

## Transcript:

Liza Prendergast: Hello, my name is Liza Prendergast, and I am Vice President for Strategy and Technical Leadership at Democracy International. I am looking forward to today discussing Indonesia's democratic transition with Eric Bjornlund, President and CEO of Democracy International. Eric has worked for more than 30 years to advance democracy at home and abroad. I had the pleasure of meeting Eric many years ago, because I shared with a colleague that I was working in Indonesia, and the colleague said, "You absolutely must talk to Eric. He's Washington's leading expert on Indonesia's democratic transition." So Eric, could you tell us more about how you originally got involved in advancing democracy overseas?

Eric Bjornlund: I was working as a young lawyer in a big law firm in the United States, based in Boston. And I was doing some pro bono human rights work on the side, including with Haitian refugees and most importantly in Africa, and that led me to learn about the then-emerging democracy promotion world. And some years later I got involved in Indonesia.

Liza Prendergast: And how did you end up becoming as involved in Indonesia's political transition as you were?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, I was working at the National Democratic Institute, and we were following Indonesia because we knew it was such a large, important country, and we wanted to encourage political reform there. We were really ahead of the curve, I guess, in that many organizations and people were not paying so much attention to Indonesia. We organized a conference to talk about whether we could do domestic election-monitoring in Indonesia around 1995, and one of the civil society leaders there said that since Suharto pretended to hold elections, they could [at least] pretend to monitor them. And we were interested in it and continued to talk to experts in the United States about Indonesia and were paying attention to it at the time when things changed really dramatically in Indonesia.

Liza Prendergast: We have the benefit, I think now, of hindsight, to know that the Indonesia experience is perhaps one of the most fundamental political transformations certainly in our lifetimes. But often I imagine, at that time, when you're living through a period of fundamental political change, there's a sort of myth that change isn't actually

possible. Would you talk about the political situation in Indonesia before 1998 and address whether you think the transition that occurred in 1998 and 1999 in Indonesia was actually expected?

Eric Bjornlund: It really wasn't. Suharto was then the authoritarian leader of Indonesia. He came to power after a bloody purge of alleged communists in 1965 and '66 that left perhaps hundreds of thousands of people dead, and he forced aside Sukarno, the country's founding father. His regime was named the "New Order," and it suppressed political dissent but presided over three decades of rapid economic growth. As of, say, the end of 1997, the transition was certainly not expected. We organized a conference in December of 1997 that brought experts from around the US in Indonesia to talk about what kind of long-term strategies we could come up with to support democratization in the country, and no one there expected change. In December of 1997, all of the top experts on Indonesia that lived in the US said that the way that we should engage was long-term education, working with young people, positioning them for the future, but no one there expected anything to happen. The Asian economic crisis came in early 1998 and led to economic problems in the country and dramatic protests led by students in May 1998, when, just in a moment's change, it led to Suharto being forced to step down and his vice-President BJ Habibie becoming President. And that initiated a rapid transition period from the middle of 1998 to 1999. On June 7th, 1999, about 25 years ago, almost exactly to when we're recording this discussion, Indonesia held its first open competitive elections in more than four decades. So it was not something that people expected, and yet it happened.

Liza Prendergast: What would you say the profile of Indonesia was at the time in 1998, 1999, in Washington?

Eric Bjornlund: I remember after the events of May 1998 and Suharto stepping down that we, among other organizations in Washington that were focused on international democracy, had a meeting at the State Department. We [planned] to talk about how much we knew about the situation, how well-positioned we were, how we had been planning for an opportunity like this, and all the good things that we could do to support a democratic transition in Indonesia. And we met with a senior official at the State Department who said, "Now, this is all great, and we want to come up with funds to support these democracy promotion programs in Indonesia. But what we really need you to do is go over to Capitol Hill and tell everybody over there something that they don't seem to know, which is that Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world and the largest with a predominantly Muslim population. The stakes for the transition in

Indonesia are enormous, and very few people in Washington seem to be aware of how important it is.”

Liza Prendergast: How fundamental were the legal and institutional changes that happened at the time? Who negotiated the new political arrangements in Indonesia?

Eric Bjornlund: And this is where the international community started to really play a role. The transition exposed ambiguities and weaknesses in Indonesia's institutions and processes for the constitutional structure of government, for elections, the election of the president and the accountability of the president, legislative oversight, the role of the military in politics and government, judicial review, and relations between the central government and the regions. All of those fundamental principles of government and how governments organize were up for negotiation starting in mid-1998, and they led to dramatic changes. There was a team of seven (*Tim Tujuh*) of largely academics, in several cases American-educated academics, who knew something about elections and election systems led by someone named Ryaas Rasyid and another participant was Andy Mallarangeng, and those became leading reformers of the time, and they brought their education from the US and knowledge of elections to this discussion, and that group of seven proposed essentially these quasi-constitutional, sweeping changes to Indonesia's arrangements. They proposed fundamental new laws making fundamental changes on elections, on political parties, and on the structure of legislatures.

