

Comparative Analysis of American and Indonesian Democracies: A Literature Review

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Abstract

United States of America and Indonesia have been claimed as two of democratic countries in the world. While Indonesian democracy is considered relatively new, it poses a promising commitment of a full-fledged democracy. The long-time-established American political system, on the other hand, has not yet achieved a satisfactory model of democracy. This article aims to observe the strength and the weaknesses of the two democracies using literature reviews in a comparative approach. It is revealed that American and Indonesian democracies still have a long way to become a perfect model of political system.

Keywords: Democracy, American democracy, Indonesian democracy.

Introduction

Democracy is not only a fluid and open idea, but also an essentially contested concept. Since the time it was invented as a form of politics and governance, the conceptualization and the application of democracy has never achieved a universal agreement. Theoretically and practically, democracy has emerged in different versions and connotations, and even manifested in forms that are entirely contrasted to its ideals and principles. Many world authoritarian regimes have claimed their governments as democratic regime in

order to enhance their legitimacy, nationally and internationally. For example, Suharto when in power often referred to the *Pancasila* democracy and insisted that his regime was democratic one. In a more contemporary example, the government of today's most well-known totalitarian republic, North Korea, persistently uses Democratic People's Republic of Korea as its official name, despite of its notorious dictator practices.

Measuring one country more or less democratic is even more intriguing. The

United States of America that is often referred as a well-established democratic country and claims democracy as one of the principles of its foreign policy, has frequently been a target of criticism over its unilateralism. Moreover, the electoral college of the current American political system is again questioned over its representation of a democratic electoral system. Donald Trump won the 2016 US Presidential election over Hillary Clinton despite the latter managed to gain the majority the American votes in a significant number through the popular vote.

In another part of the world, Indonesia is often admired of its fast-track democratization transforming from an authoritarian system to a full-fledged democracy in a relatively short period. However, after almost two decades of transformation under a spirit of what so-called *reformasi* (reform), the country is still struggling with its democratization. While institutions of democracy such as political parties and free elections have successfully been installed into the current Indonesian political system, the presence of “un-democratic” elements such as corruption, money politics and politics of intolerance is still evident in the daily activities of the political actors.

This article aims to observe the elements of democracy in the American and Indonesia political system in a comparative approach. Before discussing democracy in the two countries political systems, the article is started with a conceptual exploration of the history of democracy and the emergence of modern democracies. Reviews by some experts and prominent authors will provide some critical perspectives and insights on American and Indonesian democracies.

The history of modern democracies

Robert Dahl in *On Democracy* (1998) explores the history of democracy’s theoretical and practical development and argues that democracy has been invented and reinvented in multiple times and places as long as the appropriate conditions are met. The spirit of democracy can be found even in simple tribal communities, as they practice what Dahl calls “the logic of equality” (10). Dahl, like most of political scientists, suggests that the older recognizable form of democracy was Athens around 500 BC, an ancient Greek community that adopted a system of popular government. Yet, Simon Hornblower shows a different finding, arguing that it was not in Athens where democracy was first invented, but in Sparta.

This assertion seems controversial as Sparta has rarely regarded as a democratic community, but Hornblower argues that Sparta had already a popular assembly dating back to about 600 BC, a century a head of Athens (Hornblower, 1992: 1). Whether democracy was first established in Sparta or Athens, classical Greece has laid practical foundations of popular participation for a modern democracy.

Etymologically, the term *democracy* was invented from the Greek word *demokratia* that literally means “people to rule” or “people power” (Dahl, 1998: 11-2). However, the term only became known and central to political discourse particularly in Europe in the mid thirteenth century. Especially after Aristotle’s work *Politics* was translated by William of Moerbeke into English. It is interesting that the term was conceptually introduced by Aristotle who was also known as one of early opponents of the idea of democracy. By Aristotle, democracy was meant “the rule of the mob” indicating a bad type of government, and until the seventeenth century, it continued to be regarded negatively (Skinner, 1992: 59).

