

In 2008, the Indonesian government set up an international forum that was intended to become a meeting point for countries that shared common concerns about democracy and its development. During the first five years of its existence, the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), however, was known to Indonesian people more (or merely) for its name rather than for its programs. The annual meeting has become an international event with not much left in terms of lessons learned after the forum was over.

One can certainly assume that there should be high-level discussions and many bilateral agreements among the heads of participating states on the sidelines of those meetings. But if one were to raise a practical question as to what decisions and conclusions could guide political efforts in respective countries to further improve democratization in a more effective way, the answer would be disappointing. The public can barely get any information that might help them consolidate democracy.

This might be just an impression of an outsider who knows too little about what has been going on inside. But why, for heaven's sake, has such an important international meeting had so limited resonance in the country that will be hosting the meeting for a fifth consecutive time with an ever-increasing number of participating states? I think it is due to the fact that the BDF is a forum of and for governments in the first place, and less a forum of and for the people.

International foundations and institutions are reportedly invited to participate in the forum. However, they are present in an observer capacity only. We do not know whether the representatives of these international institutions are allowed to take part in the debates concerning the challenges to democracy or new opportunities for democratization that are created not by the states but by civil society organizations through innovative and venturesome breakthroughs.

It cannot be overemphasized that democracy is, as we all know, a particular form of government, but it is a government by the people and not a government by the state. One has the right to expect accordingly that such an important forum that bears the noble name of democracy should give sufficient room for people's participation, because it is the people who are faced with democratic challenges in their interaction with government institutions.

It is the people who on a day-to-day basis manage to tinker with the solutions of democratic

dilemmas in their communities. It is the people who keep on experimenting with new possibilities to appropriate democratic values while remaining rooted in their own local cultural systems in order not to be alienated.

Needless to say, some democratic problems originate in the uneasy relations between the state and civil society, but others come about from horizontal imbalances and contradictions between one group and another. The tension might be owing to economic disparities, social inequalities, rivalry between religious or ethnic groups, and political struggle for recognition or a general feeling of being discriminated against or at least of not being attended to.

In that sense, a list of problems can be put forward as an agenda for discussions that might have a more direct impact on the sometimes painful struggle to maintain democracy. Just to mention a few: How can we help people at the local level solve the dilemma between the requirement to stick to universal values of democracy and the need to translate those values into local expressions in order to make them comprehensible and workable within the capacity of the people? Are democratic values universal or particular? If one were to emphasize too much the nature of democracy as something that is culture-bound or history-bound, would this not provide a pretext under which the power holders would easily justify their anti-democratic acts on behalf of historical particularity or cultural specificity? On the other side, talking about universal values might easily escape a sense of relevance for most people, simply because the lofty concepts of democracy go far beyond their understanding and what they need to make sense of their public engagement.

Another problem concerns the question of how democracy relates to economic welfare. This query, as we know, has sparked many academic studies and debates, but it is also raised by every man and woman on the street. To say that democracy is a means to obtain more equitable welfare would run the risk of turning democracy into a mere instrument. If welfare seems to be out of reach, democracy might lose its legitimacy. However, to assume that democracy has nothing directly to do with welfare would make democracy lose its rationale for people who are struggling for their daily bread.

Last but not least, the question concerning the relationship between democracy and religion deserves serious attention, since it is a question that keeps lingering in the minds of so many people in fledgling democracies.

If the BDF could give some clue as to how to better answer these pressing questions, the

people might feel that this forum is also a place to which they can look for some hope.

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