

Indonesians Nail Down Their Future

by Henry Valentino

On April 5, 2004, in the world's largest single-day democratic elections, Indonesians nailed their choices for national, provincial and local legislatures – literally. Indonesians use a nail to punch a hole in paper ballots indicating their choices. The country's second legislative elections since the end of former President Soeharto's 35-year autocratic rule were a great victory for electoral reform, the newly established independent national election commission (KPU) and the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia.

The magnitude of the KPU's success has been underestimated by the international community and has surprised many Indonesian political pundits and naysayers. In the past two years, the nine members of the KPU, most of whom are academics, carried out an impressive list of accomplishments. They implemented new election laws, built an independent national election organization with offices throughout the country and registered 147.3 million potential voters. They certified 24 political parties and almost 450,000 candidates, created over 2,000 new legislative districts, trained more than 5 million poll workers and educated the electorate about the new election procedures (which included a new electoral system, modified open-list proportional representation, as well as voting for a new national chamber of representatives, the DPD). They also distributed 660 million ballots and conducted the elections for the legislatures (including the new DPD).

Obviously, elections of this magnitude would be a challenge for any country, but the complexities of Indonesia's geography – an archipelago with 18,000 islands and some of the remotest locations in the world, for example, almost half of the sub-districts have no electricity or telephone service – increased the challenge. The fact that 83% of the electorate, some 124.3 million Indonesians, turned out to vote in what were generally regarded as free and fair elections is a testament to the magnitude of the KPU's accomplishments.

A comparison of the 1999 elections with those of 2004 indicates the progress of electoral reform in Indonesia. In 1999, voters could not vote directly for the candidate of their choice. Rather,



they could only vote for one of 48 political parties. Each political party maintained a list of candidates for each province, but many of these did not live in the province they were to represent. This year, voters were able to vote directly for the candidates on the political parties' lists in addition to voting for the political party of their choice. In 1999, the national legislature (DPR) had 500 seats, and 38 of these were allocated without election to the military. This year, the DPR has 550 seats, all elected from 69 legislative districts.

It seems that electoral reform is indeed allowing Indonesians to make their voices heard. While in 1999 the six largest parties received almost 93% of all elected seats in the DPR, this year these same parties secured only 74.5% of the seats, and two new parties have catapulted to national prominence. The Democrat Party and the Prosperous Justice Party, both with reform platforms, together claimed 102 seats. The emergence of these two parties will not only make the national legislature more diverse but also may play a role in the election of the next president. The leader of the Democrat Party is Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and he is currently leading President Megawati Soekarnoputri in the polls for Indonesia's first direct presidential elections in July.

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In the end, it was the citizens of Indonesia, through their peaceful participation in the electoral process, observance of the laws and regulations, and respect for the rights and responsibilities of each eligible voter, that made the 2004 legislative elections successful. These are most interesting times for Indonesia: the voters' demands for reforms

have been heard and democracy has returned. While the mechanisms of democracy seem to have worked well in Indonesia, some observers' were surprised to see Golkar, the party created by former President Soeharto, gain the largest percentage of votes (21.6%), while Megawati's party, the reformist PDI-P, secured a smaller percentage (18.53%). Not everything about the 2004 elections was perfect, but everyone must agree they were a significant step in the right direction and offer many more reasons to celebrate than did the 1999 elections.

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