The Athenian democracy that lasted two centuries before subjugated by the Macedonians had several distinctive features that are significantly different from

what it is implement by today’s modern democracies. Unlike representative democracy that is commonly adopted by many modern states, the Greek democracy was directly ‘participatory.’ In this system, the citizens of Athens attended a popular assembly (*ecclesia*) themselves rather than elect certain few people to represent their political voices. Although the specific concept of citizenship in Athenian democracy suggests that the right to participate in the popular assembly was not applied to women, slaves, and foreigners, all free men are treated equal in politics. Another specific feature of democracy in Athens was the selection process by lot to assign people in public duties and institutions. Selection by lot was favored instead of competitive selection to maintain the principle that every citizen has an equal right (Hornblower, 1992: 1-15). Having such features, the Athens system can be considered as highly democratic due to its popular participatory model.

One may argue that the Athenian vision of democracy is impossible to apply in a modern nation-state for particular reason. For instance, it requires a small size of population and gathering citizens in a number of thousands in the popular assembly would be unimaginable. Even in a relatively tiny country like Singapore, to

gather all citizens in the popular assembly is extremely difficult especially to meet in a regular basis. Citizens also have to be relatively homogenous and harmonious in terms of economic and cultural possession in order to create an effective popular assembly. Citizens with different interests may become reluctant to participate in particular agenda. In addition, the state should be fully independent and autonomous in terms of politics, economic, and more importantly militarily in order to maintain the sovereignty of the assembly within the state. Yet, despite the complexity or perhaps the simplicity of the Athenian democracy, there is an important lesson to draw, “the spirit of popular participation”. In addition, the Athenian democracy, as Dahl argues, presents political ideals that should have inspired the modern democrats. In the Greek political vision, politics is simply a natural social activity that a citizen cannot separate it from his daily life. Accordingly, the state and government are not perceived as remote or alien entities by their citizens (Dahl, 1989: 18-9).

In fact, political history suggests that democracy was not in a representative form until it was first applied in England in the seventeenth century. Even in the Italian city-republics where territory and

population were bigger and dispersed than those of the Greek, direct participatory politics continued to be maintained. The break from the direct participatory system only occurred in England during the Civil War, when the Levellers emerged as a significant political force and introduced a form of representative government. As the term ‘democracy’ was at that time still seen as a bad form of government, the Levellers did not say that they wanted ‘democracy,’ but they called for ‘political equality’ instead (Wotton, 1994: 73). A century later, the idea of political representation was conceptualized and written in the English constitution by Montesquieu: “since it was impossible in a large state for the people to meet as a legislative body, they must choose representatives to do what they could not do themselves” (Montesquieu in Dahl, 1989: 29). From this time on, representation has been seen as a solution for the limitation of the ancient Greece democracy, and transformed democracy from a form of government that was only suitable for small city-state to be applicable to the large nation-states.

American Democracy

The American Revolution brought about a new development of representative democracy. It established a new political

system, a representative republican government, which challenged the European system of hereditary monarchy. The essence of the new political system was the commitment to equality, despite the contradictory fact that slavery was maintained in American social system until the nineteenth century. In comparison to the British ‘virtual representation’ system in that members of House of Commons do not necessary represent individual interest of their constituents, American system developed ‘actual representation’ that resulted in the expanding suffrage and the increasing participation of ordinary people in the government (Wood, 1992: 91-103). Such innovation posed a clear challenge to the Aristotelian ideas that common people could not be entrusted with leadership due to their ill-equipped ability for such responsibility. It can be argued that; while American democracy in some degree it represented a spirit of Athenian equality, it is a representative system that is substantially different from the Athenian direct participatory system.

As the term ‘democracy’ has been largely accepted, the American innovation on citizens participation in politics marked a dramatic shift in the interpretation of ‘democracy.’ Before the eighteenth century, the term ‘democracy’ was

generally perceived as ‘direct participatory government’ based on the experience of the Greek city-states. As American political system developed and inspired many newly-established governments to adopt it, ‘democracy’ has been used as a label for ‘elected representative government’ and representation has become the fundamental mechanism of modern democracy pioneered by American system.

