Rethinking Popular Representation:

Charting New Territory

A Book Review

Kuskridho Ambardi[1]

The third wave of democratisation might now be remembered as no more than a reminder of the tumultuous periods of the 1970s and 1980s, when authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world came to an end and were replaced by democratic governments. In the last decade, political observers and political scientists likely have begun to think more about the uncertainty that follows the establishment of democratic institutions in emerging democracies.

A concept such as democratic consolidation, which was possibly first coined by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996), can be viewed as an effort to see whether a new democracy can survive. Its future is determined by the level of public support for democracy and public acceptance that democracy is "the only game in town."

Literature on democratic consolidation seems, in a way, to be hollow when the debate comes to the question of the actual work of democracy (see, for example, the debate between O'Donnel and Gunther in *Journal of Democracy*, editions of April and October 1996). This is because we do not really know what a consolidated

---

[1] Lecurer in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia.

democracy can deliver for its citizens. If only the majority of citizens and the elite support democracy, the question follows: then what?

A number of political scientists have eventually attempted to open up Pandora's box regarding new democracies. Instead of talking about democratic consolidation, they discuss the quality of democracy. The essence of the concern is that democracy should be about what it can deliver to society.

The Quality of Democracy is a case in point. This edited volume by Guillermo O'Donnell and colleagues (2004) tried to set the bar for assessing various democratic practices. In this book, the authors tackle the question of government efficacy in Latin America. A variation in the levels of efficacy were identified–from the acceptable to the dismal. In short, the replacement of old authoritarian regimes with democratic governments does not necessarily produce the same quality of democracy.

A year later, Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino et.al., offered a multifaceted framework for democratic assessment in their book entitled *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (2005). The quality of democracy, according to the book's argument, has many dimensions ranging from the issues of rule of law, accountability, freedom, equality, to government responsiveness. The book is also equipped with comparative case studies, each of which corresponds to the various measures of the quality of democracy.

The edited volume by Törnquist, Webster and Stokke, *Rethinking Popular Representation* (2009), shares a similar concern that the issue at stake is not merely the instalment of democratic institutions, but the quality of democratic practices in the world of democracies–and in particular, in democracies of the 'Global South'.

The strategy employed in this book is different, nonetheless. First, the book focuses on the concept of representation. This was an intentional choice since the authors believe that the problem with democratic practices revolves around the problem of flawed representation. Building on Hanna Pitkin's concept of representation, the book explores the dimensions of representation and treats them as litmus test by which the implementation of substantive democracy

may be measured against. More specifically, it discusses how popular sections of the societies discussed have fared within the new political landscapes.

This book surveys many cases which promise detailed accounts of each case. A large section of the societies described–those that are politically marginalised–are left out from the democratic political process. They are unable to channel their interests due to the elitist nature of the supposedly democratic institutions. The available channels are captured by either patronage networks or market forces. Furthermore, the argument goes, the dominant forces in the societies tend to depoliticise the political process by blocking or diverting popular interests. In other words, there is too little politics in new democracies.

Thus, the book suggests seeking alternative channels through which the marginalised find ways to advance their interests. The alternatives come in the various forms—called autonomous links—that connect citizens to the state. Each chapter is then an endeavour to map the variation of political inclusion of the marginalised.

Second, the book takes us on a different route by focusing on cases at local levels. After going through the process of structural change that accompanies democratisation, institutional reforms, and political mobilisation, there should also be new local politics with new local actors. With this framework, assessments were made to identify and evaluate progresses or regresses of democracy at local levels in various countries or settings.

This strategy gives us colourful pictures. In the case of the Sao Paolo Municipality, Brazil, Houtzager and Lavalle demonstrate how local advocacy groups facilitated the process of representation. They did not add a new sequence of representative mechanism but created fora through which local citizens were able to connect themselves to local representatives. This achievement has posed an interesting paradox: on the one hand the advocacy groups did not secure a mandate as a representative body from society, but on the other they were the ones making popular representation possible.

In contrast to Houtzager and Lavalle's case, Buur describes

a top-down approach of democratisation in the rural areas of Mozambique. Known as *Gradualismo*, democratisation was an elite-controlled process introduced by the Frelimo government through a process of liberal-democratic decentralisation. In some areas the advancement of democracy stalled, whereas progress continued to be made in others. The variation in results is rooted in the fact that not all officials at local levels uniformly understood how participation and consultation should be implemented in district planning.

The case of Indonesia –as proposed by van Klinken– describes another picture. Behind the hurly-burly of national politics, patronage-based politics has found a way to emerge at the provincial level. Local elites surround themselves with many poor clients on which to build political support. What appears to be a competitive arena of interests which is channelling performed by political parties was actually not what it should be: "They do not act as vehicles to articulate aggregated interests." It is not political parties but non-governmental organisations that are successful in articulating popular issues. Environmental campaigning organisation, Walhi and the indigenous people's coalition, AMAN, are examples referred to by van Klinken.

Other cases such as West Bengal, Kerala, Nigeria, South Africa and the Philippines provide examples of more nuanced democratic processes and practices. These cases illustrate the obstacles and, at the same time, some of the opportunities that advance democracy at local levels. In brief, the collection of the case studies provides an optimistic view.

Despite its achievements, this collective work has some pitfalls. The conceptual strategy has not been evenly applied to all cases. In one case, an author places the emphasis on the locus of representation, while another places the attention on actors. Another issue is that the authors work at different levels: villages, municipalities, or provinces.

In addition, although the editors set out the general framework in the introductory chapter, Chandhoke, for example, invested a lot of effort in arguing for the importance of seeing the nature of popular representation as multifaceted. Yet the editors already discuss

this issue at length in the introduction, including the key concept of representation, the dimensions and the justification for the need of advancing substantive democracies.

These critiques, however, should not overshadow what the book really attempts to do, namely to look at the various possibilities of practicing democratic representation. It provides us with paths through which we may adopt and adapt the promising models of local best democratic practices at the national level. Thus, they could be complementary to the more conventional modes of representation, i.e. political parties, or they could even provide an alternative ways of doing politics. In short, the book has opened up a window for identifying multiple possibilities for crafting and advancing democracies in the 'Global South'. Or, borrowing an expression in the closing chapter, there are many nodes of democratic improvements to be done. ***