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The Journey of Democratization in Indonesia

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Indonesia has made a notable shift from an authoritarian to a democratic political system which has given new strength and credibility to the country in the contemporary era. It was not easy to get a status of a democratic state amid the issues and challenges. For example, lack of incoherent political elites' ideas, domestic political issues, disturbed law and order situation, and traditions of vibrant and authoritative masses. However, the democratic government and the structural reforms have paved the way for Indonesia to uplift the living standards and present as a model of more democratic and accountable nation. This article highlights the challenges and issues which Indonesia faced during the conversion towards a democratic state. In this study, descriptive and analytical method is used. This study also explains the prominent aspects of Indonesia's leadership to introduce such transformative policies to present a model of a prosperous democratic state and emerge as a significant power in the changing dynamics of the region.

Introduction

Indonesia is emerging as a democratic state in the region. In this process, the country has faced a certain complex transitional phase. In the 21st century, it got success in making the roots of democracy strong. The people of



Indonesia are experiencing economic prosperity and higher living standard due to the



incumbent leadership's visionary policies. The new era has brought a robust framework for cooperation and integration for the country. The people of Indonesia have faced severe phases of the non-democratic forces in the country¹. However, the internal dynamics have been changed and Indonesia is progressing by leaps and bounds by utilizing its full democratic potential. In this aspect, the ongoing era is labeled as a time for better democracy in Indonesia.

Since the 1950's, Indonesia has faced many types of democracy. For example, Parliamentary Democracy, Constitutional Democracy, and Guided Democracy. These types of democracy were the amalgamation of an authoritarian way of rule by the respective rulers. Consequently, there was Pancasila democracy which is based on five principles of national ideology by General Suharto. When he came into power, he introduced the term 'New Order' (Baru). He claimed that this system would be based on true democratic principles and would change Indonesia's impression². The political disputes were sorted out along with the release of the detained political figures. The press restrictions were uplifted, and society experienced freedom. However, later the new system lost its roots, and the perceived process of democratic change once again was halted. If the democratic scenario is reviewed theoretically, then it may be assumed that there are four main phases of the change from an authoritarian regime to the

¹ 10 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, 'Defining and Crafting Democratic Transition, Constitutions, and Consolidation', in R. William Liddle, *Crafting Indonesian Democracy* (Bandung: Mizan in cooperation with PPW-LIPI and the Ford Foundation, 2001), p.18.

² Larry Diamond, 'The Global State of Democracy', *Current History* 99, no. 641 December 2000,



democratic status of the state. In this regard, Indonesia witnessed four phases: pre-transition, liberalization, democratic transition, and finally democratic consolidation.

The Pre-Transition Phase

The strong economy of any state is one of the main factors of a solid democracy that helped the state's structure to maintain state's writ. The economic depression of Indonesia put the foundation of the Pre-transition



period of democracy. The New Order's credibility as a strong and powerful regime crumbled, and finally paved the way for mass movements and social unrest in several provinces. Social turmoil, chaos and protests created difficulties for Suharto to remain in power. Following the complete failure in keeping the writ of state intact, on 21 May 1998, Suharto transferred his powers to B.J. Habibie.

Democratic Liberalization

The process of liberalization was mixed up with doubts and possibilities. Habibie tried to keep political liberalization at the top of his priorities. However, it was considered that he was too close to non-democratic forces, which might be a danger for democracy. In the first step in the transition toward democracy, he failed to maintain his power because most Indonesian elites saw him as a reflection of an authoritarian



Suharto regime.³His policies and steps for democracy's liberalization were perceived as temporary.

Democratic Transition

The period of transition neither is claimed as democratic nor be un-democratic as many issues walked side by side with the elected political system. During the transition toward democracy, the authoritarian and democratic powers were seen to have close ties. The elected governments faced many problems due to the non-democratic forces in the country. The strong nexus against the democratic forces kept the democratic process slow.

Democratic Consolidation

The roots of the democratic process take a solid foundation in the society. Different phases may take many years to be completed or to have a strength of consolidation. In Indonesia, democracy has got the strength and the country is expecting consolidation. There are certain risk factors internally in the country. However, the nation is united and presenting a model of a more democratic and accountable nation.

Conclusion

Indonesia has attained a robust democratic structure after a long struggle. The 21st century has brought a substantial change in the overall democratic scenario of Indonesia. In the past, the un-democratic forces were more potent than the democratic

³ Geoff Forrester and R.J. May, eds., *The Fall of Suharto* (Bathurst, Australia: Crawford House Publishing, 1998).



elements. However, the democratic process is being built upon a strong foundation. The election process and the formation of the governments are on the right track. Political ethics and culture are being refined. In this aspect, the continuous circle of elections and transition of the power smoothly, will further strengthen Indonesia's political system. These factors will help to shape out its future as a democratic state and an important figure in the region.