However, Robert Dahl in his provocative work *How Democratic is the American Constitution* challenges the assumption that American political system has been ideally democratic since the early days. He reveals that the Framers of American Constitution did not intend to established democratic system in the sense of popular government. For Dahl, the original American Constitution conveyed some un-democratic elements into political practices. First, the Constitution failed to forbid the practice of slavery that was prevalent in the early American social system, and it failed to empower the Congress to do so. This most profound violation of human rights permitted by the original constitution was not corrected until the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments between 1865 and 1870. Second, the original constitution did not guarantee the equal rights of

suffrage for all Americans, but only left the states to regulate the qualification of suffrage. For considerable long time, women as well as Native and African American were excluded in electoral participation. Third, American president was not elected directly by all citizens, rather by certain persons in the Electoral College as it is emanated by the Constitution. Fourth, the senators were to be chosen not by the people but by the state legislatures. Fifth, all states were awarded the same number of senator, disregarding the size of state's population. Sixth, the constitution of the Framers did not limit the power of the judiciary to veto the laws that had been passed the Congress and signed by the president. Finally, the Congress had limited power to prevent the federal government fully controlling the economy (Dahl, 2003). Although certain amendment have abolished some of these elements, but some are still taken into practice and continue presenting undemocratic features of American political system.

According to Dahl, the Framers were lack of alternative model of democracy as guidance, and it was apparent that they were limited to considering 'republic' as a form of government. (Dahl, 2003: 5). On this point, the model of Roman republic with representative system was

seemingly more favorable than the Greek participatory system. The influence of the Roman republic model is not only visually found on the architecture of American prominent buildings and monuments, but even in political practices and literature. For example, terms like senate and republic are directly descended from classical Roman institution. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay adopted the Roman pseudonym *publius* when they were writing the Federalist Papers. However, Dahl rejects the assumption that the Framers were in a situation to choose between 'republic' and 'democracy.' Rather, they were in a polemic of how democratic of their representative government would be (Dahl, 2003: 159-62). It can be seen here that the variation of political system was not 'republic' versus 'democracy,' but between the elected representative system and the popular participatory system.

Another event that marked the transformation of democracy from classical Greek to modern system was the French Revolution of 1789, by which the French despotic monarch was destroyed and replaced by the first republican government ruled over one the largest population in Europe. The revolution produced significant achievements of the

transformation of democracy. These achievements include the production of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen that proclaimed individual political equality, personal liberty, security of property, legal guarantees and freedom of thought, of opinion and religion (Fontana, 1992: 115). These points described in the declaration are the main premises of democracy that today democratic institutions are still dependent upon.

In the modern time, the term democracy became more flexible and open than the people understood prior to the eighteenth century. There have been scores of democratic variations based on emphasis and interpretation. For instance, people today have been familiar with the terms such as liberal democracy, electoral democracy, constitutional democracy, consolidated democracy, and so on. In practice, it became a global trend as many governments and figures ranging from Capitalist, Socialist, religious adherent, to even authoritarian, have claimed themselves as democrats. However, there must be a certain indicators to define democracy and the most prominent one is the presence of fair and free elections.

Samuel Huntington in his seminal work *The Third Wave* formulates a pattern of global democratic expansion since the

nineteenth century. The first global democratic wave began around 1820s and lasted for a century with thirty-three countries became democratic. This wave had its roots in the two revolutions that has been discussed earlier in this essay, and posed impacts mainly in European and American continents. However, many of those countries returned to authoritarian rule around the World War I, in a period of what Huntington calls as reverse wave. The second wave was marked by the end of the World War II lasted until 1962 and embraced many newly independent countries of former European colonies. Again, this followed by reverse wave that was particularly evident in South America and among many of the former colonies. The third wave was initiated by the 1974 Portugal Revolution and largely marked the political changes in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Huntington, 1991).

Is the third wave of democratization over? Larry Diamond argues that it has come to an end in the late of 1990s as almost all countries that had favorable conditions for democracy have democratized. As the overall expansion of the number of democracy halts for a sustained period, he concludes that that the third wave is over in 1990s (Diamond,

1999: 60). However, It seems that Dahl's observation is not entirely correct as some authoritarian countries transformed to democracy. There is also no indication of reverse wave. More interestingly, the continuation of the third wave is now more evident in the Muslim world. Initiated by the case of Indonesia in 1998, the global democratization spread into the Arab countries. By the end of 2011, some authoritarian Arab leaders including Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Gaddafi of Libya, were overthrown by popular movements. The phenomenon of democratization in various Arab countries, often mentioned as the Arab Spring, espouses the assertion that Islam can be compatible with democracy. However, of these post authoritarian countries only Indonesia has embarked upon a significant democratic transformation.

