

Members of Indonesia's civil society organisations were euphoric when the country elected Joko Widodo, a political outsider, as president. But two years into his presidency, old-style political horse-trading has tempered the initial high expectations of a better way of doing politics in the world's most-populous Muslim-majority nation.

Nevertheless, among Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia is one of the few countries that shows genuine democratic progress. The Philippines has just elected a president keen on [using martial law if necessary](#)

. The civil society movement to push electoral reform in Malaysia, known as "Bersih Malaysia" or "Clean Malaysia", is

[severely curbed by the regime](#)

. Singapore's democracy remains a classic case of [stubborn authoritarian politics](#)

A survey I conducted with Norwegian political scientist Olle Törnquist shows Indonesia's democratic progress through the eyes of civil society activists 15 years after Suharto's dictatorship. We interviewed nearly 600 activists from across the country.

Indonesian activists see that opportunities for them to enter the state arena and influence policy processes are opening up with Jokowi's presidency. Many former activists have become close associates of Jokowi.

We recently published our survey [in a book](#) .

Progress in Indonesia's democracy

We conducted the survey in 2013 and 2014 just before Jokowi took office in July 2014. The results show how optimistic and hopeful Indonesian activists were about the state of Indonesia's democracy.

Comparing this most recent survey with surveys from ten and seven years ago, Indonesia's

democratic institutions are seemingly becoming stronger.

A whooping 85.4% of respondents said the state respects civil liberties in Indonesia, allowing the freedom to engage in public discourse and to self-organise. This shows an improvement in Indonesian activists' assessment of how well the government guarantees civil liberties. In 2007, only 62% felt positive about protection of these freedoms. In 2003, less than half of the survey respondents (45%) had this attitude.

Some 61.3% of respondents see Indonesia as having good governance, marked by transparent, impartial and accountable government. In 2007 and 2003, only 53% and 23% respectively held this attitude.

Some 77.2% of respondents view Indonesia as upholding values of representation, which are democratic political representation, citizen participation, institutionalised channels of representation, local democracy and democratic control over instruments of coercion. In 2003, only 37% respondents thought democratic values relating to representation were good. In 2007, the proportion was 57%.

Meanwhile, 71% of our respondents see citizenship, values covering equal citizenship, rule of law, equal rights to justice and universal human rights in a positive light. In 2003 and 2007, only 36% and 55% respectively held this attitude.

Another consistent finding is on democratic control of instruments of coercion – that is, civilian control over the military – which has high scores in the three rounds of surveys.

Democracy under Jokowi's presidency

Jokowi's win was seen as a hallmark of Indonesia's democratic progress as he broke the mould of presidents coming from the old political guard.

While some posts in Jokowi's cabinet are politically motivated appointments, at the same time activists have been invited to be part of the group of actors involved in the policy process.

For example, Jokowi's chief-of-staff, Teten Masduki, is a former anti-corruption activist. A member of the president's expert staff, Noer Fauzi Rahman, is an agrarian reformist, and State Secretary Pratikno is the former rector of Universitas Gadjah Mada, where I work.

This is healthy for democracy. The more diverse actors are involved in the policy process the better. It means state actors in Indonesia have become more pluralistic and less monolithic than in the past.

Setbacks

There are setbacks, however. The kind of popular movement that resulted in spontaneous volunteer groups banding together to support Jokowi for president has weakened. There has been dwindling interest in acting on important issues such as corruption and resolution of past human rights abuses.

Jokowi has also let suppression of freedom of expression and freedom to self-organise happen under his watch. In recent months, militant religious groups have attacked and harassed public gatherings in Java discussing politically sensitive issues such as [LGBT rights](#) or the [1965 tragedy](#).

These groups are backed by the police and military. This is a bad development for democratic institution.

However, our survey areas are broader than Java. We carried out the survey in 30 of Indonesia's 34 provinces. Thus, generally speaking, if there is perceived weakening of civil liberties, we expect it will not be a dramatic one.

Reclaiming the state

In post-Suharto Indonesia, democratic institutions are still the only game in town.

However, Indonesia has a lot of homework to do. Democracy does not only involve the presence of democratic values in society, but requires the means to practise those values.

Facing bumps, but on the right track: Indonesia's democratic progress

Written by Amalinda Savirani, Lecturer, Department of Politics and Government, Universitas Gadjah Mada

Political parties in Indonesia should be true representations of the Indonesian people. People should come together in a popular movement to hold the government accountable.

Lastly, civil society actors should grab the opportunity to participate in the country's political life. To balance power among Indonesia's oligarchy and civil society, there must be more plurality in democracy.

Amalinda Savirani receives funding from the Norwegian Embassy through Universitas Gadjah Mada to conduct the democracy baseline survey.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/facing-bumps-but-on-the-right-track-indonesias-democratic-progress-61038>