This seminar, organised by CDI in association with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, brought together a number of experts assisting Indonesian authorities in preparing for the elections which will be held on June 7, 1999. Some 100 participants from the university, the bureaucracy, the press and the diplomatic corps attended.

HE Mr S Wiryono, the Indonesian Ambassador, opened the Seminar. His address dealt with the difficulty of changing to a democratic process in Indonesia in so short a period. He argued that Indonesia has "a unique opportunity to achieve a much more democratic society than we have ever had." He examined the possible outcomes ranging from a successful election to a complete failure or a mixed result, expressing the hope that any failings are mitigated by the general acceptability of the results and support for further reform.

The keynote speaker was Mr Bengt Save-Soderbergh, Secretary-General of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). The Secretary-General placed the Indonesian elections in the international context. Since the end of the Cold War democracy has been embraced in many parts of the world. It has shown itself to be of universal application and not simply relevant to the West. Considerable work remains and the Indonesian elections will be closely watched by the Muslim world and by Asian countries. A successful outcome will have ramifications well beyond the immediate region.

The Secretary-General noted that IDEA had responded quickly to a request from the Ministry of Home Affairs in Jakarta for assistance in the design and drafting of the new electoral law. As part of this process IDEA had organised a workshop in Jakarta on 3–4 December 1998, where representatives from electoral commissions in Australia, India, the Philippines and Thailand shared their experiences with the Indonesian participants.

The keynote address was followed by a panel of four speakers: Dr Ben Reilly of IDEA, Mr Bassim Blazey of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Michael Maley of the Australian Electoral Commission and Mr Amrih Widodo of the Faculty of Asian Studies of the ANU.

Dr Ben Reilly spoke about the process of designing the new electoral law. The task was given to
‘Team 11’ headed by Dr Ryaas Rasjid of the Ministry of Home Affairs and assisted by a number of prominent academics and others. The initial recommendation was for a system of 500 single member constituencies. This would have created a political system more responsive to local needs but its effect on established political parties was unclear. In hindsight it is now clear that this system, if accepted, would have been virtually impossible to implement in the time at hand.

In the event the January 1999 legislation established a list proportional representation system, which is quite common throughout the world and with which Indonesia was familiar. The provinces of Indonesia are used as the constituencies. The difficulty of conducting the elections should not be underestimated and it was therefore probably wise to retain a system with which both electors and administrators have experience.

Mr Bassim Blazey argued that in an atmosphere of great change in Indonesia it is easy to lose sight of the broad continuities in the Indonesian body politic. These continuities include some fundamental issues, such as support for the continuing relevance of the 1945 Constitution and an acceptance that some place needed to be found for the Armed Forces within society. Importantly, there is little support for an Islamic State or the introduction of Shariah law. While the IMF package has attracted some criticism, it is broadly accepted in its revised form. Finally, there was no single party that was wholly unacceptable to the others such that its success in the elections could not be tolerated. This situation contrasts with the 1950s when true party politics existed in Indonesia and the Communist Party was emerging as a powerful force.

Mr Blazey did not wish to predict the outcome of the elections. The general trend, however, pointed to the emergence of four broad political groups. The ruling party, Golkar, would retain some support, particularly in the outer islands. Several parties would contest the elections under a modernist Islam banner, including Amien Rais’ National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional – PAN). The third group could be described as parties supporting traditional Islam, typified by Nahdatul Ulama with the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa – PKB) in the fore. The nationalists led by Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan PDI – Perjuangan) will comprise the fourth broad group. This points to a need for coalitions and alliances to form effective government and to elect a president.

Mr Michael Maley distributed a fact sheet summarising the main provisions of the new election law. He accepted that every country had unique issues and problems to deal with in organising multi-party elections, yet there remained many basic issues of commonality. The major problem in organising the elections is the scale involved. Australian election days are conducted through 8,000 polling booths. In Indonesia there will be between 200,000 and 320,000 polling booths. This will amount to the largest logistical exercise ever undertaken in the region, involving every adult on a single day. Previous elections have seen three parties on the ballot, this election would see at least 48. As a consequence, the ballot will be longer, voting will be more complex, voters will spend more time in the booth, and the counting process will be more difficult.

Compounding these challenges are several factors: voting will take place simultaneously for three levels of government; there will be a new electoral body administering the elections; and the elections will be conducted under a new electoral law, albeit adopting a familiar electoral system. Given the international interest in these elections, monitoring will be a significant factor and mounting a strong monitoring operation is almost as difficult as holding the elections. Communications have to be excellent to enable the monitors to distil a common and agreed
judgement that the elections were ‘free and fair’. That the Indonesian people see the results as credible is of vital importance.

International co-operation to assist Indonesia is good, with UNDP undertaking the co-ordinating role. The AEC is providing advice on location of ballot booths, design of polling stations, design of ballot paper and methods of compiling the result. One particular difficulty flows from the election law devolving many important decisions to the electoral body. As this body is not yet functioning, the time for preparation is shrinking with only 90 days left. It should also be remembered that the election is not the end of the process as the law calls for the system to be reviewed in three years.

Mr Amrih Widodo adopted a historical perspective to assist in understanding the 1999 elections. He said the 1955 elections, which came to be seen as the most free and fair in Indonesian history, may be used as a point of comparison. Then as now the elections were seen as a way of resolving a political crisis. The as now expectations were very high. A key distinction is that there had been two years to prepare for the 1955 elections: the electoral law was adopted in 1953 and the electoral commission was established in the same year. Voter registration had taken place between May and November 1954. In 1999, the elections will be carried out in a very short time-frame and in a time of emergency. In 1955, 90 per cent of the 43 million eligible voters had participated. Today there are 125 million eligible voters and three months to prepare for the elections.

The 1955 elections saw the rise of the Communist Party of Indonesia as a political force only seven years after its formation. This had sowed the seeds for future conflict. Today Indonesia has far greater freedom of expression but fortunately the ideological divide is narrower than in 1955. 1955 also witnessed a shift from ‘culture to politics’ as a means of dealing with conflict. Previously, differences had been dealt with outside the public arena. With the 1955 elections differences became political and public.

Mr Widodo identified several critical issues that may be flashpoints during the 1999 election process. First, the fact that 39 seats within Parliament are reserved for the military may be a point of conflict. The second possible flashpoint is the exclusion of ethnic parties, for example those representing local interests in Aceh or Irian Jaya, because the electoral law requires parties to have representation in half the provinces to be eligible to participate in the election. Third, the number of polling booths will cause significant problems for observers. Amrih Widodo concluded with the hope that the 1999 elections are as free and fair as the 1955 elections and that the 44 years of democratic amnesia has not cut this link.

Editor's Note:
Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU) will be central to the election process and is charged with wide-ranging duties and responsibilities under the 1999 Electoral Law. At the time of the seminar the Commission was not established, as noted by some speakers. The Commission was established on 10 March 1999, and held its first meeting on that date. It consists of five representatives from the government and forty-eight from political parties. Andi Mallarangeng, Adi Andojo, Adnan Buyung Nasution, Affan Gafar and Oka Mahendra are government representatives on the committee. Party representatives include Rudini, Hasballah M Saad from the National Mandate Party, Sri Bintang Pamungkas from the PUDI, and Mahadi Sinambela from the ruling Golkar Party.