The Centre for Democratic Institutions was pleased to host a small group of visitors from Indonesia sponsored to visit Australia by the International Republican Institute. The Indonesian team comprised:

Mr Pius Sugeng Prasetyo (PDIP)
Member of Research and Development Dept
Lecturer in Indonesian Political System
Parahyangan University, Bandung

Mr Zaini Rahman (PKB National Awakening Party)
Director, Department of Islamic Studies
Institute for Social Institutions Studies, Jakarta
Member of PKB’s 9 person expert think tank

Mr Abdul Hakam Naja (PAN Partai Amanat Nasional)
Deputy Secretary General
Joined PAN upon the establishment of the party (1998)
Responsible for PAN in Central Java and Yogyakarta

Mr Anhar Jamal
Program Officer
International Republican Institute, Jakarta

They met with a small group from CDI (Roland Rich, Director CDI, Gillian Storey, Member of CDI Consultative Group and Vice-President of the Liberal Party of Australia, and Cathy Boyle, Executive Officer) and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (Prof Jim Fox, Director RSPAS, Dr Sharon Bessell and Dr Greg Fealy).
The objective of the group was to look at the Australian model as part of a broader study to find ways of improving the workings of Indonesian political parties. There was a lively discussion on various aspects of party organisation and the challenges facing Indonesian political parties in particular.

The discussion covered the recent openness in the Indonesian political system allowing political parties to operate freely and the press to report freely. Indonesian political parties tended to represent a mix of economic interests, particularly reflecting urban/rural divisions, as well as religious interests and regional interests. The process of building ideologically based parties with committed membership was continuing and the next election would see a considerable change as parties would need to obtain votes above the 2% threshold to gain representation. If results from the last elections were repeated, only six parties would meet the new threshold qualification. One important factor in this process was the need to extend influence beyond each party's regional stronghold and look to establish coalitions with other parties on a more permanent footing. There was some speculation as to whether the parties based on Islamic norms would coalesce or whether those with strong regional complementarity would work together.

The discussion turned to party organisation in the context that many prominent political parties were relatively new, were greatly dependent on the public's support for their individual leaders and had little party organisational structures beyond their geographic strongholds. The problem is greatly complicated by the size of the electorate. Parties would ideally like to have a representative in each village, but there were 60,000 villages in Indonesia. Observers had noted that, to date, Indonesian political parties tended to favour 'top-down' methods of communications with their members.

This led to a discussion of leadership issues. Every party had to try to capitalise on the popularity of its leader but it was also necessary to plan beyond this and look to the next generation of leaders. Leaders also had to set a certain tone as an example for the country's new political discourse. The broad public tended to favour more moderate and inclusive political tactics and speeches and it was in each party's interest to set this example. Political parties did not belong to the public at large, neither did they belong simply to the leader, they belonged to the party members and a successful party had to develop a culture of training their cadres and involving their cadres in decision making. One of the hardest aspects for the leadership of a party was to find the right balance between allowing freedom of thought and speech within the party while at the same time requiring discipline from party members in support of party policy positions.

The discussion identified money politics as a great social evil in Indonesia. Money politics was evident at all levels of government. There was no single solution to solving the problem but it was interesting that in Thailand, the fight against money politics was the main reason for the adoption of compulsory voting. Compulsory voting took the emphasis away from getting people to vote and placed it on how electors would vote once at the polling booth. Compulsory voting in Thailand hopefully would make it too
expensive to buy a seat in parliament because there were too many electors turning up to vote.

Another problem in Asian politics was the 'winner-take-all' mentality that caused politicians to try to retain office at all costs. Loss of office often meant loss of all political and economic power and even loss of liberty. Political systems had to find ways to value the role of the Opposition and to value the role of elder statesman for those leaders who lost office. This would facilitate the changeover of power in peaceful ways in accordance with the electoral results.

There followed a discussion on gender issues including the various ways different countries had encouraged women's participation in politics. Quotas for candidates or for seats in parliament were among these practices. There was also value in special training courses for women to assist them to tackle the difficulty of entering what was still essentially seen as a man's role. Society lost out when half the population had an inadequate voice in formulating national policies. It was pointed out that this issue was particularly difficult in Indonesia where Islamic mores were often interpreted to the exclusion of women from leadership roles in society. Political parties in Indonesia had a responsibility to lead the public to be more accepting of women leaders.

The visitors expressed gratitude for a stimulating discussion and said they valued the ANU's knowledge of Indonesia and of democratic processes.