



Center for Global & Strategic Studies

Islamabad

The Transition to Democracy in Indonesia

By Muhammad Ramzan, Research Intern at Center for Global & Strategic Studies (CGSS), Islamabad



Published on 15th April 2021



The existence of statehood depends upon four characteristics as agreed by political scientists and the earliest political thinkers. They explained that the foremost element is sovereignty. The scholars were Thomas Hobbes, John Lock and Jean Jacques Rousseau. The four acceptable characteristics



of statehood were laid down in the Montevideo Convention of 1933. It has been stated that a country must have permanent territory, population, government and ability to conduct international relations (possesses sovereignty). The time when these ideas were flourishing in Europe and many European nations were busy colonizing the people in world's other part particularly, Asia and Africa. A tiny nation of Dutch people had also colonized many territories in different parts of the world. Dutch began colonizing Indonesia (derived from two Greek words *Indos* and *Nesos* meaning Indian Island) in the 17th century and named it as 'Dutch East Indies'. As exploiters, they ruled Indonesia in a despotic manner and plundered the resources and wealth of the colonized territory. However, twentieth-century began with a political awakening of the people of colonized nations and they started political movements to get rid of the clutches of foreign rulers. Indonesian people already had three characteristics and they declared independence however they lacked sovereignty over the mainland.

The resilient people of Indonesia were no exception to that and for ensuring sovereignty, they compelled the Dutch rulers to leave their land. In 1945, Indonesia



declared independence while the Dutch, in haste surrendered and handed over colony's affairs to Japan. This was considered to be a favor to the people of Indonesia. However, the Japanese continued committing atrocities against the Indonesians during 1942-1945.

The constitution of 1945 was approved, and independence was declared on 17th August, 1945. Nevertheless, it took another four years for the country to become independent and sovereign. Afterwards, it was a critical task to emerge out of the problems and solidify the people against all odds and so that the journey towards progress and prosperity be carried out. Unfortunately, the political maneuvering took hold of the affairs of the Indonesian system. Instead of evolving into a stable political system, it was taken over by the political forces not and a true representative of the people. This unsmooth political path continued right from Soekarno to Suharto. In 1998, after the President Suharto's resignation, the efforts to form a robust framework and establish a strong political path were started. Consequently, those factors enabled Indonesia to become the fourth most populous democratic nation in the world.

Accountability and transparency are the main factors for any solid democratic political system. Accountability is essential to counter people's problems and to provide protection of the rights. A multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic society requires stable political parties with a manifesto attracting all segments of society in general, particularly the vulnerable section of the society. Therefore, more provinces were carved out and decentralization was evolved down to rural and urban level in

Indonesia. After creating new provinces, domestic organizations in rural and urban areas were mobilized to tackle the grass root problems. More than three hundred sub-division at the local level were created and all was headed by a governor.



These fundamental changes were made possible due to long and bitter political experiences faced by Indonesia right from the first general elections of 1955. In these general elections, more than 150 political parties participated. However, only four parties obtained a majority. President Soekarno dissolved the elected assembly and introduced guided democracy, and gave rise to the Communist party of Indonesia. Subsequently, the 1945 constitution was restored in 1959. As a result of Coup d' é tat of 1965, Suharto came into power and the 'New Order' was introduced. In this regard, 1971 elections were held and a new political party named Golkar was established. It was actually a combination of different segments of society forged into a political party and emerged as country's largest party. After a wide protest, President Suharto was compelled to resign. After that, transformative reforms were started and paved the way for different political parties, including Indonesian Development Party (PDI) later became Indonesian Development Party of Struggle (PDIP). The United Development Party and PDIP are based on the five principles of Pancasila. The features of reforms include certain major aspects. The aspects are mentioned below:



- Prohibition of establishing a political party was lifted.
- Five principles of Pancasila became the hallmark of the political system.
- The age of voters was reduced to 17, increasing the number of voters up to 193 million.
- Age for contesting elections was declared 21 (the political system is presidential with a unitary form of government. However, it has successfully maintained the flair for devolution of power down to village level).
- Unity in diversity practically demonstrated.
- Shariah laws were implemented at the local level.

The last general election held in April 2019 gave a new dimension to strengthen the political system in Indonesia. The most important milestone in a nation's politics is the continuation of the political process. It requires transparency, accountability, free and fair elections, vibrant social fabrics and a strong economy. In recent times, all these aspects are clearly witnessed in Indonesia that is emerging as a strong regional player and presenting a model of a more democratic and advanced nation.