Clashes for democracy

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During the year 1999, when I was gathering data for my graduate thesis on Java in Indonesia, the country was undergoing a period with major political unrest, fierce violence and recession.

Even though ethnic and religious based violence was taking place in several parts of Indonesia at the time of my stay, the only way I was aware of it was simply through the media. On the other hand, however, the depreciation of the economy and the distinctive and very intense democratization process was something I observed at a close range. Within the limits of such a short essay there is little room to pursue all the different aspects of the political changes occurring that year. I will therefore in the following essay scrutinize one particular case: the election campaign and especially the numerous violent campaign rallies. These rallies were the main factor in stirring up a situation that soon escalated into the political chaos during the months prior to the first free democratic general elections held in Indonesia since 1955. In the kampung (Indonesian City Village) in the south of Yogyakarta where I conducted fieldwork, I always felt as living under fairly protective conditions. However, this did not prevent me from experience some unfortunate situations related to the election campaign.

Despite the fact that most political commentators expected the violent campaign activities to continue throughout the elections, it was the opposite that actually took place. I will attempt to address some of the reasons why the elections were so peaceful when newspapers journalists predicted them not to. This I will do, by examining, among other things, the wishes and hopes expressed by the people as an important factor contributing to calming down the situation.

First, I think that it is necessary to present a brief overview of the situation in Indonesia during my fieldwork.

Ethnic and religious violence

While the potential for political, ethnic, religious and social conflicts could be described as latent during decades with authoritarian rule, Indonesia’s
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crumbling economy and the downfall of president Soeharto generated a scene with outbreaks of violence throughout the archipelago. Strong-hand methods used by Soeharto’s military regime created an ambience of fear that so far had prevented people from expressing themselves. However, while I was conducting fieldwork, it seemed as if Indonesia was engulfed in wave upon wave of mass violence and destruction. While the riot torn independence process of East Timor was carrying on, there were reports of ethnic violence in Banda Aceh (north Sumatra) and bloody clashes between Madurese settlers (immigrants from an island north of Java) and local Dayaks and Malays in West Kalimantan. Unrest of no less extensive scale was also taking place between Muslims and Christians in Ambon, capital of the eastern province of Maluku (sparked by a petty dispute over a bus fare). And there were sporadic reports of even more outbursts of violence spread out to almost every corner of the archipelago.

Recession and steps towards democracy; bringing back the party system

What made ex-president Soeharto and his New Order regime finally step down in 1998 was a result of a wide range of concurring events. A detailed account of the reasons behind this political event, or maybe revolution, would no doubt fill a book in itself. Generally speaking, however, I hold that what made the situation under the ex-dictator intolerable for most people in Indonesia, was the deterioration of the country’s economy since the second half of 1997. I think that the plummeting value of their money followed by price hikes on a variety of foodstuffs created feelings of resentment and disappointment amongst most people. These emotions and the courageous student demonstrations in several major cities on Java finally enforced the demand for a new system of governance; change towards democracy.

On Java riots and violence stemmed partly from the month long campaign activities by 48 political parties culminating with the people of Indonesia going to the polling booths on June 7. Three months before the elections no less than 141 political parties had been registered. 48 of them were finally confirmed and ran for presidency. Despite the vast number of parties participating in the election campaign, only four parties were really significant. They were at that time: the ruling Golkar Party led by now ex-president Habibie, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI Perjuangan) led by Megawati Soekarnoputri (daughter of the country’s first president Sukarno who was deposed by Soeharto), the Party of National Awakening (PKB) led by a liberal Muslim leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, and the National Mandate Party (PAN) led by Amien Rais, a professor at the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta.
Months with turbulent campaigning

After over three decades of dictatorship, thought control, “world record” nepotism and cronyism, and some of the worst massacres the century has seen, it seemed like, all of a sudden, democracy had broken out all over Indonesia. The implications this process posed upon my fieldwork were more or less triggered by an intense electoral campaign – a campaign visualized through dozens of party flags lining the roads and pathways everywhere. However, it was the numerous party rallies, parading the streets on motorbikes, which no doubt made the strongest impression on me: motorbikes were lined up in two or more rows behind their local party leader whose main function besides carrying the party flag, was navigating his ‘troops’. Since the bikers had both stripped off the silencers and were revving the engines up, a heart-rending noise was to be heard all over. This spectacle was not only shaking me up, it also made the whole village where I lived somehow strung up every time a parade was getting close. The people taking part in campaign activities such as these had muffled themselves up in party colored sarongs (typical Indonesian all-purpose cloth) and wore headbands with the party emblems. I remember that I used to liken their appearance to that of Japanese ninja warriors, since all of their faces were covered behind scarves and dark sunglasses. Unfortunately this way of campaigning provided conditions conducive to the occurrence of tragic bloodshed.

