Observations of the 1999 Indonesian Elections

Heralded as the first free elections in more than four decades, the Indonesian General Elections held on June 7 1999 created intense interest both within and beyond Indonesia.

In early 1999, the Indonesian Electoral Commission (Komisi Pemilu Umum) KPU issued decree number 12 of 1999 on Election Observation and Procedures which identified a role for domestic and foreign observers. Election observers from governments and non-government organisations around the world were invited to seek accreditation from the KPU. Given CDI’s focus on supporting democratic processes and institutions in Indonesia, it was considered to be important for the Centre to be involved in the international election observing effort. CDI’s Executive Officer, Dr Sharon Bessell, received accreditation from the KPU and travelled to Jakarta for the elections.

Background

For thirty-two years Indonesia was ruled by President Suharto’s New Order regime. Sustained economic growth, assisted by the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, saw levels of poverty decline as living standards improved and more Indonesians had access to basic services such as education and health care. Economic development did not, however, translate into democratic development or greater political freedom. Freedom of expression and the right to organise were severely restricted under the New Order. Only three political parties were permitted to operate, with the Government party – GOLKAR – winning every election held during the New Order period by a large majority. While elections were held every five years, they were not generally regarded as free or fair.

In September 1997, Indonesia was engulfed by the regional financial crisis that had begun in Thailand some months earlier. In Indonesia the crisis soon
took on economic and social dimensions as the value of the rupiah on the international market plummeted and prices for many basic goods soared. The situation quickly transformed into a political crisis of momentous proportions, as President Suharto came under increasing pressure from a range of dissenting voices. In May 1998, amidst violent riots, social upheaval and widespread anxiety about the succession process, President Suharto resigned from office. In accordance with the 1945 Constitution the Vice President, B.J. Habibie, stepped into the Presidency. Soon after taking office, President Habibie announced that elections would be held the following year.

In a climate of deep uncertainty and concern that violence would break out, the elections went ahead on June 7 1999 and for the first time since 1955 that the Indonesian people were able to cast their vote freely. In the months leading up to June the elections were widely hailed as ‘free’ but concern remained as to whether they would be fair. It was against this backdrop that both domestic and international observers were invited to take part in the process.

Despite the fears that existed prior to the election and reports of relatively minor irregularities, the elections were declared to be free and fair. Indonesia has a long way to go on the difficult path to greater democracy, but the 1999 elections represent one step along that path.

The following report is an account of the process that took place on election day in polling booths in Kelurahan (neighbourhood) Warakas, Tanjung Priok, Jakarta. This report should not be considered to be indicative of the voting experience of the entire country. In particular, the electoral process in areas plagued by violence and conflict is likely to have been fraught with difficulties but these issues are not taken up in this report.

Elections were held for three levels of government on 7 June 1999: the national government (People's Consultative Body, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat DPR); provincial government (DPR I); and local government (DPR II). In some special administrative areas, including Jakarta, only two levels of government exist - national and provincial - and voting took place only for these two levels (DPR and DPR I).

**Area Monitored: Kelurahan Warakas, Tanjung Priok**

Four polling booths were visited during the course of the day. All polling booths were in Kelurahan Warakas in the district of Tanjung Priok, North Jakarta. This is the port area of Jakarta and is a relatively poor, although there is some socio-economic mix. Tanjung Priok is a predominantly Muslim area, with a history of strained relations with the New Order Government. In 1984, Tanjung Priok was the site of anti-government demonstrations which culminated in government forces opening fire on a group of about 1,500 mainly Muslim protestors. According to official reports nine men were killed and 53 wounded. Unofficial accounts put the number of dead far higher, with claims that many bodies had been thrown into the sea. Anti-government
feeling escalated in Tanjung Priok as a result of the shootings, with several activists imprisoned on political grounds.

Of the four polling booths visited on polling day, three were visited briefly on two occasions, while one was observed for most of the day from before the commencement of voting until after the vote count. General comments made in this report are based largely on the experience of the later polling booth.

Overall booths opened on time and the specified process was followed. In one polling booth there was concern as insufficient ballot papers had been received for the DPR election – a shortfall of about 12. The committee noted that if all registered voters turned out there would be a problem, the lurah (neighbourhood head) had been contacted and the polling booth committee advised that efforts would be made to provide more ballot papers. At another polling booth the seals/stickers around the locks on the ballot boxes were absent. This was identified as an issue of significant concern by some community members and was noted by the domestic monitors.

Payment for votes
Informal discussions with voters indicated that some had been given money to vote for a particular party. Many more people told stories of knowing someone who had received money than admitted receiving money themselves. In most cases it was stated that GOLKAR had given money, although some individuals made the point that GOLKAR was not the exclusive offender. Whether the payment of money influenced or determined the way people voted is difficult to gauge. A number of people expressed the view put forward by some party leaders, candidates and observers: ‘just take the money and then vote for whomever you want, the ballot is secret’. I had the sense, however, that some people, having taken the money, felt obliged to vote in a particular fashion. There was some uncertainty, not necessarily about the whether the casting of the ballot was secret, but whether one could simply disregard the lessons of the past.

