

# INDONESIA'S NEW PRECEDENT

by Eric Bjornlund

On October 20, 2004, Indonesia inaugurated its first directly elected president. This historic event marks a major step toward the consolidation of democracy in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. One month earlier, Indonesia successfully conducted the last of three democratic elections in six months, following the legislative elections in April and the first round of the presidential election in July. During all three rounds, a peaceful atmosphere prevailed, and more than 70 percent of the 155 million eligible Indonesians went to the polls.



Sealing a ballot box

These elections—the largest single-day elections in the world—were both a remarkable logistical accomplishment



Counting the vote

and an important political milestone. The direct presidential election is just one of a number of wide-ranging, fundamental constitutional reforms in Indonesia since the country's transition began with the resignation of long-time authoritarian president Soeharto in May 1998. These reforms have created new checks and balances and have recognized fundamental human rights. The revised constitution has established a second house of the national legislature to represent the interests of the provinces, created a new court to judge the constitutionality of laws and referee election disputes, and eliminated the legislative seats previously set aside for the nation's military. Since 1999, Indonesia has also embarked on an ambitious decentralization program. Direct election of provincial governors and district heads is set to begin next year.

Indonesia's new president is Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as SBY), who won a plurality in the first round of voting and gained 61 percent

against incumbent Megawati Soekarnoputri in the runoff to become the country's fourth president since the fall of Soeharto. A retired military general, SBY had served as

coordinating minister for security for former President Megawati until his resignation in March. Running on an anti-corruption and pro-reform platform, SBY's Democrat Party, founded only in 2001, won a surprising 7.5 percent of the vote in the April legislative elections. In addition to giving the party the fourth largest number of seats in the new national legislature, the showing made the party eligible to nominate its own candidate for president. SBY's meteoric ascent to the pinnacle of Indonesian politics has been stunning, and his election offers new hope for the cause of democracy and genuine reform.

Nevertheless, some have questioned SBY's commitment to fundamental reform. Many of his advisors hail from the military establishment or from the Soeharto-era political elite. Moreover, SBY's ability to advance reforms may be tempered by a legislature in which the government does not command a majority. Although in the election SBY was able to overcome a coalition of the country's two largest political parties (the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle of incumbent President Megawati and Golkar, the political machine established by Soeharto), those parties and their allies in the so-called National Coalition still have a legislative majority and will likely control key legislative positions. Under the new institutional arrangements, the rules governing party discipline in the legislature and the relationship between a directly elected president and the legislature remain unclear and untested.

Notwithstanding the political achievements embodied in the direct election of a reformist president and the broad range of institutional reforms, the new government faces daunting challenges to the continuing consolidation of democracy in Indonesia.

First, Indonesians and the international community will watch to see whether the new government is genuinely committed to addressing corruption and establishing the rule of law. Rent-seeking networks and old authoritarian elite interests have survived the transition to democracy and reorganized

their political bases of support, both adapting to and operating beyond the more formalistic democratic political rules. During the recent elections, complaints about the influence of money in the campaign, including

vote buying, and the inappropriate use of government resources were common. SBY has promised concrete actions in his first hundred days to address these problems.

...In just a few years, Indonesia has made a dramatic transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.

Second, questions remain about the military's willingness to accept civilian control. SBY has stated his commitment to military reform, but he has remained vague about specifics, including whether the military should report to a civilian minister of defense rather than to the president himself, whether the new government will dismantle the notorious "territorial system," which has enabled military domination of local politics, and whether he will attack the practice of military involvement in business, licit and illicit.

Third, Indonesia continues to face problems with separatist and communal violence. Violent conflict continues to afflict the province of Aceh, at the northwestern tip of the country, and the central government has withheld long-promised institutions of special autonomy for Papua, in the far eastern end of the archipelago. Meanwhile, communal violence continues to flare up periodically in Ambon and in central Sulawesi. After the election, SBY told international visitors that he would renew the government's efforts to solve the ongoing conflict in Aceh and to implement long-delayed special autonomy for Papua.



Pollworkers in Jakarta

Fourth, terrorists, such as those responsible for a September 9 bombing that killed nine outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta, pose a serious threat to the country's international reputation and, as a result, could provide a pretext for cracking down on civil liberties. Recent assaults on the freedom of journalists and researchers—including the criminal prosecution for alleged libel of Bambang Harymurti, the chief editor of a highly regarded magazine, and the expulsion of Sidney Jones, the well-known American human rights activist—also provide cause for concern. Like other Indonesian leaders, SBY has avoided condemning by name Jemaah Islamiyah, the Muslim extremist group believed to have been responsible for the September attack. At the same time, SBY has pledged both to attack terrorism and to uphold fundamental human rights. He even suggested to international visitors that he would likely reverse the previous government's expulsion of Jones.

Finally, despite its political achievements, Indonesia still needs to address concerns about the process of elections and the functioning of democratic institutions. The election law and election commission rules, for example, limited the second-round presidential campaign to three days and imposed considerable restrictions—inconsistent with international norms—on campaigning. During the elections, international and domestic election observers also expressed concerns about ballot design, polling and counting procedures, polling hours, candidate

eligibility, dispute resolution mechanisms, training of polling officials and the structure of the election commission. Not only are these issues important for future national elections, but they will also be directly relevant to the provincial and local elections that begin next year. Continuing efforts to build accountable, effective political institutions are essential to the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia, and profound challenges remain. But the successful conclusion of Indonesia's presidential elections represents a major step in the country's ongoing democratic transition. In just a few years, Indonesia has made a dramatic transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.

*Eric Bjornlund represented the Carter Center in Indonesia and is a principal of Democracy International. His latest book is Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy (Washington, Baltimore and London: Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).*



## MEDIA + ELECTIONS

An Elections Reporting Handbook

by IMPACS Associate  
Ross Howard

© IMPACS 

The Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) offers journalists in countries with developing democracies the tools to support free and fair elections. This book, written by Ross Howard, covers the rights and responsibilities every professional journalist should know.  
Available at [www.impacs.org](http://www.impacs.org)