Supporting Democracy Abroad: An Assessment of Leading Powers

Indonesia

I Ketut Putra Erawan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indonesia only embraced democratic institutions in 1998, but it has become active in supporting democracy and human rights in its region. Indonesia’s foreign policy emphasizes the sharing of lessons learned while respecting the sovereignty of neighboring states. The country encourages finding solutions to human rights problems both through national processes and regional mechanisms, rather than singling out states for criticism.

Indonesia’s most significant achievements in democracy and human rights promotion have been in strengthening these aspects within the structures of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in support for the Bali Democracy Forum, which brings together representatives from across the wider region to discuss democracy topics on an annual basis. On the other hand, Indonesia’s work in this area has been hampered by its policy of noninterference as well as continued domestic shortcoming, which undermine its ability to lead on certain issues.

Introduction

Despite its relatively recent embrace of free institutions, Indonesia believes that the practices and values of democracy have been an important part of Asian political culture for centuries. While Indonesian policy has emphasized closer economic integration in its region, it considers political and security cooperation to be important as well. Indonesia sees the spread and consolidation of democracy as a crucial component of the response to major global challenges. It also believes that advancing democracy in Asia will enable the region to assume a more important role in world affairs.

Indonesia’s own transition to democracy since the fall of authoritarian president Suharto in 1998 has been built on the interaction between the state and civil society. Indonesian democracy also benefited from international and regional actors during its transition. This in turn has led Indonesia to engage societies in its region that are undergoing political change. At the same time, Indonesian policy believes that the most successful strategy focuses on the sharing of lessons learned while refraining from interference in the internal affairs of neighboring states.

Indonesia has increased its promotion of democracy and human rights over the period from 2012 to 2014. Initiatives include exchanges with other countries, building democratic norms through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and providing institutional support. Indonesia encourages finding solutions to human rights problems both through national processes and...
regional mechanisms, rather than singling out states for criticism.

Although promotion of democracy and human rights is among the stated objectives of Indonesian foreign policy, its implementation has not been straightforward. Despite significant progress, Indonesia faces particular challenges in supporting democracy abroad due to its own domestic performance. Rights violations such as mistreatment of minorities and limitations on free expression have led to serious questions regarding Indonesia’s internal commitment to democracy and human rights. Action in support of democracy is also hampered by Indonesia’s adherence to the principles of noninterference and respect for national sovereignty.

Foreign Policy Objectives
According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan 2010–14 and its strategic implementation report, Indonesia’s support for the promotion of democracy and human rights shares equal priority with other foreign policy objectives. The democracy promotion theme has been included in sources ranging from the annual presidential opening speech at the Bali Democracy Forum in 2008, to the annual presidential speech for the anniversary of the Republic of Indonesia in 2009, to the annual Ministry of Foreign Affairs press statement in 2014. In the latter speech, Minister for Foreign Affairs R. M. Marty M. Natalegawa said that Indonesia’s diplomacy will contribute to the attainment of Indonesia’s national interests, including to consolidate democracy.

Promotion of democracy falls under the directorate general of information and public diplomacy, although in practice it is supported by all sections of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Similarly, the promotion of human rights is the domain of the directorate general of human rights under the directorate general of multilateral affairs, but also engages multiple actors.

Much of Indonesia’s support for democracy is carried out through the framework of ASEAN, which does not prioritize democracy and human rights above other areas. According to the Indonesian director-general of ASEAN cooperation, “There are several concentric circles of Indonesian foreign policy. ASEAN is the first and the closest and becomes one of the main foundations of Indonesian foreign policy.”

Promoting democracy and human rights through support of the ASEAN Political-Security Community—which works to ensure that countries in the region enjoy a just, democratic, and harmonious environment—and implementing the ASEAN Charter are among Indonesia’s projected values and foreign policy objectives. However, implementing these has not been easy, as not all ASEAN members have accepted the idea that democracy and political development are among core ASEAN values.

Another achievement is the Bali Democracy Forum, which the government initiated in 2008. The first intergovernmental forum in Asia with a democracy focus, the forum aims to promote regional and international cooperation on peace and democracy. Participants from across Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East come to Indonesia annually to share ideas and experiences. In 2013, for example, leaders discussed the challenges of consolidating democracy and balancing human rights with internal stability. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs created the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) with the support of the state-run Udayana University to implement the Bali Democracy Forum; both the management and funding of the IPD are independent of the state. The Bali Democracy Forum is an important means by which Indonesia supports democracy in other countries by encouraging them to initiate their own reforms.

Development Assistance and Trade
Programmatic support for democracy and human rights takes place through a combination of state and nonstate diplomacy. For example, in the case of Myanmar, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (track one diplomacy) designed and implemented programs to support the democratic transition in cooperation with the IPD (track one and a half diplomacy), all of which were supported by various civil society organizations in Indonesia (track two diplomacy).