Indonesia's electoral democracy

Since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, Indonesia experienced tremendous democratic change. From a formal perspective, Indonesian political system has significantly transformed with various democratic achievements including the introduction of a multi-party system, decentralization process, military

withdrawn from politics, and the amendment of the constitution to meet democratic demands. More importantly, Free and fair elections have taken place four times (in 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014) in which the last three included direct presidential elections. Such features have positioned Indonesia as the leading democracy in the region, while democracy in its neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Philippine is often considered stagnant.

Applying the three phases of political change in the course of democratization conceptualized by Huntington (1991), it is apparent that Indonesia has passed the first two phases: the regime breakdown and the democratic transition, and is now struggling in the last phase: the democratic consolidation. As the democratic institutions and procedures have been brought into existent, especially fair and free elections, Indonesia is arguably in the process of consolidating its democracy. However, this phase poses greater challenges from that of in the transitional phase, so Indonesia's consolidating democracy is not an easy task. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan argue that three criteria have to be met in order to achieve a consolidated democracy. Behaviorally, no significant institutions or

actions spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a non-democratic regime or turning to violence. Attitudinally, a strong majority of citizens believe that the democratic procedures and institutions are ‘the only game in town’ to govern collective life in society. Constitutionally, governmental and non-governmental forces alike become committed to resolving conflicts within the specific laws, procedures and sanctioned by the democratic process (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 5-6).

Using the conceptual framework of Linz and Stepan in analyzing the current situation of Indonesia’s politics, it seems there is still a long way to go before achieving a consolidated democracy. There are still some prevailing undemocratic features inherited from the former authoritarian regime continue to be major obstacles for the country's democratization. Behaviorally, although formal political institutions do not dare to take any unconstitutional measures to achieve power, some social groups still take violent actions to achieve their institutional goals. The most prominent example is the *Islam Defender Fronts* (FPI), which regularly conducts raids on public spaces that is consider un-Islamic by the FPI.

Attitudinally, the democratic procedures and institutions as ‘the only game in town’ are undermined by the presence of political gangsterism. It is widely known among Indonesians that many local officials and elites use gangsters (locally called *preman*) to achieve their political objectives or to maintain their power. In many cases, social and student movements have to confront a group of armed-civilians employed by elites, creating ‘horizontal conflict’ between citizens. Constitutionally, state apparatus have not fully prepared with adequate doctrine and procedures to be democratic-professional, leaving state officers tend to act unconstitutionally especially when they are facing mass actions. At the same time, citizens are well informed about their civil rights but not about civil responsibility when pursuing their rights. In a recent case of resident protest against a mining company in Bima of Nusa Tenggara, two people were shot dead during a clash between police and protesters.

In general, the following are the common obstacles to Indonesia’s consolidated democracy during a decade of non-authoritarian rule. Corruption is still rampant and systemic in the sense that it is ingrained in the state apparatus, its structures, procedures and policies, and

affects the everyday lives of many citizens. Several anti-corruption institutions were established to fight corruption practices in state administration, but none have been effective enough to achieve a total eradication. The existence of various militant and violent groups poses a critical threat to Indonesia's pluralism and the current democratization. Ironically, these groups are often used by political or formal actors to achieve the objectives. Some areas are still vulnerable to the eruption of ethnic and religious violence as well as separatist sentiments. Moreover, all of these problems are worsened by a weak rule of law and incapable law enforcements. These undemocratic features indicate that democracy has not become deeply internalized in the social and institutional life of certain level of populace as it is required for democratic consolidation.

To conclude, Indonesia as a democracy latecomer is still in the category of "electoral democracy" and not yet achieving "consolidated" form of liberal democracy. Of course there have been significant results after more than a decade of democratization. Free and fair elections as well as freedom of expression are among the prominent achievements. However, some undemocratic features are also prevalent at the level of elites,

organizations, and mass public. Having this condition, the future of Indonesia's democracy, whether it will be consolidated, stagnant, or even reversed, is fully determined by the commitment of all Indonesians themselves. Consolidated democracy in Indonesia will never be achieved if even one of elements of the society refuses to accept the legitimacy of democracy in their life.

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