

## **PRESENTATION ON THE SECOND SESSION**

### **TOPIC: MOBILISING PEOPLE: CONNECTING AGENTS OF CHANGE BY KORNELIUS PURBA FROM THE JAKARTA POST**

#### **When the People Have Little Trust in the House**

##### **The World's Third Largest Democracy**

Indonesia is internationally recognized as the world's third-largest democracy after India and the United States. It is an incredible achievement knowing that the country only adopted full democracy 54 years after it gained independence in 1945. Sadly, the country is also globally perceived as one of the world's most corrupt nations. It seems that democratization of corruption is also blooming in this country. While under the Soeharto regime, graft was the privilege of a few people close to the strong man, nowadays corruption is being committed and enjoyed by a far more widespread group in society.

Good governance, transparent and equitable rule of law, equal rights and obligations for all, are some of the fundamental elements of democracy that are still neglected in this country. In just 14 years, this nation has been transformed into a fully fledged democracy, at least on the surface. So it is fair to say the nation is on the right track in its journey toward achieving the goal of democracy, although we do not know when we will arrive there. Not that anyone expects Indonesia to become a failed state; that is highly unlikely, if not unthinkable.

##### **Press Freedom**

Press freedom was a luxury under Soeharto's rule; but now, Indonesian media is among the most liberal and free in the world, although the country's press still faces a multitude of challenges in terms of securing high-quality human resources, as well as dealing with the monopolistic and oligopolistic practices of ownership, especially in electronic media, such as television. Complaints over the behavior of journalists and the selfish attitudes of media owners continue to rise. From the perspective of media employees, decent working conditions and welfare still comprise a big problem for many.

No wonder, then, that some even question the truth of the old saying, that the press functions as the fourth pillar of democracy.

##### **Parliamentary System?**

During president Soeharto's 32-year rule, the House of Representatives' role was merely to act as a rubber stamp to the government. Indeed, Soeharto virtually enjoyed absolute power according to many anti-government campaigners and international media sources. Now, the pendulum has swung perhaps too far the other way with the House playing an overly dominant role, especially in terms of budgeting, where it controls state-budget spending to a micromanaged degree. The result: Many legislators, especially those from new political parties, have been jailed for

accepting bribes or they have abused their power by manipulating the state budget. It seems that many more are doomed to follow the same fate.

Officially, Indonesia has a presidential system but in reality, our system is closer to a parliamentary system, in which the House has the final say on almost everything. This is a far cry from its muted position under Soeharto. Many people are confused by the seeming lack of checks and balances. Our House members are tremendously lazy in carrying out their principal task: that of passing legislation; their achievements are far below the minimum targets set. Many of our laws and regulations only last a short time as they are so often deliberated too hastily. Moreover, many lawmakers are only interested in handling “lucrative” bills from which they, or their political parties, can benefit directly or indirectly.

Under the glare of public perception that the House and other regional legislatures are among Indonesia's most corrupt state institutions, the country is undergoing massive administrative preparations for its fourth direct presidential election and legislative elections, since the fall of Soeharto in May 1998, next year.

### **Year of Judgment**

Next year's elections will be held at a time when voters' trust in political parties and their candidates is at its lowest point, and the number of abstaining voters will likely be very high compared to previous years. Like it or not, and whether you agree or disagree, in the eyes of many voters, a great number of legislators - if not all – are viewed as working only to enrich themselves, their cronies and their political parties. There are very few interactions between legislators and their constituents based on the democratic principle of serving in the best interests of the people. Money politics is rampant, but voters are also very smart; they gladly accept the money but often vote for other parties or candidates than those distributing the handouts.

Voters are generally more enthusiastic with regard to the presidential election. Hopefully next year, Indonesia will elect a new president from a generation that has no relation with the Soeharto era. There are few indications, however, that the quality and integrity of the next House members will be any more promising than what we have now.

### **On The Right Track**

All the above appears very gloomy, as if democracy does not contribute much to people's livelihoods; as if all politicians are crooks; as if there is nothing good about this country; as if we, as Indonesians, have no reasons to be proud of our nationality. And I am sure that many House members will take great umbrage with the aforementioned description.

Despite its shortcomings, the media plays and will continue to play a vital role in terms of checks and balances. We need to remember, however, that the media is just a mirror of society. Thanks to the widespread use of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter -- Indonesia in fact boasts one of the world's highest percentages in terms of social media users -- ordinary people may prove to be the supreme holders of power, compared to the past.

Corruption and abuse of power are rampant, but media coverage is now so diverse and widespread that even people at the lowest levels of society are well-informed about the social and political problems in this country.

The people themselves are great but unfortunately, their highly educated and more sophisticated leaders are often mediocre. Elections should always be held in a spirit of peace and democracy, but many of the political elites are greedy people who think their duty is no more or less than enriching themselves. It is indeed laughable that our elites are unaware how fed up people are with them.

And that is my main reason for believing that Indonesia is on absolutely the right track toward democracy. Next year, voters – many of them uneducated and disadvantaged — will elegantly punish those political parties and politicians who have betrayed their trust.

The journey to democratization is often very rocky and painful. Many of us were even tempted to question the relevance of democracy for the nation. We can easily witness how some of our neighbors, the members of ASEAN, are much less democratic than Indonesia, but they are much better and cleaner than us in terms of corruption and abuses of power.

Despite all turmoil and upheaval, the nation however continues to strictly stick to its commitment to democracy. And it is a very right decision.

**Thank you.**