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# THE DEMOCRATIC INSTINCT IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

*Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono*

*Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected in 2009 to his second term as president of the Republic of Indonesia. The text that follows is adapted from the keynote address that he delivered in Jakarta on 12 April 2010 at the sixth biennial Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy.*

On behalf of the government and people of Indonesia, I am pleased to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to Jakarta, Indonesia. This is a very impressive gathering of the members of the World Movement for Democracy, who have come here from all around the world. I commend you for your tireless dedication to the cause of promoting democracy.

We meet at a challenging time. On the one hand, we have seen a positive trend of significant expansion in the number of democracies, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Through different means, democracies emerged in many regions—in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. That democratic wave also swept Indonesia in 1997, and changed us for good.

As a result, the political map of the world was significantly changed, with all its strategic, geopolitical, economic, and social consequences. In Asia, there was a time several decades ago when Japan was the only democracy in the region. But today, Asia is home to many democracies. At the same time, however, we are also seeing a parallel trend of democracies in distress—military coups, political instability, constitutional crises, divisive polarization, violent conflict, a return to authoritarianism, and failed states.

I do believe that, in most cases, these setbacks are temporary. Democracy, as we Indonesians know all too well from our own experience, is never easy, never smooth, and never linear. It always involves a painful process of trial and error, with many ups and downs. So do not despair. I am convinced that ultimately the twenty-first-century instinct is the democratic instinct, and that the democratic instinct in the twenty-first century will inevitably be even stronger than it was in the twentieth century.

That is because the world will be more—not less—swept by the powerful force of globalization. Globalization is bringing greater connectivity—of people, goods, services, information, and ideas. Nations, communities, families, and individuals will be mutually “exposed” to one another. Prosperity will spread, along with the self-esteem that goes with it. The middle class everywhere will grow—it is said that, for the first time in history, more than half the world’s population can now loosely be categorized as middle class. In that process, as the middle classes grow in strength and confidence, sooner or later they are bound to seek greater transparency and accountability in the decisions that affect their lives. No political system can ignore this. For all such systems, the choice is either to adapt and survive or to resist and crumble.

### A Surprisingly Swift Transition

Regardless of how one defines that elusive term “democracy,” I have no doubt that the future belongs to those who are willing to *responsibly* embrace pluralism, openness, and freedom. I say this based on the Indonesian experience. During the 1970s and 1980s, when we experienced high economic growth, Indonesians found it convenient to stay in our “comfort zone,” an authoritarian system that sought stability, development, and national unity at all costs.

We believed then that Indonesians were not ready for democracy—that democracy was not suitable for Indonesia’s cultural and historical circumstances. It was widely held that democracy would lead to national regress, rather than progress. Thus, our political development was forced to proceed through a very narrow and rigid corridor. The certainty of authoritarianism was preferred to the uncertainty of democracy.

What many of us find surprising is how fast Indonesians ditched that notion, and how swiftly we transformed our mindset. Yes, it took some noisy soul-searching and fierce public debate about the form and pace of democratic change. But ten years after we held our first *reformasi* free elections in 1999, democracy in Indonesia is irreversible and a daily fact of life. Our people not only freely but enthusiastically accept democracy as a given—as their right—and they increasingly feel ownership of their political system.

This proves that there was a deep-seated democratic impulse among many Indonesians that was just waiting to be drawn out. It also shows that, once individuals and communities get a taste of the exercise of democracy and choice, they are likely to cling to it and fight for it when it is under threat. In short, we have awakened our democratic instinct.

Indonesia’s democratic experience is also revealing in another way. For many decades, we lived in an intellectual and political environment which suggested that we had to choose between democracy and economic growth. “You cannot have both. It’s one or the other,” they said.

And for many years we believed that—and chose economic growth over democracy.

I do not wish to prejudge my predecessor. But I can tell you that such is no longer the case in Indonesia. Today our democracy is growing stronger, while at the same time Indonesia is registering the third-highest economic growth among the G-20 countries (after China and India). In other words, we do not have to choose between democracy and development—we *can* achieve both! And we can achieve both at the same time!

