

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Kantor Pos
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Tomorrow, September 29, is election day for Indonesia. The great event is finally to take place, and the world will soon know the balance of Muslim, nationalist and communist strength among the eighty million citizens of this uniquely diversified nation. An extremely fluid political situation will be stabilized for at least a day.

The polling of votes tomorrow will come as a climax to months of careful administrative preparation and generally mild and well ordered campaigning, but in Indonesia moderation and care ride uneasily on the crest of a political wave which has not yet broken.

More than forty-three million Indonesians are registered to vote for two hundred and sixty members of the People's Representative Assembly. Most of those registered will have a chance to vote tomorrow. In some outlying islands, the election has already been postponed because of transportation problems, but all votes must be cast before November 29. By the second week of October, the results on the heavily populated island of Java will be known and observers will see the general trend of voting.

The election will be carried out according to a system of proportional representation that few understand completely in all its complexity. The system is strikingly like that of the Netherlands. The division of seats in the new Parliament will be almost perfectly representative of party strength in the islands, with the qualification that a minimum quotient of votes--probably between sixty and eighty thousand--must be won by a candidate or party to gain a seat. The larger parties will benefit slightly from this provision, and at least a dozen smaller groups should disappear permanently from the Indonesian scene.

The Voting Procedure

The great strength of the voting procedure is that it will

minimize the opportunities for malpractice, violence and corruption. Its weakness is the amazing complexity of the regulations and instructions which must be put into effect by the lowest level functionaries.

The strategic administrative unit will be the Polling Committee, administering to between 300 and 1000 voters. In East Java alone, there are more than 21,000 of these committees, an average of nearly three to each village or city neighborhood. Sole responsibility for the tasks of polling and counting votes will rest with these committees and their members, who number nearly half a million in Indonesia.

The election will thus be largely conducted by the village people themselves. The enormity of their responsibility can be seen best through the focus of election preparations in one village area.

This village of Mlirip has 1,345 inhabitants and 835 registered voters. Because the village area stretches out over several kilometers, four polling places have been set up to accommodate the voters. In early summer, the village headman was asked to recommend four chairmen and five or six members for each Polling Committee. After screening by the Sub-District Officer*, the chairmen and committeemen were sworn in.

In Mlirip, the four chairmen are Sukir (Indonesian Nationalist Party), Saleh (Indonesian Communist Party), Mat Moelijono (Nahdlatul Ulama, a Muslim party), and Bahi (non-party). The choice of these men has given rise to no important objections on grounds of politics. None of the chairmen are primary school graduates. They are young and apparently able men.

So looking toward distant Djakarta from Mlirip, the election machinery looks like this: four committees of intelligent but barely literate villagers are saddled with the job of taking in and counting the votes, and above them stretches a hierarchy of government-led electoral committees charged with the responsibility of training the polling committees and providing them with funds, supplies and plans. For the committeemen of Mlirip, contact with the hierarchy has been made only through the Sub-District Electoral Committee at Tarik, five miles away. This committee is headed by our Sub-District Officer, an exceptionally energetic and effective official.

The task of providing ballots and the materials for polling

* The Tjamat, a central government executive for an area of approximately 25,000 inhabitants.

places has now been satisfactorily completed. The four voting places in Mlirip have been constructed in accordance with instructions, so that voting will be done in secret and ballots will be inserted in the locked ballot boxes and later counted before the curious eyes of all villagers who care to watch.

The job of training the committeemen has also been completed, but officials are apprehensive about the capacity of the villagers to perform their difficult tasks. Lectures and demonstrations have been provided by the Sub-District Committee and local government information officers to help the committeemen to understand the folders of regulations which they have been given. The efforts of the Sub-District officials have been exhausting and their team-work has been unprecedented in Indonesia's short history. But their success is open to doubt on election eve.

In essence, here is what the village Polling Committee members must do:

(1) Tomorrow morning, before the polls open at eight o'clock, they must inspect the premises and equipment of the polling place.

(2) When the polls open, two members will sit in front of the polling shelter and inspect the credentials of the voters who appear. Each voter should bring his "invitation", sent out by the polling committee during the past week to all registered voters. If he has no "invitation", he must show proper identification, sign the register and affix his thumb print. Those who pass the examiners outside will go through the entrance door and take seats in either the men's or women's waiting section.

(3) Sometime after eight o'clock, the chairman of the committee will read a resume of the voting procedure to the voters present. All voters in Mlirip have attended voting practice sessions or demonstrations put on by government information officials or their own parties, so the chairman's explanation will not cover unfamiliar ground. Throughout the polling and counting, any spectator can lodge a protest if he suspects dishonesty or error.

(4) The chairman will show the empty ballot box to the voters. He will then lock it. The ballots will be unsealed and the outside of the ballots examined to see that they are unmarked.

