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**Political Opposition and the Transition from
Authoritarian Rule:
The Case of Indonesia**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Political and Social Change
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
of The Australian National University.

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February, 2000.

I certify that this thesis is my own original work. It contains no material which has been accepted for the award of a degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

signed:

Edward T. Aspinall

Abstract

This thesis presents a study of political opposition in the decade leading to the end of President Suharto's New Order regime in Indonesia. In particular it focuses on the contribution of opposition forces to the process of political democratisation and the interplay in that process between societal/opposition initiative and disunity within the governing elite.

Following the literature on authoritarian regimes, the study proposes a typology of opposition: illegal, semi, alegal and proto-opposition. Each of these are responses to the combination of repression and pluralism typical of authoritarianism. Although a mood of discontent was apparently ubiquitous in the later years of Suharto's rule, opposition remained dispersed through a wide range of institutions and was structurally weak. Much of it was located along the blurred boundary between state and society.

The study focuses on the period of limited liberalisation (*keterbukaan*, 'openness') between approximately 1989 and 1994. Following the mainstream democratisation literature, the thesis concludes that conflict within the governing elite (in this case between a substantial section of the Armed Forces leadership and the President and his camp) was an important pre-condition for the limited loosening of political controls from 1989. From the outset, however, societal agency played an important role in conditioning the emergence of nascent 'soft-line' reform groups within the regime.

In a series of case studies (elite dissident groups, Non-Governmental Organisations, student dissent and the Indonesian Democracy Party, PDI) I examine the methods by which opposition groups responded to divisions within the governing elite and made use of the opportunities thus afforded them to expand the scope of political action. In a process typical of authoritarian regimes which initiate liberalisation, in the years after 1989 an escalation of opposition mobilisation took place.

However, by the mid-1990s, President Suharto was able to reassert control over the ruling elite, especially the army, facilitating a retreat from liberalisation policies. Increasing 'sultanisation' of the regime undermined its legitimacy and precluded a resolution of its political problems, especially the succession issue, from within the ruling elite. After the economic collapse of 1997-98, in a 'sequence of disaffection' typical of regimes where the hard-line element is strong, a society-initiated process of regime change began. Mobilisation, pioneered by the most politicised groups (notably university students), propelled other social and political forces into action, and stimulated the final fracturing of the ruling elite and the abandonment of Suharto by

a substantial part of it. The legacy of authoritarian rule, however, meant that opposition remained structurally weak and divided, allowing for the replacement of Suharto's government by a reconstituted version of it.

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Preface

In Pancasila Democracy there is no place for Western style opposition (*oposisi ala Barat*). In the world of Pancasila democracy we have deliberation (*musyawarah*) to achieve consensus (*mufakat*) of the people. The method we use is that the people put their trust in their representatives. Then, the people's representatives engage in *musyawarah*. Then we achieve *mufakat* to determine what steps we shall take together for the next five years . . . Here we do not have opposition like that in the West. Opposition for the sake of opposing, for the sake of being different, is unknown here.¹

This statement, from Suharto's 1989 autobiography, typified the view of his New Order government toward political opposition. The authoritarian 'Pancasila ideology' expounded by the government's leaders extolled 'traditional' and 'authentic' Indonesian values of mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), deliberation (*musyawarah*) and consensus (*mufakat*), insisting on the subordination of group and individual interests to the societal good and the fundamental unity of state and society ('the organic state').² Groups and individuals which challenged the government were routinely portrayed as selfishly placing their own narrow interests before those of society and as thus forfeiting their rights to participate in the consensual life of the body politic. An all-pervasive, but often brutally effective, coercive apparatus was always ready to be deployed against them. Even leaders of the permitted political parties routinely denied that their parties were 'oppositions'. Attempts by liberal intellectuals, notably Muslim scholar Nurcholish Madjid, to advocate a 'loyal opposition' within the New Order framework were routinely rejected out of hand by government spokespeople.³

And yet, opposition was apparently ubiquitous in New Order Indonesia. I was struck by this during my first Ph.D. field trip to Jakarta in early 1993. On informing a new acquaintance that my research topic was 'opposition', he replied: 'Who do you mean by the opposition? These days, everybody in Indonesia is in the opposition.' At the height of *keterbukaan* (openness) it seemed that he was right. Almost every day there were reports of protests by students, workers, or Islamic youth. Newspapers were full of reports quoting academics, party politicians and retired officials making sometimes fundamental criticisms of the regime (indeed, newspaper reports often did not even bother to report any particular event, but were simply cobbled-together collections of the views of noted critics on this or that issue). Neighbours, taxi drivers and other casual acquaintances were very willing to complain about topics like the President's

¹ Dwipayana and Ramadhan, 1989, p. 346.