Indonesia's democratic experience is also remarkable when one considers the doomsday predictions about it only a little over a decade ago. When we first embarked on the path of democracy, there were voices, both internally and internationally, who said we would fail. And why not? Indonesia was in total disarray. Our economy contracted by 12 percent. Ethnic violence flared up. East Timor seceded from Indonesia. Terrorist bombs were exploding. The constitutional crisis seemed endless. Between 1998 and 2001, we had four presidents: Suharto, Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati Sukarnoputri. Thomas Friedman compared Indonesia to Russia, calling it a "messy state—too large to work, too important to fail." Many predicted that, after East Timor's secession, Indonesia would break apart. Some even talked about our becoming a failed state.

Yet we proved the skeptics wrong. Indonesia's democracy has gone from strength to strength. We held three peaceful national elections on schedule in 1999, in 2004, and in 2009. We peacefully resolved the conflict in Aceh with a democratic spirit, and pursued political and economic reforms in Papua. We made human-rights protection a national priority. We pushed forward an ambitious decentralization program. Rather than regressing, Indonesia is progressing.

There is a larger lesson at work here: No matter how bad the political, economic, and social conditions, no matter how steep the fall to unimagined depths, democracies *can* pull through. There *is* a way up. There is always hope, and one should never let go of it.

It is important to keep in mind that Indonesia's democratic development could have easily gone the other way—on a downward spiral, leading to a crash. I personally believe that there is a "hidden hand" at work here, guiding us to make the right turns at critical crossroads in history. But I also know that it takes more than luck. Making democracy work requires faith, discipline, determination, and creative improvisation.

One of the key lessons we have learned is that democracy must be connected with good governance. In the early years of our transition, this was one of the hardest things to do. We were so consumed by the euphoria of our newfound freedom that governance sometimes suffered. In some places, mismanagement and corruption became worse under elected leaders. Quickly, we realized that democracy is not a panacea.

Elections alone will not automatically solve the age-old problems of poverty, corruption, separatism, and unemployment. And leaders who indulge for too long in populist rhetoric without producing results will end up hurting the people who elected them.

In our case, it was only once democracy was combined with good governance that we were able to strengthen national unity, resolve conflicts, enhance economic growth, and promote social cohesion. That is why I believe it is important for this Assembly to discuss how democracies can better deliver results for their people. How do we produce better leaders? How do we ensure that more democracy means less corruption? How do we make sure that democracy leads to responsible and responsive government?

The appeal of democracy should rest not just on the power of choice, but also on the promise that it will bring better opportunities to citizens. As we try to achieve this, we should always keep in mind that good governance is neither a natural feature nor a monopoly of democracies. Nondemocracies and semidemocracies can also develop good governance. Every—and I mean every—political system must *earn* the precious reputation of delivering good governance and not take it for granted.

I can tell you that one of the key challenges for Indonesia's democratic development is how to minimize and ultimately do away with "money politics." This, I know, is a problem even for many established democracies, Western and non-Western alike. We know that money always follows politics, in a variety of ways. But money politics can seriously undermine democracy because it induces elected leaders and politicians to serve their paymasters at the expense of the public good. It also produces an artificial democracy, one that betrays the public trust and crushes democratic ideals. The more money politics prevails, the less the people's aspirations will be heard, and the more democracy will suffer. Certainly, fighting money politics will be a challenge for Indonesia's democracy in the short, medium, and long terms.

One of the reasons our democracy has worked derives from a hard lesson from our past: the need to build a future that focuses on institutions and rules, not personalities. History, of course, is full of great men and women. But political systems that depend upon the force of individual personalities will find it increasingly hard to sustain themselves. As we twice experienced in Indonesia, when a strong personality fell from power, the entire system crumbled with him because the system was simply a mirror image of the leader. Thus I would prefer to define strong leaders as those who are able to develop a durable system.

That is why it is extremely critical for our democratic development to build lasting institutions. In the past ten years, this is precisely what we have done. Our periodic elections ensure political accountability and peaceful turnovers of power. The office of the president is no longer the

all-powerful dominant executive post that it once was. The military and police no longer intervene in politics. There is a system of checks and balances. The parliament is vibrant and completely independent, and so is the judiciary. The constitutional relations among them are clearly defined. And the rule of law reigns supreme in our land.

