal democracy in the world, changes did not take place quickly. Vedi Hadiz (1999:106-7) argued soon after May 1998 that it would be very possible that the New Order would continue, in a modified form, without Suharto:

While inter-elite struggles have ensued, this has only allowed for the partial unravelling of the New Order political structures rather than Reformasi total as demanded by the opposition, especially students. The military as an institution remains firmly behind the New Order, in spite of internal cleavages, and a severely damaged public image after revelations about kidnapping of activists and brutal massacres in various regions. Golkar, while badly weakened internally by defections, and externally by popular disaffection and distrust, remains a formidable political machine that its opponents can only dismiss at their own peril.

Hadiz’ observation has proven to be largely accurate: although the head of the authoritarian regime resigned, the political structure was not immediately changed. Furthermore, regional heads of government were not replaced, so the New Order bureaucracy remained in office. Yet, loss of the ultimate leader and the damaged image of the state caused the bureaucracy’s hierarchy to become unstable in 1998. Regional heads of government had to live without the certainty of receiving orders from the centre or of being backed up by the powers of central government. The fact that they are situated among and have to work within the local societies which they serve suddenly became much more relevant.

Placing state officials in their societal context and disaggregating the state into many parts and types of officials also suddenly became very relevant to analysis of events. In New Order Indonesia, the state comprised the governing officials, and also included the army, police and Golkar (Smith Kipp 1993:87). After May 1998, the political crisis in Indonesia could be understood as the question of whether these groups still collectively composed ‘the state’ or instead represented competing forces each of which held some of the state powers.

In West Sumba, reactions to the uncertainty about regime, authority and the future which had spread all over Indonesia culminated in two days of mass violence. One of the causes of the violence in the streets of the capital town, and at that moment in time, was the rivalry between local political elites. If all reforms proposed by protesting students would be accepted by the national parliament, the conditions for Sumba’s district politicians would also change dramatically. Decentralization would bring these individuals more
power and resources; new political parties would bring new opportunities to create constituencies and networks; direct elections would necessitate building support among the voters and free media; the presence of opposition and civil society organizations would demand of the district’s government more transparency and accountability. At this dawn of a new period, competition for power in the district became more intense and even included mobilizing violence in the district’s capital town.