(5) The chairman and two committeemen, sitting at a table in the center of the room, will check off the names of the voters as they come to the fore, present their "invitations" to the committee and receive ballots in exchange. The process will go very slowly,

for each ballot must be signed on the outside by three committeemen before it is used. The signatures must be made during, not before, the voting session.

(6) The voter will go into a booth alone, out of sight of the spectators and the committee. Inside he will see posted a complete list of all election symbols and of the candidates running on each list. His ballot will contain only symbols, with a small space at the bottom for a written vote. He may vote in one of two ways:

- (a) by punching a hole in the symbol he chooses. He will use a pencil-like puncher provided by the committee.
- (b) by writing the name and number of his candidate on the line at the bottom.

(7) He will then fold his ballot, return to the center of the room, show the signatures on the outside of the ballot to the committee and drop his ballot into the box. He will leave the room by the exit door.

(8) The election will end officially at two o'clock. Those registered voters already inside the room or lined up outside will be permitted to go on and vote. After a short recess, election officials and policemen or soldiers on duty will be allowed to vote.

(9) When all votes are in the ballot box, all voters will be invited to the polling room to watch the counting.

(10) The box will be opened and the ballots unfolded. The committee will set aside the invalid ballots, making their decisions according to detailed instructions which they have read and heard explained. The remaining ballots will then be divided into piles for the various candidates and parties, with separate sections for votes cast for symbols (by punching) and individual candidates (by writing).

(11) The votes in each pile will be counted in public view.

(12) The votes will be noted and totalled on a tally form. The numbers of ballots received, ballots used, ballots valid and invalid and improperly printed ballots will be listed on a separate sheet.

(13) The two counting sheets will be sealed in a container,

together with all ballots and descriptions of all protests and the chairman's decision on each objection.

(14) The container will be then transmitted by police guard to the East Java District Electoral Committee.

The election procedure can be described briefly in fourteen steps or in detail in several score. Each step has been covered by regulation or explanation and the whole process melds into something that is rational and quite perfect. But perfection and abundance of detail may be the Achille's heel of the entire system. The tally sheets are too long and complicated. Their language is high Indonesian, while the committeemen in Mlirip only know Indonesian as a second or third language. And, finally, the regulations which explain the polling and counting reach levels of complexity which only a mathematician, linguist or legalist could understand.

On election eve, the greatest weakness of the polling and counting procedure seems to be the number of unintentional errors which the Polling Committee members must make in their technical work, whether it be in counting the various types of votes or in tallying votes on their confusing forms.

Malpractices and Intimidation

Safeguards against intentional errors appear to be strong. Immediate control over the honesty of polling and counting will be exercised by the voters themselves and the members of the local Polling Committees, who sit as party representatives. This is the advantage of the ambitious system which places administration in the hands of the villagers--in public meeting--rather than higher officials in closed session.

The safeguards are of course imperfect. Within the polling room, a clever chairman could mystify his committee and voting audience by fast, erroneous calculations on the tally sheets. He could refuse to recognize legitimate protests and make his decisions stick through power of personality or local prestige. These possibilities are present but they seem limited because the chairmen should be checked closely by the members of the committee.

Outside the voting room, security will be maintained by the State Police and the Army. Campaigning has been forbidden within an area one hundred meters in diameter around polling places in cities and two hundred meters in rural areas. In most of Indonesia, all open campaigning has been outlawed for the three or four days preceding

the election. Within most localities, the authority of the army and police is considerable, as is their efficiency. The army, police and special election guards have already begun to patrol the silent city. Security should be adequate tomorrow, despite the many rumors of disorder and trouble.

In guarding against malpractices, Indonesia has made good use of two prime administrative assets: the compelling power of community judgement within the polling room, and the impressive force of the police and army outside.

The organization of Indonesia's first General Election could be called "characteristically Indonesian" for the year 1955. Basic laws and instructions were considered carefully and in detail over a long period of time. Some consider this a lesson learned from the Dutch. Yet the perfectly proportional, perfectly detailed electoral system now seems slightly beyond the administrative capacity of the village functionaries sitting on the polling committees. This fact highlights the great gap between the highly educated leaders of Djakarta and the semi-educated villagers serving below them.

In another way, the election is unique. Initial preparations have been made in higher level electoral committees by the experienced and skilled civil service executive officers, who have made the Indonesian government function for five troubled years. Tomorrow, their responsibilities will pass on to thousands of villagers and city workers--among them twenty eight men of Mlirip. Without further guidance or instruction, Sukir, Saleh, Mat and Bahi will be called upon to perform a difficult task well, before the critical eyes of their neighbors.

Tomorrow will tell whether this democratic trust has been placed with wisdom or naivete.

Yours sincerely,



Boyd R. Compton