

ASIA

THE DEMOCRACY CHANNEL

by Jacqueline O'Connor

Promoting democracy around the world is not always an easy task—the very definition of democracy varies from person to person and country to country. A common thread in dictionary definitions is the supreme power of the people over the affairs of government. But, how does the ordinary person obtain and exercise power? One reasonable answer is through education and knowledge. The more people know about their government and the actions of their elected representatives, the easier it will be for them to exercise their power. Other essential elements include a transparent legislative process and a channel for the citizenry to express their views on how they are governed. In many countries IFES has supported legislative transparency and civil society efforts to create a more open government and an informed populace. An excellent example of IFES' work in these areas is its program in Indonesia.

In October 1999, IFES collaborated with the People's Representative Assembly (DPR) and the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) to launch a government affairs television channel based on *C-SPAN* in the United States. *SWARA*, an Indonesian acronym for *Voice of the People's Representatives*, airs 24 hours per day and features live, recorded and repeat broadcast of proceedings of the DPR and MPR. It is the only channel of its kind anywhere in Asia with the exception of Japan. Excerpts from *SWARA* are frequently used in other news and public affairs programs. Indonesian opinion leaders and the international community have credited *SWARA* with contributing to successive and peaceful political transitions in Indonesia.

As a companion to the *SWARA* channel, a website, www.swara.net, was created to feature information about the parliament, committees, members, sessions and committee agendas. The site also has streaming live video of parliamentary proceedings and interactive chat rooms that include regular appearances by the Speaker of the DPR. Other features were added in 2001, including special programs focusing on specific areas of parliamentary activity such as DPR leadership activities, reports by various political

factions and committees, and a weekly legal digest produced in coordination with a local non-governmental organization.



SWARA has also extended its coverage to several regional parliaments in key regions outside of Jakarta. Also at the regional level, IFES has worked to establish Local Consultative Forums (LCFs) comprised of NGOs, academics, private sector representatives, community and religious leaders, and other civil society organizations. LCFs work with their respective regional parliament to discuss topical issues for that community. IFES works with LCFs and regional media outlets (television and radio) to develop television and radio programs that are relevant to each particular community. Thus, the media become the mechanism through which the LCFs can influence their leaders and inform the public.

Pierre Mendes France once said that "to govern is to choose." If this is true, then the people must be given the tools to make informed choices. For the moment at least, Indonesia has two such tools.

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April: Rwandan genocide of Tutsis by Hutus begins; estimated 800,000 slaughtered in about 100 days.



April: South Africa holds first interracial national election; Nelson Mandela elected president.



October: Aristide returns to joyous Haiti, forms Haitian government with prime minister and full cabinet.



1994

IFES begins three-year project in Peru to set up a National Office for Electoral Processes.

IFES opens office in Jerusalem and conducts pre-election assessments in West Bank/Gaza, Yemen and Tunisia, and an election observation mission to Morocco.

IFES provides key technical support in satellite communication and vote tabulation for the historic South African elections.

IFES establishes its field office in Moldova. It remains active through 2000.

IFES sponsors the first continent-wide gathering of African election officials in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

IFES delivers hundreds of computers to election offices in every district in Ukraine and trains election administrators to use them.