What’s Wrong with Indonesia’s Democratization?

OLLE TÖRNQUIST
Department of Political Science
University of Oslo, Norway

Democracy at Stake

It is no longer what it used to be, the discourse and practices of democratization. For a long time, democratization in the third world was regarded as difficult, and resting with a whole series of conditions that had to be achieved through rather long-term structural change and hard political work. The major thesis was that of liberal as well as Marxist modernization theory, which stressed the lack of social, economic and political prerequisites. In East and Southeast Asia, modernization, institution building, and the rise of sufficiently strong middle classes were the celebrated perspectives among adherents as well as liberal critics of the developmental states.¹ Others added the conservative and elitist character of the processes that had started anyway, or pointed to the predominance of so-called illiberal democracy.² The major rival dependency thesis, moreover, was even more pessimistic, stressing economic globalization as a major threat against democracy.³ Since the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, however, the idealist idea of democratization as something natural and almost inevitable has attained worldwide adherence. Actually, it began with the defeat of fascism in southern Europe in the 1970s and the defeat of authoritarian regimes in Latin America in the 1980s. Post 1989, the thesis was quickly exported to Eastern Europe as well, and, most remarkably to Africa, as the soft backpack of structural adjustment schemes. East and Southeast Asia, however, seemed rather immune to democratization, aside from some NGO activists. Just as elsewhere, it took economic and political crises, and those crises remained local until 1997. By now, however, the post Cold War truth on ‘democratization’ has settled here as well, and it is time for a contextually based critique.

The scholarly backup for this trend was celebrated studies of democratization in southern Europe and Latin America, which then spread to Africa and Eastern Europe.⁴ This was the proposition (quite against previous thinking) that it was possible, after all, to craft instant democracies almost no matter what the given conditions. One could compensate unfavourable internal structures with external support for the introduction of elementary human rights, ‘free and fair’ elections, and ‘good’ institutions. For some time now, supplementary studies have emerged on the difficulties...
of ‘consolidating’ these instant democracies as well as more radical critiques of ‘democratic imperialism’, which argue that limited, unstable and ‘choice-less’ democracies have been produced, especially in Africa but also elsewhere. The specific question we need to ask, therefore, is if there are additional, and perhaps different, lessons to learn from Southeast Asia.

The Philippine and Thai Debacles

What would be the best case to examine the experiences? The natural choice for first candidate is the Philippines with its authoritarian tendencies but also, a long experience of liberal democracy. Here, the problem of ‘consolidation’ as well as the tendency towards shallow and uneven democratization are obvious. By 1986, the Philippine middle class was deprived of their electoral victory and, thus, gained mass support against Marcos’ authoritarianism. An entire world was thrilled, but the outcome under Corazon Aquino was the resurrection of the traditional elitist cum boss democracy and under Fidel Ramos, additional and more efficient structural adjustment. In the next presidential elections, therefore, populist and semi-nationalist Joseph Estrada could benefit from people's frustrations and win a landslide victory. The outcome, however, was misgovernance and abuse of public resources. So in early 2001, the undermining of the second pillar of the institutional channels of democracy (in addition to elections), open and accountable government, paved the way for a partly middle class cum business-led revolt. The only other major difference from 1986 was that Estrada had not (yet) lost as much mass support as had Marcos (who also undermined the constitutional rights). This was compensated for by the massive mobilization of the major parts of the radical Left that had not stubbornly invested in Estrada’s populism but finally, had learnt the lesson to defend rather than neglect democracy; some consistently and some, like the Maoists, for tactical reasons.

An obvious second candidate for study is Thailand, with its own waves of pro-democratic movements but also with serious setbacks. Just a few weeks before the recent debacle in Manila, for instance, Thailand’s major business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra won a landslide victory on the basis of an Estrada-like nationalist-populism, against a liberal middle class cum business and IMF sponsored ‘post-1997-crisis regime’. The idealist NGO attempts at crafting new ambitious constitutional regulations against boss politics and vote buying did not help much. With fresh and massive backing, Thaksin himself has so far avoided legal disqualification for having tampered with the new rules of the game. It is more likely that he will face similar problems later on, as did Estrada.