Since 2012 Indonesia has engaged in a dialogue on constitutional reform with Tunisia, which includes exchanging experiences in guaranteeing rule of
expressing concern and encouraging solutions, the states. As a result, although it may make statements of democratization. The principle is providing citizens’ protection.”

The absence of democracy and human rights conditionality is rooted in the principle of noninterference. Indonesia believes that foreign relations should be grounded in cooperation and synergies, with democracy and human rights support based on mutual ownership of results rather than concepts imposed from outside. As stated by Rafendi Djamin, Indonesian Representative for the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, “Democratic support is initiated not by conditionality or external enforcement but invitation in consideration of national ownership of the processes of democratization. The principle is providing citizens’ protection.”

IPD has been working closely with Australia, Denmark, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the United States, and the European Union to promote assistance for initiatives on democracy and human rights. Like the Indonesian government, IPD does not agree with attaching conditions to assistance. While democracy and human rights initiatives are related to other areas of cooperation such as development, IPD respects mutual ownership of the initiatives with partner countries.

Elections
Indonesia considers election fraud and electoral manipulation as internal problems of sovereign states. As a result, although it may make statements expressing concern and encouraging solutions, the Indonesian government will not comment on the legitimacy of any given election. The IPD and broader civil society have more freedom to directly respond to election fraud and manipulation.

However, the Indonesian government does urge integrity in elections by working in close partnership with other countries. Indonesia has been active in promoting free and fair elections predominately through a focus on norms and sharing experiences, as well as technical assistance in electoral management. Support primarily takes place through engagement with partner countries. The most significant work in this area are election visiting programs, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the IPD have conducted beginning with the Indonesian presidential election in 2009 and continuing through the 2014 presidential election. The program also includes visiting programs for local and parliamentary elections. During an election visit, participants from various ASEAN member states and other countries come to Indonesia, where they observe the drafting of election rules, management of the election process, resolution of disputes, and efforts to engage the public in elections. Similarly, Indonesian officials have observed election practices in Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

During the 2014 presidential election, the IPD and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted three sequential election visiting activities. The first was a regional workshop to implement the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint to engage ASEAN member state representatives and researchers. Adopted in 2009, the blueprint is designed to encourage shared values and norms among all ASEAN members. The workshop, scheduled for July 2014, was to be followed by a meeting of representatives of think tanks, academic institutions, and election commissions. The second activity was a presidential election visiting program attended by 30 delegates from Myanmar. The third was the Asia-Pacific Political Leadership Program, attended by 14 delegates from 10 countries in Asia and the Pacific. All of the participants from the three programs visited polling stations and witnessed activities from the beginning of the voting process through the vote counting on July 9. These activities were accompanied by dynamic debates on Indonesian politics and election management with relevant representatives from the Indonesian electoral commission, think tanks, the media, and political parties.
After directly witnessing previous election processes, participants from Tunisia, Egypt, Myanmar, Fiji, and other ASEAN countries have invited the IPD to provide further support. Working closely with the partner countries, the IPD shares experiences and provides technical assistance on electoral management.

The promulgation of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 marked a new agreement among member states, providing a foundation to promote democracy in the region through free and fair elections. Indonesia remains active in maintaining election integrity on the international agenda through its various election-related activities.

Disruptions of Democratic Processes
In countries in the inner circle of Indonesia's foreign policy, especially in Asia, disruptions of democratic processes are a serious concern. Such events generally are addressed through the framework of ASEAN. When coups or other disturbances occur, Indonesia will first express its concern through a Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, following the ASEAN Political-Security Community blueprint and articles of the ASEAN Charter. Often, the issues are discussed in meetings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After this, Indonesia usually emphasizes that solutions should be sought through bilateral and multilateral dialogue and through the internal mechanisms of ASEAN.

In the case of the military coup in Thailand in 2014, some important Indonesian foreign policy actors saw the events as an unconstitutional power grab and a violation of the ASEAN Charter. However, others in the state administration viewed the coup as a domestic affair and urged a policy based on respect for Thailand's sovereignty. Indonesia's official response was that the coup was a violation of the ASEAN Charter and should be handled through that organization. According to Indonesian sources, ASEAN had difficulty responding to the coup, given Thailand's strong position in the organization.

Despite its various ties with Egypt, Indonesia issued no official response to the 2013 coup in that country. This is likely because it sees Egypt as outside of its immediate sphere of influence.

Gross Human Rights Violations
Indonesia supports bilateral, regional, and multilateral mechanisms to end gross human rights violations. As in other areas, it first invites national solutions based on the principles and mechanisms stated in the ASEAN Charter. It also seeks multilateral solutions through its membership on the UN Human Rights Council. As a member of the council since 2007, Indonesia has supported resolutions that respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, abstaining in other cases. Aiming to play a role as an honest broker, Indonesia also responds to violations by conducting informal diplomacy and instituting dialogue processes among governments and other actors.

