

Reviewing the *Demos* in Democracy

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Today, democracy is increasingly like a half-remembered love letter. It begins with fresh passion, anticipating a warm and honest conversation—and then time wears it away. As an expression, words, and performance, democracy has lost the thrill. And yet it retains its resilient, albeit confused, hope of rebound.

The story of Indonesian democracy is a case in point. In 1998 the *Reformasi* movement that replaced Suharto's authoritarian rule was accompanied by a euphoria of change: big business could no longer be monopolized by the president's family, critics were no longer muzzled, the military no longer controlled civilian life, people could not be detained indefinitely, there was no official obstruction to the creation of political parties, power could not be centralised, leaders, from the president right down to the *bupati* (the head of a regency), were elected with limited terms.

Today, despite *Reformasi*, all these things persist. When the “New Order” regime collapsed, people expected that the political institutions guarding private choice in matters of religion, ideas, and life-styles would be enforced. But it turned out they suffered from a lack of conceptual investment and political commitment. Today we can no longer hope for a judiciary independent of political influence, money, and the “ideology” of the judges. Bribes roll in right from the initial stage, beginning with the police.

On the positive side, Indonesia is still better off than the Middle Eastern countries in the violent aftermath of the “Arab Spring.” Indonesia has not brought back authoritarian power similar to Russia and the People's Republic of China. Still, Indonesian democracy is a performance in which political parties are a proxy of the oligarchy, the election process is sullied by corruption, and parliament has increased its own power to such an extent that it is immune from sanctions.

Vapidity is the current trait of the system.

Can this slide be stopped and the impetus revitalized? This is an important question at a time when a state of malaise is worming into most of the world's democracies. For about a quarter century now, since Francis Fukuyama proclaimed of triumph of “liberal democracy,” people have begun to speak of the system not only as an evil necessity but also a major historical misstep. It brings about a lot of good things (you can see it as a road of hope) but also social discontent. In 2017, Fukuyama himself admitted that he had not expected democracy to be in retreat, and had no theory to explain how it could happen. Now he knows that it is a distinct possibility.

This year, research by *The Economist* shows that less than 5% of the world's population lives in “full democracy.” Using 60 indicators, the research found that 89 out of 167 countries got a lower score than the previous year. Democracy is “in recession.”

It seems that the ancient misgivings that Socrates voiced in the 5th century BC about democracy have come back to haunt us. Can the *demos* form a good republic? Socrates took his analogy from ocean travel. “If you were going on a sea voyage,” he famously asked, “who would you ideally want to be in charge of the vessel: just anyone, or people trained in the rules and demands of sailing?” Socrates had a clear answer. He rejected the *demos*. But he did not find it crucial to probe that idea further.

History shows us that the *demos* are a concept of fluid identity. That is to say, the *demos* are actually an event, contingent to particular time and space. They occupy the street and shout their slogans as, to use Rancière’s words, “figure of the people.” In 18th-century France, they were generally identified as the bourgeoisie oppressed by the aristocracy and the Church. They made a social entity that was the power base of the leaders of “the French Revolution.”

In 20th-century China, the *demos* were peasants whose means of production were just hoes—an impoverished class curiously melt into the category of “proletariat” who, according to the diktat of the Maoist party, were supposed to lead them.

In short: the *demos* are those who make their presence felt by demanding justice and equality—or equality that is also freedom. They are the product of a taxonomy evolved in a given political history. There are times when history is not that of revolution, but of negotiation concluded by a tentative consensus. Since the 18th century, the *demos* of many parts of the world have been represented by citizens expected to cast the ballot. In the 21st century, attached to the paradigm of a capitalist system, the *demos* are “political consumers” and society, to use Hegel’s words from the 19th century, the realm of the “system of needs.” Today the *demos* are perceived as subjects with private lacks and desires, living most of the time in self-centred worlds.

To be sure, the taxonomy of the *demos* is never accurate. There is a structural inability to fix it but with a contingent and tentative labelling, especially in our era, the time of utmost mobility. When the *demos* are treated as consumers, we know that they are not as autonomous as assumed. The myth of the consumer as king is bogus. The voter-to-be, the “consumer,” is a product of the power that generates political campaigns, just as buyers of perfumes are directed by labels and advertisements.

Recently we found out that the personal data collected through Facebook are gathered and turned into a huge bank of information (“Big Data”) to be manipulated. The aim is to bring out the voter’s political preference. It is a case of Foucauldian “technologies of discourse” *par excellence*. In other words, the voter/consumer does speak, but in an inorganic conversation.

The idea of “representation” has therefore become problematic. Institutionalised representation of the popular will is always a delayed practice. Deleuze is quoted as saying that representation presupposes presentation, but since this original presentation never appears, “the representation

too lacks meaning.” There is a necessary time gap between the initial articulation of popular demands and the production of procedures and policies.

As follows, there is a temporal shift, and a spatial one as well. The focus of deliberation often drifts along the distance between the site and the social setting of the *demos* and their representatives, especially in a vast archipelagic country like Indonesia. Ultimately, at a certain stage of the political process, they will find themselves alienated.

Their mutual estrangement disrupts the deliberative rationale. The so-called “mild voice of reason” becomes more and more inaudible. This may bring in the impulse for extra-parliamentary contestation. The temptation is latent in the history of Indonesian politics. Both during the period of Sukarno’s “guided democracy” (1958–1966) and Suharto’s “New Order” (1966–1998), authoritarian/bureaucratic management of conflicts was the product of a disillusion with parliamentarism after a brief experiment with constitutional democracy (1945–1958).

Theoretically, it is possible the current political format will have to face a resurgence of the utopia of popular will or to deal with the demand for an unmediated rapport (and tension) between the state and society. The so-called ‘populist’ appeal is real. It replaces deliberative process both in the parliament and the judiciary with the force of mass rallies in city streets.

The mythical colloquium of reason meets its nemesis, i.e. the mythical unity of the *demos*—a unity shaped by a rejection of the Other. The election of the mayor of Jakarta in early 2018 was a case in point: a highly respected incumbent, with an impressive record of achievement as a city administrator, was unseated after an upsurge of ethnic and religious demagoguery against him, a devoted Christian. His defence was even misrepresented as an insult to Islam, the religion of the majority. And he was jailed.

As the presidential election campaigning gets underway for 2019, Indonesia remembered the effect, and side-effects, of “populism.” One wonders whether another tsunami of bigoted campaigning will mark the race. On top of that there is also a legitimate concern that the election (inevitably an expensive ritual) will be a rerun of oligarchic contest, no matter who or what will win. But that’s the rub: it is the karma of democratic process, or struggle if you will, that it will never lead to the promised land of happiness.

Politics entails disappointment: it is an unfinished project of freedom and justice, contested by different agents engaging in the struggle for supremacy. And yet the love letter from the *demos*, by the *demos*, for the *demos*, is only half-forgotten. It is what makes politics necessary, alive, and meaningful.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.