Registration problems
One issue of dispute arose late in the day in relation to voter registration. A small group of young men claimed to have registered to vote but had no registration slip. They claimed that the fault was with the lurah or camat (sub-district head) who had failed to include their name on the registration lists.

The polling booth committee refused to allow the young men to vote without the appropriate registration document. A heated debate broke out with one young man becoming extremely frustrated and complained nothing had changed in this era of reformation. Finally the polling booth committee sent the young men off to the lurah to sort the issue out.

The young men returned to the polling booth just after 2pm with a memo stating that they were eligible to vote. At this stage the committee members
had voted and the seals were about to be placed over the ballot boxes. There was some discussion of the issue and the decision was taken by the committee to allow the men to vote. Technically this decision was not in line with regulations, given that the polling booth was closed and the committee had voted. The decision was, however, the sensible and appropriate one, and one which met with the approval of those gathered around the polling booth.

**Role of Monitors and Scrutineers**

Independent election monitoring had no place in the carefully orchestrated elections held during the New Order period. In March 1996 the first independent monitoring group, KIPP (Komite Independen Pemantau Pemilu, the Independent Committee for Election Monitoring) was established. KIPP, which represents a diverse array of NGOs, monitored the 1997 elections through 12,000 volunteers in 47 cities in 16 provinces. While the 1997 elections were not considered free or fair, KIPP saw its efforts as important in promoting popular participation in the election process.

Following President Habibie’s announcement of the 1999 elections, KIPP launched a nation-wide effort to monitor both the forthcoming election and the campaign. Several more independent election monitoring groups were formed during 1998, including University Rectors’ Forum for Democracy and the University Network for Free Elections (UNFREL).

The domestic independent monitors were exclusively young, usually in their early 20s. The nature of the process and the newness of the monitoring organisations meant that the monitors had little experience, but their commitment to what they wanted to be a democratic process was considerable. All monitors appeared to take their task very seriously, during both the voting and counting processes. Had a serious violation or disruption taken place, it may have been difficult for the monitors to have responded given their inexperience and, in some cases, their uncertainty about their role. In the polling booth visited, however, the monitors did not have to face this situation. The role of the domestic monitors was extremely important, both symbolically – most voters felt that the monitors’ presence was important – and in terms of their functional role. The domestic monitors’ presence was in no way disruptive to the process, on the contrary it was an important factor in seeking to ensure transparency.

In the case of the Indonesian elections, the practical role of international monitors may have been less important than that of domestic monitors. The significance of international monitors tended to be symbolic and may be of importance in terms of relaying an impression of the election to audiences at home. International monitors were made welcome, on visiting the lurah of Warakas on the day prior to the election I was given information and told that our presence was seen in very positive terms. A similar reaction was received from the committees at each polling booth, although the extent to which the
committees wanted to ensure that documentation was in order varied markedly.

Discussions with voters indicated a widespread feeling that the presence of international monitors was positive and indicated support for Indonesia in the transition to democracy. During the counting process it was suggested that the international monitors should verify the count. It was explained that the international monitors should not actually intervene in the process and verification should be discussed with the saksi (scrutineers). This led some voters wonder what the purpose of the international monitors was if not to be pro-active. Overall, however, people felt that it was a ‘good thing’ to have international monitors, and among some there was a sense of pride in this election and the view that other countries should know that Indonesia is undergoing a transformation. Many people explained at length the significance of this election.

Like the domestic monitors, the saksi were generally quite young. Most took their role seriously and voters commented on the importance of having parties represented at the polling booth. One or two incidents suggested that some of the saksi were unsure about the process and regulations, and there was very occasional disagreement as to what constitutes a spoiled ballot (which were, in any case, very few).

The count
The count began at approximately 2.45pm and took place in the polling booth in full view of voters, many of whom stayed to watch the count. The votes for the DPR I were counted first and each ballot paper was held up for spectators, saksi (party scrutineers) and monitors to inspect. The committee and one or two of the saksi were quite scrupulous in the counting of the DPR I votes. On a few occasions the saksi noted that a ballot paper that was initially counted as blank was in fact lightly marked. In each of these cases, the ballot paper was checked by all saksi and committee members and agreement reached. Overall the process was smooth and there was great enthusiasm from the watching crowd.

The DPR votes were counted second. By this time the crowd had dispersed a little and the committee and saksi were clearly tired. Less attention was paid to each ballot and less care taken in showing the ballot paper to saksi and monitors. It became common for the ballot paper not to be shown to anyone except the person calling the votes. This diminishing scrutiny should be attributed to nothing other than fatigue. There was an opportunity for some form of deliberate miscounting at this point, but there were no indications whatsoever that this occurred.