Despite their hidden faces, I noticed that most of the people participating in this unattractive show were young men or teenagers set out to gain support for their parties. To me this seemed like an absurd or even distorted way to exercise campaign activities, since what it first and foremost contributed to was causing fear amongst city kampung dwellers. Fajar (19), a PDI Perjuangan supporter, told me that every time he went on a rally he was always armed with a sharp weapon hidden under his shirt. Emotions were high and tempers hot, he claimed, and something to defend himself with was of outmost importance. An old man explained that every time he saw a parade approaching he got startled (kaget). The uniforms used by the involved supporters reminded him of the Japanese during the occupation of the country (1942–45). And similarly to the Japanese, the party supporters too were shrouded in an aura of death and violence everywhere they went, he exclaimed.

Needless to say, most party rallies made it through the streets without any fatal incidents, but because of the vast numbers of campaigning parties it was inevitable that they also incidentally bumped into one another. In certain cases this turned into fierce violence. In the months prior to the general elections held on June 7, except for a period from mid May until the presidential elections in November that same year, violent clashes be-
between parading supporters of different parties were reported almost daily through the local mass media. I guess my mind is still filled with a vivid memory of one particular experience. I witnessed a fray in March, involving parading supporters of two parties where four people were stabbed to death. This incident took place just outside the kampung where I lived. After this horrendous incident, experiences of other campaign activities always filled me with an agony of fear. As a consequence this influenced my behavior for a while, but despite this, I don’t think it was causing any significant troubles regarding my own fieldwork. Except this above-mentioned event I never really felt exposed to any hazardous situations. The main reason for this, I think, was that the people I lived with took extremely well care of me. I remember that some of my co-villagers often advised me to be cautious with where I moved around Yogyakarta, since all of sudden I could get intertwined in a clash between party supporters. The somewhat dubious status of being a westerner would not provide me with the convenience of anonymity and I could get hurt, they thought.

**Campaigning turns friendlier**

Just before the elections on June 7, I saw another incident whereupon two parading parties met in a crossing. However, this time the two parties’ supporters were only cheering and waving at each other and not a drop of blood was spilled. This was somewhat symptomatic for the election campaign as the poll neared. The campaign-related violence reported by the media since my arrival in February had virtually ceased. This was actually the opposite development to the general view, which held that chaos would precede the polls. On several occasions I was advised to flee the island since the violent tendency was thought to escalate. I must admit that these gloomy prophecies posed me with some dilemmas. Even so, I chose to ignore them altogether, due to my own evaluation of the situation.

As it all turned out, late May and June – the latter being the month in which the general elections were scheduled to be held - were perhaps the most quiet months all together. This is somewhat ironic since the campaign activities were not officially supposed to set off until mid May. I will not claim to know the reasons why the general elections turned out so peaceful, when all the political commentators expected the opposite. Living in an Indonesian neighborhood for almost one year has provided me with some ideas, though. First, the Javanese have never known a riot-free electoral campaign, apart from the one time in 1955. The whole enterprise on exactly how campaigning is supposed to be conducted was somewhat unfamiliar in the beginning. It is likely that people became accustomed to the parades as they eventually appeared as an everyday phenomenon.
Perhaps it was also true that some newly formed parties simply were not ready for democracy in the beginning. Some party supporters retaliated earlier incidents. For instance, many PDI Perjuangan supporters had several grievances against Golkar – a conspicuous pillar of the now generally reviled New Order regime. The truth is that PDI Perjuangan for decades suffered agonizingly under the repressive politics of Soeharto’s New Order, whose key policymakers – without exception and including officers of the Armed Forces – were Golkar cadres. Despite this public antipathy towards Golkar I had the impression, after months of campaigning, that everybody was simply tired of all the riots and the fighting, and that a spirit of accord and unity then somewhat dispersed itself across the nation. With their eyes all glinting, some kampung residents whispered to me that it was likely that the Sultan of Yogyakarta – Hamengkubowono X – had exercised some of his magic powers so that the campaign-related violence was somehow lulled to sleep.

