



Hail to the chief; medal to the people

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The Indonesian people just received an award. Their president accepted it on their behalf. The award is no small matter -- it has to do with Indonesia's democratic achievement. Precisely, it is an acknowledgment for the Indonesian people's unambiguous quest for self-determination and democratic progress. Proud must have been their president in accepting such an award. And indeed he was. In fact, it looked more like: Hail to the chief. Medal to the chief.

On Nov. 11, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono accepted the International Association of Political Consultants' 2007 Democracy Award on behalf of the citizens of Indonesia. The IAPC, a global organization of political and public affairs advisers, awarded the medal at its 40th World Conference in Bali. With the award, the Indonesian people joined the likes of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and other prominent leaders who strive in the achievement of democracy.

It was not too long ago that the Indonesian people fought for regime change and demanded free and fair elections, the results of which are today embodied in the democratic system of representation and political decentralization. There is no doubt Indonesia is a democracy because the people believe their country should be a democracy. According to a recent survey by Roy Morgan International, a solid 86 percent of Indonesians believe in democracy.

Indonesian leaders, on the other hand, believe their country has become a democracy because they wanted it to be such. Or that they even allowed it to be such. To see signs of such a view, look no further than any high ranking government official's explanation of the democratic transition the country undertook within the last decade or so. Unfortunately, that view represents a gap in attitude and a disconnection in vision between the political leadership, elected and unelected, and the people of Indonesia.

Ordinary citizens, while strongly believing in democracy, also realize that they are not getting many of the outcomes associated with a democratic system of government and representation. That is, the quality of democracy they are getting is not meeting the expectations one would normally associate with democratic institutions and processes.

According to the same survey, only about 40 percent of Indonesians believe their government is doing a good job and put trust in it. Furthermore, only 46 percent believe democracy is working at all in Indonesia. And what seems to be the major problem? Corruption. An astonishing 90 percent of the people believe that to be so.

And where does the political leadership fit in all of this? Well, they seem too busy padding each other on the back for having made democracy possible for the Indonesian people. By some accounts, they have in fact made it possible relatively peacefully. Indonesian transition to democracy has not been characterized by civil war or other extremely bloody power struggles that are not unusual in developing countries democratic transitions.

But isn't about time they come to grip with reality and recognize, or even appreciate, they have been endowed with a very patient people? And isn't about time they stop taking the people's patience for granted and begin delivering the fruit of democracy in the areas of socio-economic progress?

There is little doubt that people in new and developing democracies associate democracy with transparency and

accountability. In fact, one could easily argue that transparency and accountability represent the bare minimum threshold in expectations.

But many people also associate democracy, although not always rightly so, with an efficient form of government that fosters socio-economic progress—a type of progress in social and economic policy that eventually leads to higher standards of living. People in new and developing democracies tend to associate democracy with a tangible socio-political and economic development that is typically associated with the West, although not necessarily an exact copy of what we see in the Western world.

A development, in any case, that produces a substantial increase in the general well being of the population along dimensions such as economic growth, higher standards of living, better health care, investment in public infrastructure and so forth.

It's no longer a question of whether Indonesia's elected politicians are truly democratic, but rather whether they are effective leaders and custodians of their people's democratic values, interests, and expectations. And whether they are willing and able to provide much needed effective and decisive leadership.

There are many learning curves in democracy. Some of these are steep, others not so much so. Some institutional mechanisms may take time to adjust and getting adjusted to. Others however, such as using the right to vote effectively, may very quickly come naturally to most... Naturally, that is, in voting people into office and out of office. So, leaders beware. The Indonesian people's patience may not be that long lived after all.

Hail to the people. Medal to the people.

The writer is President of Savi Political Consulting and a member of IAPC. The views expressed here are solely his.