

Making Politics Fun:

Why Youth Empowerment is Important for Democracy and How to Do that

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“Everything was better in Soeharto’s reign.

Yes they’re corrupt, but at least prices were stable and we were safe.”

-A ‘walking vendor’, 2006

It was year 2006, when we were in the middle of a demonstration commemorating eight years of Indonesia’s arrival to democracy under the battle-cry named *“Reformasi”* (Reform), calling for more serious effort from the government to curb corruption. During the demonstration, we bought some drinks and foods from walking vendors (note: in Indonesia, these ‘walking vendors’ are omnipresent, even in conflict-prone activities such as strikes or political rallies). We had a little chit-chat with some of them, hoping for a moral support. However, some of the responses were not really encouraging.

“Everything was better in Soeharto’s reign. Yes they’re corrupt, but at least prices were stable and we were safe,” one of them said. He was not joking when he told that to me and my friends.

I believe that more people believe in the political reform and democracy now. However, we should not overlook a pivotal point that every transition into democracy has to pass. The statement from the walking vendor shows that Indonesia has not yet safe, even though we have done relatively better than other emerging democracies.¹

This essay is an attempt to answer the abovementioned challenge. It will elaborate these following points:

- 1. The ability of democracy to deliver its promises (fulfilling the expectations of the people, from security to welfare and justice) will define its fate.** Democracy arrived with a lot of promises (including security, political rights, equality before the law, welfare, justice, effective and clean government, etc.). When people perceive democracy is not delivering its promises, the danger of a democratic reversal is eminent. By the way, a reversal did really happen in 1959, when the

¹ Larry Diamond, “Indonesia’s Place in Global Democracy”, in Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner (eds.), *Problems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010)

democratic Constitutional Assembly was dissolved because of a political deadlock and the popular President was calling to “bury the parties”.²

2. **However, democracy is not an automatic machine to fulfill all expectations.** Whether democracy can deliver or not depends on how the game named democracy is played by the people. It won't work when most people are becoming bystanders and leave it to politicians nurtured by authoritarian regime in the past. Participation is one of the most important keys.
3. **If participation is the key, how to boost the precious public participation? In this context, youth is the key.** In 2005, young people (15-34 years old) made up around one third of the total populations (\pm 77 million people).³ They are also a vibrant, dynamic, and creative part of the society and well-connected to technology's state-of-the art (from Twitter to BlackBerry).
4. **To empower the youth for making democracy work, we should know the right way to activate them.**

Indonesia's Democracy: Overpromise, Underdeliver?

“In the past, corruption was done under the table. Now, even the table is taken away”

-Political joke, written in a sticker put in a public bus

Before we go further, I would like to highlight one important notion: “the progress paradox”.⁴ Dissatisfaction to democracy's performance is not always about ‘objective truth’, but sometimes more defined by perception.

Even political scientists do not have identical perception on the performance of Indonesia's democracy. Which one is Indonesia: democratic success story or a flawed democracy? According to Marcus Mietzner and Edward Aspinall, there are three broad schools of thought: **(1) Democratic change has been superficial**, with core structures of power remaining unchanged (Robison and Hadiz, 2004; Boudreau, 2009); **(2) Indonesia has done exceptionally well in consolidating democracy**, especially from comparative viewpoint (MacIntyre and Ramage, 2008; Freedom House, 2009); **(3) Middle ground**: some democratic progress but still crippled by severe structural problems –e.g. corruption and weak law enforcement (Davidson, 2009).⁵

² For a vivid description on this particular period, please see Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2007).

³ Statistics received from http://www.datastatistik-indonesia.com/component/option,com_tabel/kat,1/idtabel,116/Itemid,165/

⁴ The notion was used by Gregg Easterbrook to illustrate the situation in the United States. See Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (Random House: 2003).

⁵ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner (eds.), *Problems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010)

Academic assessment is important. However, in this essay I would like to argue that what matter most is not always the perceptions of the professors, but perceptions of the people –the “users” of a political “operating system” named democracy. To understand that, let us go back to history.

Indonesia has been a latecomer to democracy. In the latter half of 1990’s, the expansion of democracy came to a halt (since 1996 modestly in decline). However, Indonesia emerged as democracy in this period (in 1998).⁶ The beginning of the story is not a nice one: the 1997 Asian Crisis.

The financial crisis started to be a ‘multidimensional’ one (as illustrated in one popular term that I remember: “dari krismon ke krisis multidimensi” or “from monetary crisis to multidimensional crisis”). The social and political situation changed dramatically, with students and civil society saw this as a momentum to overthrow the authoritarian Soeharto. I remember how streets and newspapers are started to be flooded with demonstrations. I was in my junior high school when I joined my first demonstration.

I do not know how academically reliable is this, but I felt that when people were shouting “Reformasi” (which means political reform, democratization), they believe that it is the answer for all problems at that time. Democracy was seen as a panacea. It will eradicate the rampant corruption from all levels. It will make a better economic situation. It will create justice and equality before the law. Democracy will fix everything. Overthrow the regime, change into democracy, and this country will be a paradise.

Hope is your best friend when you want to change something. When the change happens, hope (high expectations) is one of the worst enemy. This happens to the introduction of democracy in Indonesia, to some extent.

Here the “progress paradox” works. Because democracy arrived as a “total solution” for all problems, any relatively well democratic achievement (better press freedom, successful institutionalization of election as the only means for political succession, etc.) are undermined by unsolved problems which were actually already there before the democratization (corruption, for example). Uniquely, the problems seemed bigger than they were in the pre-democratic period –because now everybody can talk about it freely (and for media, “bad news is good news”, no wonder good news rarely seen on TV or newspapers).