Indonesia has three main responses to address gross human rights violations. The first is to encourage the development of an independent, national institution with responsibility to receive complaints, conduct fact-finding missions, and adjudicate. The second is to encourage the creation of regional bodies to share experiences, provide technical assistance, and coordinate initiatives to support human rights in the region of concern. The last is to coordinate efforts among ASEAN members, share experiences, and mobilize support to national and regional initiatives. In no case does Indonesia issue explicit condemnations of the conduct of other governments, regardless of the scale of the abuse.

In practice, ASEAN has been criticized for failing to uphold the Responsibility to Protect, which was unanimously adopted by ASEAN and other world leaders in 2005 to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. ASEAN's principle of nonintervention and its national shortcomings have prevented action in places such as fellow ASEAN member Myanmar, where there have been ongoing widespread abuses of the Muslim Rohingya population in Rakhine state.

Civil Liberties
Indonesia has promoted protection of freedoms of association, assembly, and expression through its dialogues on constitutional and political reform with Egypt, Tunisia, Myanmar, Fiji, and other ASEAN countries. The foundation of Indonesian democracy is explored in these relationships, especially its grounding in civil liberties. Indonesia has also defended freedom of association in the UN Human Rights Council and other international forums.

In the Bali Democracy Forum IV in 2011, in response to the recent Arab Spring, an important theme was how to expand political space for the participation of civil society. In addition, two ongoing side events to the forum have addressed key civil liberties issues.
The first one, started in 2009, is the Bali Media Forum, convened by the Indonesian Press Council and the International Federation of Journalists and supported by the IPD. In this forum, freedom of expression, censorship, and prosecution of advocates of free expression are discussed among national and international journalists. This annual meeting also provides skills training for journalists and an opportunity for network building and support for journalists’ initiatives. The second related side event is a forum among civil society organizations working on democracy and human rights issues. Participants in this event share their experiences, strategies, and support for each other’s initiatives.

In face of censorship and prosecution of journalists, Indonesian state actors always encourage systematic solutions that do not impinge on national mechanisms or internal processes. For example, Indonesia has not responded to Vietnam’s imprisonment of bloggers and other journalists over the past few years. When the UN Human Rights Council discussed surveillance and other Internet issues in September 2013, Indonesia sided with the governments of Russia, China, and others in criticizing international telecommunications companies for their role in privacy violations.23

Indonesia continues to strive to build trust in order to play the role of neutral mediator and conduit for information with other countries. However, Indonesia’s confidence and capacities in responding to efforts to limit civil liberties abroad depend on its own domestic context, which includes incidents of censorship, prosecution of journalists, and limitations on freedom of expression.24 These violations hurt Indonesia’s position when it attempts to promote such rights in its foreign policy.

Marginalized Communities

Indonesia has developed a range of initiatives to encourage protection of marginalized communities and prevent systematic discrimination in other countries. For example, Indonesia has instituted dialogues with Myanmar that address marginalized communities (especially religious minorities and women). In these discussions, Indonesian participants have emphasized the potential of decentralization to help protect these populations and minimize discrimination, thus helping to maintain peace. In Indonesia’s experience, systematic discrimination can be reduced through devolution, although this also creates opportunities for local policies that run counter to national and international human rights laws.

According to senior Indonesian foreign policy officials, support for marginalized communities in other countries is based on strategic political assessment. Most responses from Indonesia are normative statements that do not result in sustained pressure. For example, senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials have worked closely with communities and state officials in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia to help foster peace through mutual dialogue and to support victims in the aftermath of the conflicts since the Arab Spring.

Indonesia has been committed to women’s rights, as demonstrated by its support for the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of Violence against Children in ASEAN. While Indonesia has not provided bilateral funding for gender equality, it has worked with ASEAN on the Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, which implements programs to support women’s and children’s rights and conducts capacity building and other activities.

As in other areas, Indonesia’s domestic situation affects its ability to promote protection abroad. Recent threats, coercion, and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities in Indonesia have affected the country’s credibility in promoting democracy in this area.25

ENDNOTES


3. Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.


8. I Gusti Agung Wesaka Puja, Director-General for ASEAN Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Interview, Jakarta, July 8, 2014.

9. Various institutional mechanisms have been established, starting with the creation of a working group on democracy and human rights, and continued by various initiatives through track one and a half diplomacy, national institution and solution, and effort coordination through ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights.


14. Wirajuda, Discussion; ASEAN Charter.

15. Puja, Interview.

16. Discussion with various sources who requested anonymity.

17. Hadi, Interview.

18. Discussion with various sources who requested anonymity.


20. Puja, Interview.


25. Puja, Interview; Djamin, Interview.