² Pancasila, the Indonesian 'national ideology' is a brief statement of ideals, incorporating belief in one God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy through consultation and consensus, and social justice. On Pancasila ideology see Morfit, 1981; Reeve, 1985; Bouchier, 1992, 1996 & 1997; Simanjuntak, 1994b; Ramage, 1995.

children or the many low level abuses they experienced. During my months in the capital I attended a seemingly endless series of functions on the Jakarta seminar circuit, where topics like democratisation, openness and the like were dissected in minute detail. And yet, the mood was almost universally pessimistic. Most of my informants were reluctant to believe that anything more than the most cosmetic reform would occur in the foreseeable future.⁴

Initially, my research project began as a detailed historical study of Indonesia's democratic opposition. I aimed to trace the origins of various groups and key individuals back before the foundation of the New Order, in order to analyse their changing responses to the consolidation and ossification of the regime over subsequent decades. In this way, I hoped to account for the combination of diffuse oppositional sentiment and structural ineffectiveness. However, the rapid pace (to put it lightly) of political developments during my Ph.D. candidature (1992-1999) kept drawing my attention to contemporary developments. I ended up discarding much of this early research and focusing on the *keterbukaan* period, which began in 1989 and ended between 1994 and 1996.

During those years, as tension about Presidential succession mounted, an atmosphere of increased political uncertainty developed. Many kinds of political actors strove to adjust by finding new constituencies, formulating political strategies, making new alliances, pressing for political change or jockeying for position in anticipation of it. Gradually, political opposition became more overt, prompting the government to take action to rein in *keterbukaan*, moving first against sections of the press, then Megawati Soekarnoputri's PDI (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*) and other groups.

Although I concluded most of my fieldwork in late 1995, the pace of political change in Indonesia continued to accelerate. Accordingly, I decided to add chapters incorporating the major crackdown on opposition in 1996 and the wave of protest which culminated with President Suharto's resignation in May 1998, although these later chapters are not as detailed as those which precede them.⁵

³ See for example Madjid, 1994.

⁴ Juan Linz (1973, p. 173-4) made similar comments on Franco's Spain in the late 1960s, noting that a foreign visitor would sometimes 'have the impression that almost everyone is opposed to the regime or at least holds opinions that seem incompatible with its avowed ideology...'

⁵ It should be noted at the outset, too, that the collapse of the Suharto regime confronted me with an important methodological problem. Most of my information was collected as the events discussed in chapters four to seven unfolded. It is likely that had I the opportunity to re-visit all my informants after Suharto's fall, that their recollections and reconstructions of events, their tactics and choices, would be quite different from those relayed to me earlier. In addition, I would presumably not have to rely to the same extent on confidential sources. Time and other constraints made this impossible, but it is important for the reader to bear this limitation in mind while reading following chapters.

I bring my study to an end at this point. Suharto's fall proved to be a decisive democratic breakthrough. Under the (as it turned out) transitional Habibie presidency, a far-reaching process of liberalisation and democratisation began. The strategic environment which confronted societal actors was utterly transformed.

In the study I focus on two main sets of questions. These cover, first, the nature and forms of oppositional politics under the New Order regime. This implies looking at both internal features of opposition (composition, aims, techniques etc) as well as how the regime distinguished tolerated and non-tolerated opposition. Second, I focus on the contribution of opposition actors to democratisation itself. A particular concern, as explained in chapter one, is the influence on societal opposition of intra-regime disunity and structural changes wrought by economic development.

The core of my thesis consists of cases studies (chapters four to seven) where I look at 'elite' dissident groups, non-governmental organisations, student dissent and the PDI. This choice does not imply that I found these forms to be 'most important', merely that together they represented a broad cross section of oppositional responses to New Order authoritarianism.

My interest is primarily in 'democratic' opposition, although, as we shall see, strategies for democratisation were inevitably inter-twined with attitudes about social inequality and the proper place for Islam in the polity. I have limited my selection in other ways. I am primarily interested in middle class opposition, for reasons which are more fully explained in the next chapter. I exclude from the study independence movements (most prominently in our period, those in West Papua, East Timor and Aceh) which sought not merely to reform the governmental system in the Indonesian nation-state, but to break away from it altogether. Similarly, I have not devoted a separate chapter to 'Islamic' forms of opposition. This was partly, too, for practical reasons: balanced treatment of Islamic politics in our period would have required a separate thesis-length study. In part it was because the Suharto government pursued a policy of rapprochement with political Islam from the late 1980s, which meant that Islamic opposition was to a large degree co-opted and neutralised during *keterbukaan*. In any case, questions about the proper role of Islam infused all opposition debates, and are considered at length in following chapters. I am aware that some readers may have objections to my selection, but for reasons of space alone I was obliged to be ruthless.