In the end, we have to understand that democracy is not a genie’s lamp in the Arabian Nights tales. Democracy is not something that gives what people want just by declaring that “we are democratic” and “Abrakadabra!” –everything is fixed, no more corruption or poverty. Whether democracy can deliver or not depends on how the game named democracy is played by the people. It won’t work when most people are becoming bystanders and leave it to politicians nurtured by authoritarian regime in the past. Participation is one of the most important keys.

⁶ Larry Diamond, “Indonesia’s Place in Global Democracy”, *Op.Cit.*

Making Difference: Empowering the Youth

This is the year 2010. Five years ago, young people (if we limit it to age 15-34 years old) made up around one third of the total populations, with a total number of 77 million people.⁷ From the number alone, we will understand that when the youth are activated, politics is no longer the same game.

There is another reason why empowering the youth to participate in many levels and forms of politics will change how the game is played. Youth are the vibrant, dynamic, and creative part of the society. They may have no traditional source of authority such as religious clerics or ethnic leader, but they are well-connected to technology's *state-of-the art*.

Two years ago, Facebook was only used by the youth. Most teachers were having no idea when students were badmouthing them at the popular social media. One year later, almost all teachers –at least that I know- are having a facebook account. This year, Facebook became an important instrument for civil society to fight against the efforts to destroy the Corruption Eradication Commission (represented in the effort to capture the chiefs of the Commission, Bibit Samad Rianto and Chandra Hamzah, through a conspiracy). The pressure from “One Million Facebookers against the Unjustified Capture of Bibit and Chandra” had forced the President to establish Team 8, which in the end recommended that the President should stop the conspiracy-laden legal process against Bibit and Chandra.

With a fast growing number of internet users in Indonesia (only for a little illustration: the number grew from two millions only in year 2000 to twenty five millions in 2009), internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter will be more and more important in the future. Of course, as the most-well-connected-to-internet part of the society, the role of the youth will be more pivotal. With their number and creativity, they will make democracy really works.

Only one obstacle: most of them are not interested in politics. According to them, politics is not cool. Below, I outline a 4-step strategy to activate youth participation.

Entering the Game: 4 Steps

1. Politics is Fun!

Let us call it detoxification. Most of us breathe in a political air polluted by corruption and other bad things. That makes politics looks not cool. To activate youth participation, what we need to do is to make them realize that every single aspect of their life is influenced by politics. By being unaware to politics, our fates are decided by somebody else. That was not cool too.

In this stage too, we have to change their perceptions on politics. Politics can be cool. Politics can be fun. Politics is not a difficult thing to do. Not all of us should be politicians, but all of us should be aware of it and participate in deciding our own destinies.

Strategy:

⁷ Statistics received from http://www.datastatistik-indonesia.com/component/option,com_tabel/kat,1/idtabel,116/Itemid,165/

- Campaign both in online and offline. Use their language and interest to come in. For example, we can make an online quiz about “What Can You Do to Stop Corruption?” or producing a Japanese-style comic (manga, very popular in Indonesia) that depicts politics in a different way. Movie is also a good media. Some of my friends are becoming more aware to politics after they watch Kimura Takuya’s drama titled “CHANGE”⁸ (in case you are not familiar with him, Kimura Takuya is a hot Japanese guy with tons of fans in Indonesia).
- Find communities and their influential people there. When they are into it, the whole sphere of influence will follow.

2. You CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Many young people who are aware of politics are having a skeptic perspective. *“Even though I know that politics is important, I have no power to influence it. I am nobody.”* Thus, the next step is to make them believe that they can make difference.

Strategy:

How to make them believe? Show how the system works and why our participation matters. It is better to make them experience one. Start with things close to them: rejecting an unfair school regulation, asking for better food in school or campus cafeteria, or that kind of thing.

3. KNOW THE REAL GAME

The third step is to introduce the ‘real politics’ by explaining about the political system and how it works: how a legislation was made, how political officials are elected, how the budget was proposed and accepted, how we can influence decision making, etc.

Other than that, capacity building is also important. Not only knowing the rules of the game, knowledge and skill upgrade is needed. Knowledge is including knowledge on the current political constellation, knowledge on the economic situation, etc. Skills are including important relevant skills such as public speaking, negotiation, writing, legal drafting, etc.

Strategy:

At this stage, it has to be deep and intensive. Thus, we should realize that what we need is a big number of people. Picking some potential influencers is important. Empower them, they will move the rest.

4. EMPOWERMENT NETWORK

Last but not least, when participation flourishing in the youth with various issues of concern, what we need to build is network. Network is one of the advantages that the youth have, thanks to technology.

⁸ “Change” is a drama about politics. It follows the story of a kind and pure-hearted ordinary people jumped into politics. His kindness successfully changed the color of politics.

Strategy:

Maintain contacts with various youth groups. Exchange information and share experience. Promoting each other in their respective peer group will strengthen the network. Informal meetings such as basketball or football games or barbeque party are interesting way to strengthen the bond.

FINAL REMARKS

The ability of democracy to deliver its promises (fulfilling the expectations of the people, from security to welfare and justice) will define its fate. To make democracy works and able to deliver its promises, participation from the people is at paramount importance. In this context, empowering the youth is the key of success. The article give several ideas on how to empower the youth.

I believe that ideas should be translated into reality. When I finished writing this essay, I have contacted my friends (most of them were student activists). We are planning to execute the outlined steps and establish EMPOWER: center for youth research and capacity building. Our tagline will be: empowering the nation's future.

Looking forward for future collaborations.