

OPINION

Do They Want Us to Support Their Democracy?

By Michael Wodzicki

In late June 2008, 2,150 Indonesians were asked by one of Indonesia's most reputable polling firms, Lembaga Survey Indonesia (LSI), about their opinions on democracy and the role of outsiders in Indonesia's democratic development. This was the first time that a survey in Indonesia or anywhere had asked what people thought of foreigners working on *their* democracy.

Democracy support or democracy assistance is an accepted, if at times controversial, part of international development. Billions of dollars are spent each year by donor countries to strengthen democratic institutions such as parliaments, civil society organizations, or electoral commissions in developing countries around the world. Canada alone spends almost \$500-million supporting democracy in other countries and has promised to publicize a whole-of-government policy to democracy assistance. This policy statement was due in May 2008 but has yet to materialize.

In all the deliberations over how Canada or other donors support democracy, the individuals meant to benefit from this assistance, namely the citizens in those countries where these programs are implemented, are rarely if ever consulted. This is not only ironic, but it threatens to condemn such initiatives to failure. Democracy needs to be built from the ground-up and led by the people in the countries where it is being established.

Observers of democracy support initiatives have in fact warned of a public backlash against programs led from the outside. This

backlash stems mainly from the perceived double-standards of some donors, who are seen to support democracy in some countries while turning a blind eye to friendly authoritarian regimes in other countries.

Despite this warning, very little is actually known about the public demand for foreign democracy support in developing countries. Increasingly sophisticated public opinion polls show that people in developing countries generally want more democracy. The question that remains is: Do they necessarily want it from us? The LSI poll is the first time that data is available that offers a cautious "yes" in response.

Indonesia is often held up as an example of successful democratic development. Next year, it will have its fourth presidential elections since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998, no small feat for a multi-ethnic country spread over two million square kilometres and 17,500 islands. It is the largest Muslim country in the world and is often presented behind India and the United States as the third-largest democracy in the world. As a result, it has in the last 10 years become an important destination for international democracy-support initiatives.

Despite its advances, Indonesia's democratization cannot be taken for granted. Corruption remains rife. Rising oil and food prices have had a devastating effect on the more than 40 per cent of Indonesians who live on less than \$2 a day. In May, violent confrontations between youth linked to different political parties raised serious concerns about next year's elections. It is not surprising then that many of Indonesia's foremost demo-

cratic reformers have warned that democracy in Indonesia is in fact failing.

However, conclusions on Indonesia's democratic development may need to be more nuanced, as illustrated by the findings from the June 2008 LSI survey. The poll showed that 74 per cent of Indonesians still think that democracy remains the best form of government, and 68 per cent of Indonesians feel Indonesia is already a democracy, even if it could use improvement.

Moreover, while 52 per cent claimed that a democracy should be left to improve on its own without outside support, 48 per cent of Indonesians felt that a country can use international assistance to improve its democracy. When asked about Indonesia specifically, 43 per cent of Indonesians actually welcomed the help of other countries to improve their democracy, compared to 33 per cent who do not see a role for outsiders.

Finally, when asked which countries or institutions they would like to assist Indonesia's democracy, the United States was the respondents' third preferred choice (15 per cent), compared to "a Muslim country" (33 per cent) and the United Nations (23 per cent). Canada was hardly on the radar, selected by only 0.4 per cent of respondents.

What tentative conclusions can be drawn from these findings? First, Indonesia's democrats should be heartened, as Indonesians may well have more confidence in Indonesia's development as a democracy than they are given credit for.

Second, foreign providers of democracy assistance should be reassured by the fact that many Indonesians seem to accept a role,

even if cautiously, for outsiders in supporting Indonesia's democratic development.

Third, while the public backlash against foreign democracy assistance in Indonesia may not be as broad and deep as feared, the poll's results should not be interpreted as unqualified support for unilateral foreign democracy assistance. Fully one-third of respondents were against any role for outsiders. One way to change this view might be for democracy support programs to be supported collaboratively by donors, the United Nations and other democratizing Muslim countries.

There are also words of warning in the poll's findings. When the data is disaggregated, young urban Indonesians are shown to be more skeptical about Indonesia's democratization or even hostile to the role of foreigners. Recent history in Indonesia and elsewhere—think Kenya in January 2008—shows that disenfranchised young people living in urban areas can become dangerous tools in politically charged situations, such as election periods.

Following the tragic election violence in Kenya earlier this year, this newspaper lamented that supporting democracy is "a messy business" and that the Government of Canada had "better know what it's getting itself into." (*Embassy*, Jan. 9, 2008).

The LSI poll shows that one way to perhaps do that is to simply ask what people actually think about this whole endeavour.

Michael Wodzicki is a Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation Global Youth Fellow (2007-2008) and deputy director of policy, programs and planning at Rights & Democracy.

editor@embassymag.ca