All this is important because, while leaders may come and go, the system must remain, and democracy must go on. Indeed, when I end my second presidential term in 2014 (Allah willing), I expect the affairs of the state to continue as usual. *That* will be a sign of democracy in progress.

### Change from Within

One of the reasons our democracy has held up is that it is completely homegrown. Democracy cannot be imposed from the outside. Democracies that are not sourced from within, or that cannot generate homegrown energy, will run out of steam and experience political decay. Yes, our democracy came out of a political crisis triggered by the 1997 financial crisis, which originated from outside our borders. But the desire to get rid of corruption, collusion, and nepotism came wholly from within. The aspiration for political change and *reformasi* came from within. The determination to rebuild Indonesia anew came from within. These things were not imposed by outsiders, but were the genuine will of the Indonesian people.

Of course, we have been open and have learned a lot from our friends around the world. Ultimately, however, we are *our own* stakeholders in our democratic experiment. If we rise or fall, it is because of our own doing or undoing. It is telling that last year a survey found that some 85 percent of Indonesians believed that the country was heading in the right direction. They may not agree with the leader or with the opposition; they may be critical of government policies, as they should always be; but they believe in their hearts that the system is working, and they are optimistic about it. To a new democracy like Indonesia, this is very encouraging. It is a sign that democracy is maturing.

It also means that you can never go wrong if you trust the people. If the three Indonesian elections in the past ten years have taught us anything, it is that the voters are much smarter than most politicians give them credit for being. Politicians may wage dirty campaigns, confuse the public with deceptions, spark messages of hatred, try to seduce them into returning to the past, or promise them the world. Yet ultimately the voters will make up their own minds, and in the voting booth they will responsibly, carefully, and rationally cast their vote. What is incredible is that this is generally happening regardless of the educational or economic status of the voters.

Thus, if we in Indonesia have made the right turns in our recent his-

tory, it is only because the power of judgment rests in the hands of good people who exercise it with great caution. In the last three elections, the people have turned out in large numbers to vote. Even though voting is not compulsory, and even though we have a complex system that re-

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***We in Indonesia have shown that Islam, democracy, and modernity can grow together.***

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quires voters to return to the voting booth several times within a period of months, turnout in Indonesia has been consistently very high. The voters know that there is a direct and absolute connection between their ballots and the future of their country. That is why the most terrible thing to waste in a democracy is the mandate from the people, and the most precious asset to

keep is the public trust. Believe me, once you lose that trust, you will not regain it.

Indeed, I see democratic development as a constant process of expanding the opportunities and empowerment of the people. It is a process that promotes gender equality and brings more women into politics. It is a process that reaches out to those who are still marginalized. It is a process aimed at achieving a national consensus on the future direction of the country while preventing a tyranny of the majority. It seeks to build a democracy where every citizen can become a stakeholder.

For an exceedingly diverse country like Indonesia, that means not just promoting multiparty democracy but also building a multiethnic democracy, and one that guarantees freedom of religion for all. We in Indonesia have shown that Islam, democracy, and modernity can grow together. We are a living example that there is no conflict between a Muslim's spiritual obligation to Allah, his civic responsibility as a citizen in a pluralist society, and his capacity to succeed in the modern world. It is also telling that in our country Islamic political parties are among the strongest supporters of democracy—and they have every reason to be.

This brand of moderation, openness, and tolerance, in Indonesia and in other societies around the world, is the seed of a twenty-first-century world order marked by harmony among civilizations. It is a sad fact that humanity has never had the good fortune to enjoy a century without conflict or contest between civilizations and cultures. But the twenty-first century can be different. It need not—it must not—be a century of the clash of civilizations. It can be a century marked by the emergence of a global conscience, working across cultures and civilizations to advance the common cause of peace and progress.

That is why I appreciate the theme of your conference: "Solidarity across cultures." It is time for us to build on this solidarity across cultures to promote a confluence of civilizations, and thereby to make the twenty-first century the best in the history of humankind.