A relatively small number of ballots were either blank or marked twice. These votes were disregarded. There was no indication that those ballots marked twice (only 2 for the DPR I and 4 for the DPR) had been marked prior to the vote. The ballots marked twice did not favour any one party.
The Results

Results in the main polling booth visited saw PDI-P winning the largest number of votes for both the DPR and the DPR I. Discussions with voters prepared to discuss their political views openly indicated a rather mixed view of PDI-P's leader Megawati Sukarnoputri. In particular, some felt that Megawati might not represent the interests and values of Muslims well. This view was influenced by perceptions of the late President Sukarno and his relationship with the Islamic community. It should be emphasised that these comments are highly impressionistic, reflecting the general and wide-ranging discussions taking place around the polling booth.

GOLKAR polled particularly well, as did PPP. While there were some claims that support for GOLKAR must have been bought, some voters expressed a genuine affiliation with the GOLKAR. While some claimed that GOLKAR would reform from within in the post-Suharto period, most support for the party appeared to be based on the concern that a swing away from GOLKAR would result in instability and greater uncertainty in an already uncertain political environment. PPP's strong showing in Warakas is not surprising, giving the history of the area and traditional support for this party. The National Awakening Party came in after PDI-P, GOLKAR and PPP in both the DPR and DPR I elections. The National Mandate Party polled less well than expected. Discussions about this Party's leadership, Amien Rais, who had gained considerable respect internationally and in some quarters within Indonesia was particularly interesting. While those who supported Amien Rais and the National Mandate Party did so with a strong commitment, there was also a perception that the party and its leader did not reflect the concerns of the common people. As one young man expressed it "Pak Amien speaks beautifully, but I do not think he speaks to us". While the discourse of the National Mandate Party appeared to have been particularly well received and influential among well-educated elites (beyond as well as within Indonesia), the other major parties were more successful in appealing to community aspirations, at least in the neighbourhood of Warakas.

General comments

The enthusiasm for the election was considerable, and a majority of voters returned to the polling booth for the count. Significantly there was a strong sense of community ownership of the elections, and a determination to ensure that the process was fair.

Informal discussions with voters around the polling booth indicated that some were extremely sceptical and felt that they needed more evidence to be convinced of significant and lasting change. Such views were not uncommon, but appeared to be in the minority. The predominant sense was that this election was democratic and fundamentally different from previous elections. A number of people explained that this was the first free election since 1955; and they genuinely believed that this election would be free.
Informal discussions indicated some perception that the human rights situation had improved in recent times as a result of the process of reform and democratisation. The reasoning behind this was an example to which most people appeared to relate closely. The PPP candidate lived in the area, was known to many and had been gaolled for four years in the 1980s, following the Tanjung Priok killings in 1984. That he was now not only a candidate, but is apparently able to speak freely about his past experiences was viewed positively. This one example says little about the broader human rights situation, but was seen by some in Warakas as symbolising change in a positive direction.

Overall there was a general feeling that democracy was being put into place. It was interesting that a group of children – all under about ten or twelve – impressed on me that this was a democratic election, suggesting the nature of discussions heard in their homes or in school (raising the question of the role of schools in democratic processes and transition). Yet most people, not surprisingly, had little detailed knowledge of the government structure or of legislative reform. Of course, it could be asked how many Australians or citizens of other nations have any detailed knowledge of electoral (or perhaps a range of other) laws. The pre-election education process appeared to have been reasonably effective and most people had seen and understood advertisements on TV or in the newspapers.

There was a generally strong sense of optimism about the elections which, in some cases, translated into high expectations for the future and perhaps unrealistic expectations as to how rapid political reform can be. Countering this was a strong sense among many people I spoke to that enormous problems remain, with corruption considered by many to be particularly significant.

Concluding comments
The vote at the main polling booth visited appeared to be free and fair. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn in regard to the three polling booths visited for brief periods, the process being followed appeared to be in order. There was no visible intimidation on the day and there were no reports of intimidation.

It should be noted that the level of voter education and knowledge would be expected to be significantly higher in Jakarta than in more remote areas. Similarly, the opportunity for fraud or intimidation would be expected to increase in more remote areas. That the vote was observed to be free and fair in this part of Jakarta says little about the process elsewhere. It could be said, however, that had the process not been free and fair in Jakarta it would have boded very badly for the process elsewhere.

In sum, the most positive aspects of the elections at the polling booths visited was not only the fact that the process appeared to be free and fair, but the
extent of the sense of community ownership of the process. This would seem to offer a window of opportunity for developing and institutionalising a more participatory and representative political system in Indonesia.

Report by Sharon Bessell
Observations made and views expressed in this report are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Centre for Democratic Institutions.