Donald L. Horowitz


‘Democracy without democrats’—that is how Indonesia since 1998 could be described. Ignoring the most fundamental demands of protesters on the streets, elites did institute democracy but not to represent ordinary folk. Instead, democracy serves to prevent deepening conflict among themselves. It does work—Iraq could learn from Indonesia. But it is a corrupt democracy that brings little social change. So should we admire it, or condemn it? This is the puzzle Donald Horowitz addresses in this magisterial book. He comes down firmly on the side of admiration. Horowitz concludes that the way in which Indonesians built their democracy after 1998 is so impressive it ought to be a model for others. In particular, seriously divided societies in which identity groups vie for different visions of the state can learn from Indonesia’s slow, inclusive constitutional negotiations. Where countries like Turkey, Bolivia, or Iraq are polarising perilously on the issues of religion or indigineity, Indonesia, itself divided along religious lines (aliran), managed to build a set of institutions that are competitive yet non-polarising. Horowitz is best known for his books on ethnic conflict (Ethnic groups in conflict, 1985; The deadly ethnic riot, 2001). The irrational passions that he saw unleashed in those conflicts led him to think about institutions that prevent them. He has advised governments all over the world on how to build such institutions. This impeccably researched book is his first on Indonesia, and it seems he has found what he has been looking for.

The story of Indonesia’s democratisation is remarkable because it was so unlikely. Right up until May 1998 it looked as if the military were there to stay, with the political elite too divided and the democratic opposition too weak to make a difference. When the elites were forced by street protesters to start out on the road to democratic reform anyway, their overriding concern was a conservative one. They wished above all not to end up once more in the kind of democracy they felt the nation had had in the 1950s—deadlocked at the top and rebellious in the regions.

Most members of the elite were not even democratic in heart and soul. They became democrats not by any conviction but by ‘the web of institutions in which they became enmeshed’ (p. 270). Worried as they were about the dangers of democracy, they also felt things would go even more badly wrong if they refused to democraticise. Horowitz never seems to miss a beat in his authoritative documentation of the process. He shows clearly how filled with irony each new step was. So it was precisely the caution they exercised to
avoid making their fears come true that eventually produced a working and apparently stable democracy. Yet progress always moved forward. The whole process ran ‘without U-turns’ (p. 266).

Horowitz’ book is really a long argument in favour of a government of national unity with elections. Known by the name consociationalism, such a government style has long been favoured as a conflict-avoidance strategy in deeply divided societies. Horowitz draws a sympathetic, even admiring sketch of Indonesia’s ruling elite. Surprisingly perhaps for those who have mainly seen fragmentation at the top, he finds them to be rather compact, united in a sensible, pragmatic conservatism that is at once cosmopolitan and cautious. They are open to international advice, but their fear of deadlock and polarisation makes them prefer slow, elite consensus-based change over sudden, one-sided innovation. Democratic consultation played no role—the constitutional amendments that now underpin Indonesia’s democracy were designed by experts. The 2000s have thus been shaped by the elite’s jaundiced view of the 1950s, a period that they see as a warning rather than a positive example. All political parties, Horowitz notes (p. 279), are now like Soeharto’s Golkar. The differences between them are never about economics, but about aliran.

That last part strikes me as more of a problem than it does Horowitz. He never seriously considers the money. In this book, politics are about keeping the peace between elites. But aren’t they also about representing the interests of the people, most of whom are still poor? Only in the very last chapter does he confront Dan Slater’s work on the dangers of non-accountable, ‘cartelised’ elite power. When elites ‘put aside their ideological differences to pursue their collective interest in rent seeking’ (p. 281), the result is a democracy of low quality. It is corrupt, fails to protect minorities, does not uphold the rule of law, and does not control the armed forces. To do Horowitz credit, the chapter in which these issues are discussed is the longest in the book (chapter 7). But this is also the chapter where his institutional analysis does not provide much insight into the reasons why today’s political parties have so carefully avoided the representational challenges they face. A bit of political economy would have gone a long way here. Instead, his response to Slater is simply to suggest that the ‘cartelisation’ of today may not last (p. 291).

Horowitz’s idea of elite-led democratisation is echoed in an influential book by North, Wallis and Weingast (Violence and social orders, 2009). This argued that democracy came to France, Britain, and the United States early in the nineteenth century because elites feared intra-elite conflict. Opening up the political process was thought to be a better way to cope with disagreement than the old authoritarianism. Indonesia’s elites may be thinking the same thing.