The fact that the results of the polls turned out almost as people expected should also be considered. All those who work closely with the ‘little’ people of Indonesia knew beforehand which party had the support of the masses. I mean, it was blatantly obvious that PDI Perjuangan had the numbers. Command posts encircled in PDI Perjuangan colors, flags and large photos of Megawati decorated streets and pathways everywhere. It was all put up by the people themselves, with their own funds. This was in itself a brave call for change. This call for change was not really new. It had been in the hearts of most Indonesian people for a long time. For 32 years there was no political party which could express their feelings. On numerous occasions I was told that Indonesians buried their dreams in their hearts. “We always had hopes, but at the same time there was also fear, which somehow made us numb. Expressing our political opinions could, after all, mean jail or disappearance”, one kampung resident said. The people that I studied wanted a new leader who cared for them. They said they did not need a “clever” leader but one who cares. I might for the sake of it add that “clever” refers to clever in stealing from the people (minterin). “Caring” refers to listening to the people and responding to their needs. Maybe people didn’t really know which leader who cared the most, but they tended to know that women cared more than men did. People didn’t necessarily pay much attention to ideology or electoral promises. They wanted peace, lower prices, job opportunities, and so forth. And the situation would only change in their favor if they had a leader that cared about them. Indonesians felt that Megawati, as a woman, was more likely to care than her male counterparts in the election campaign. My own perception that the elections would turn out peaceful partly developed from observing the way people
were calmed down by the conviction that they now were finally going to see some changes. I shared this, too, as I felt my situation gradually was getting safer.

In retrospect, what strikes me the most when thinking back on the situation in Indonesia, is all the more or less dubious advises handed to me regarding my own fieldwork. This gave me, of course, some worries. I must admit that at one point in time it almost discouraged me from proceeding, since most of the predictions concerned further developments of chaos and turmoil. Some of the anticipations were to a degree also pure speculations, and not all of them carried with them any ‘experience near’ conviction. Especially on evaluating my own situation, I felt that most of the prophecies spouted out through local and international media were simply quite wrong or blown out of all proportions. For example, one way of keeping track with the ‘outside’ views in the field was to read about them on the Internet. One evening a few days before the presidential elections I remember getting a bit astounded by what I was reading. One international newspaper claimed that the best outcome of the elections in Indonesia would be if the country remained in a political status quo. Of two evils, it continued, the less destructive for Indonesia, and for the country’s international relations, would be if Habibie (Soehartoe’s successor, and handpicked by the old ex-president himself) and the Golkar regime remained in power. Regarding the other so-called evil, referring to Megawati and PDI Perjuangan, the newspaper deemed it inevitable that the country would literally fall apart if governed by Megawati. This view did not concur with the empirical reality I observed, which rather implied that a hell would break loose unless Megawati was not to seize power. The fact was that the June 7 general elections calmed down the situation on Java somewhat, and this seemingly tranquil situation endured until the presidential elections later that year, when several outbursts of violence again were reported all over Java. These were mainly activities by followers of the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI Perjuangan). They were disappointed and unable to comprehend the fact that their presidential candidate, Megawati Soekarnoputri, was not elected. This unrest was obviously not indicating that political continuity would be far the best solution. Even though Megawati’s party got over 40 percent of the votes and was the winner in the polls, it was the leader of PKB, Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, whom on November 7, 1999 was finally elected president by the House of Representatives. Some of my friends in Yogyakarta suggested that this was in large part due to “traditional” thinking, which is still prevalent in many parts of Indonesia. It implies that a woman cannot lead. In the eyes of the public, however, The House of Representatives did not only fail when not making her the president, they also
neglected to listen to the voices of the people - just as under Soeharto’s New Order regime. (Megawati was, however, elected vice president the following day in an effort to calm down the rage).

I would like to end this essay with a remark on the students and their role. Maybe it is true that without the dramatic economic turnaround from bubble to burst, Soeharto would probably still be in power. Most political commentators would probably also agree that it was the courageous protests by student movements in several major cities that in the end cost the old ex-president his position and put Indonesia on the road towards democracy after 30 years of dictatorship. Based upon my own experiences I would like to add that the students did not just trigger this process, but their participation maintained the process during the first months. To extend the scope of a famous dictum proposed by Gregory Bateson, it seemed as if the numerous student demonstrations and their brave call for political changes were ‘the difference that made a difference’.