

Indonesia's General & Local Elections: the EU EOM verdict

by John Quigley

On 15th April, one of the European Parliament's most active members with regard to Asia addressed the European Institute for Asian Studies, following his return from Jakarta. Glyn Ford, a British Socialist, headed the largest ever EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) to Indonesia to monitor the general elections that took place on 5th April. Calling the operation the "biggest and most complex ever undertaken by an EU team", Mr Ford characterised the elections as peaceful and democratic, despite administrative shortcomings.

For the Indonesian general election and the series of local and regional elections that took place on the same day, the EU deployed the largest ever observation team consisting of a thirteen-man core team, led by Richard Carter, sixty-six long term observers (LTO) deployed throughout Indonesia's 32 provinces, one hundred and twenty six short term observers (STO) assisted by a small group of locally recruited observers. The whole team was made up of 231 people. To underpin the scale of the task facing the EU team, Mr Ford explained that the objective was to monitor four different elections, namely, to the lower house, district elections, provincial elections and, finally, to the upper house. Some 600m ballot papers were issued throughout 560,000 polling stations across 6500 islands and 450,000 candidates.

As at 15th April, only some 60% of the ballot papers had been counted but this is an improvement on the 1999 elections where the count took a total of 68 days. Turnout should be somewhere in the region of 78-82% of the electorate. In addition to the EU team, Australia, New Zealand and the United States also deployed observation missions but none matched the EU for either personnel or duration of deployment. In compiling the terms of his assessment, Mr Ford indicated that the EU team had visited 1244 polling stations. The EU team considered the general environment, the ability of political parties to campaign freely and whether there had been any abuse of State resources for campaigning. Other important criteria include the general conduct of the poll and the count, whether there was any election-related violence and, finally, the tabulation of results.

In the pre-election phase, there were no reports of any major problems. The EU team's analysis of the media, including radio, television and newspapers, both in English and native languages, did not find any evidence of bias. On the election in Papua, there were significant administrative delays which has been largely put down to the short time available to prepare election material. Papua was the only example where the Election Commission delivered election material only 10 days ahead of polling. Counts were painfully slow, in part due to the complexity of ballot papers, taking upwards of 6-7 hours in local polling stations. For the district level election, there were two ballot papers which caused a lot of confusion and meant a large number of invalid ballots were cast. This was an area of concern, particularly as it seemed to affect the elderly and first time voters disproportionately.

Deployment in several areas was late or delayed due to a combination of delays receiving permission from the government and the imposition of martial law. These

areas include Papua, the Moluccas and Aceh. Although the EU team had its own security advisers, the deployment of the observers was limited in geographic terms. Otherwise, the team was not hampered by the Indonesian government. One point of contention was the fact that the EU observers only received permission to monitor polling stations between the hours of 8am-6pm even though the stations opened at 7am. The preliminary statement does not, therefore, draw conclusions on what happened before the observers were in place.

The EU Observation Mission team issued a preliminary statement of 8th April but will continue to monitor the outcome of the election for a further 60 days. In the statement, Mr Ford said he refrained from describing the election process as “free and fair” as this seemed to lose its meaning. Instead, he said he was happy to declare the process as peaceful and democratic, despite some administrative shortcomings. None of the other international or domestic observers have recorded verdicts at odds with the EU statement. In accordance with the terms of reference of an EU observation mission, the EU does not draw any conclusions on the results of the election, only the electoral process. As part of his mandate, Mr Ford said the he would be in place in Indonesia to monitor the Presidential election, which is due to take place in early July, with the second round in September.

In reply to questions, Mr Ford said the elections were generally peaceful and democratic. The EU mission did not set any lower standard. While two deaths were reported it was not immediately clear whether they were directly connected to the election. In any case, while regrettable, this was very much lower than the 100’s that died during the 1999 election. Whatever flaws did exist, Mr Ford said, did not affect significantly the electoral outcome across Indonesia. Or, in other words, the losers lost in a fair process. The influence of money politics received a lot of media attention but, in reality, the influence on polling seemed irrelevant. People were paid to attend pre-election rallies but, equally, parties in the West often offer food and drink to entice people to attend! In any event, two small parties campaigned on an anti-corruption platform and did well. The most generous parties did not seem to acquire any electoral advantage.

The EU team did make one important criticism of the election, the fact that there is not universal suffrage: members of the police and armed forces can not cast a vote. Also, a ban on voting for the Communist Party was overturned by the Constitutional Court but too late for the Party to be able to stand in the election. For no apparent motive, the government introduced conditions raising the minimum standard of educational qualifications necessary for candidates. While some citizens complained that they were not on the electoral register, the feeling was that this was not malicious. The EU team is recommending that the electoral roll be re-opened for the Presidential election. Speaking personally, Mr Ford said it was perhaps too early to say that democracy had taken root firmly in Indonesia but the general election was handled very well, which augers well for the July and September Presidential rounds. ■

See also:

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