Liza Prendergast: What was different about the new laws, and how did they represent a new kind of more dynamic political system?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, the new laws were very different from what preceded them. For elections, the reformers initially proposed abandoning the previous system of proportional representation in favor of a first-past-the-post, district-based election system. They wanted to do this on the theory that it would take power away from party leaders at the national level and give it to people around the country. It didn't really fly though, because new political parties largely opposed it. They thought it would advantage Golkar, which was the New Order political machine/political party and the only political party that had extensive resources and a nationwide organization. So what they ended up with was an election law that was kind of this awkward compromise between majoritarian district-based elections and proportional representation elections, a system that was incredibly complicated. Largely, it [was] kind of internally inconsistent and ultimately very, very unclear and complicated. I think we were saying

at the time that there were a very small number of people who even understood what the new election law was calling for. So the real-world process, which diverged a lot from what the laws and the regulations specified, became strongly influenced by practice and precedent and, really, negotiation, both before and after the elections. There was a new law for political parties that required them to be national political parties. So you couldn't have regional parties that represented interests of any of Indonesia's far-flung regions, some of which—a few of which—had separatist movements and sentiment. There was a restructuring of the legislatures. The new law created a 695-member People's Consultative Assembly. That's called the “MPR,” in Indonesian the “Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat,” which was the supreme body of the country, that included members of the of the lower house—the 500 members of the DPR, the “Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat”—and also some representatives elected by the regional legislatures and representatives of functional groups within the lower house, the People's Representative Assembly. It also included appointed military members at the time. So these new laws that kind of completely changed the political system were agreed upon and moved forward, and you ended up with kind of this complicated hybrid of a presidential and parliamentary system. It wasn't fully presidential, and it wasn't fully parliamentary. The process of constitutional form continued for the next number of years. Each year over the next few years, the MPR adopted constitutional amendments largely because of public pressure. Most notably in, I think, 2001 the MPR adopted a constitutional amendment—maybe it was 2002—to have a direct presidential election, and so when Indonesia had elections again in 2004 for the first time, the president was elected directly. In 1999, the new president was elected in the fall by the MPR.

Liza Prendergast: I want to ask you about the role of the international community, but before I do that, did you want to speak at all about decentralization as part of that?

Eric Bjornlund: There were a lot of political changes. There was a move for decentralization over the next few years and very substantial laws changing the relationship between the central government and the provincial and local governments and special autonomy for Aceh and Papua, where there had been strong separatist sentiment. So yeah, that continued to be a major issue, as well.

Liza Prendergast: That's something you've written on extensively, the role of decentralization and devolution in Indonesia. But going back to the transition, what was the role of the international community during that time?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, as I said, there were some of us who had followed Indonesia and who wanted to be there once this transition started. I was lucky enough to be able to move to Indonesia in 1998, and I actually lived there for the next couple of years during this whole transition process. I mentioned that some Indonesians who were educated in the US played a leading role in designing and adopting the reforms, and they were supported by international expertise including from our organization and a few others. I know people like Andrew Ellis from Britain; Blair King, who was then a young academic who had studied Indonesia, an American political scientist; Lawrence Lachmansingh, who came from Guyana and worked on domestic election monitoring. Those people all moved to Jakarta, as well, and were able to be a very integral part of that process of discussing the reforms and understanding the details. I thought at the time that Indonesia was somewhat different from many other countries that we had worked in before, in that the Indonesian political, governmental, and civic leaders were skeptical of foreign engagement, and foreign influence, as people sometimes are. And understandably, they were very confident about Indonesia's ability to think through political problems, and somewhat, you know, unsure whether international expertise was valuable to them, but they were also sophisticated and willing to benefit from good ideas and really willing to learn from genuine comparative experience. And because of the quality of the international engagement and some of the people that were there, I think we had the opportunity to really engage and to try to help them and to really play an important role in supporting what they were doing. And then international election observation became important, as well. So as the calendar turned into 1999, the Carter Center and the European Union were doing effective long-term election observation by that point. President Carter himself came to Indonesia several times in 1999 and again in 2004 supporting the transition there.

Liza Prendergast: Thank you for sharing that. I think it's interesting to hear how the leaders in the international community were engaged in supporting the transition. I'm curious why you think the elites in Indonesia agreed to such fundamental reforms that essentially shook up the entire political system?

Eric Bjornlund: This is, I think, one of the really interesting things that I learned from that experience is that all of the New Order elites, the people that had been part of a not-open political system, in 1998 all became democrats, 'small-d' democrats. And I think it was sort of public pressure, the tide of history, and all of a sudden there was a consensus that emerged that they needed to establish new legitimacy for their governing structures. BJ Habibie became kind of an 'accidental' president. He had been, only for a short time, the Vice President for Suharto, and then he became president. He was seen as something of a technocrat, and he oversaw substantial

political reforms and is at least to be credited for that. He wanted to continue as president, but he was not elected when the MPR, the People's Consultative Assembly, met to indirectly elect the president in the fall of that year. Civil society played a really key role in monitoring elections and pushing for real reform. After the transition elections of 1999, it was really civil society that pushed for direct election of the president, really against the interests of the political elites, and forced the political elites to accede to that and led to that fundamental change in the political system in 2004.

Liza Prendergast: So, in your opinion, did Indonesia at that time establish a foundation for genuine democratization?

Eric Bjornlund: I think probably the answer, looking back with 25 years of subsequent experiences, is yes. It's a qualified yes. It hasn't all been linear in the direction of progress. The experience in 1999 was mixed. As I said, there was lots of compromise and ambiguity. There were lots of ways in which the rules weren't fully followed. In 2001, the MPR impeached the president. In 1999, the MPR elected a very prominent religious and political leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, as president in 1999. In 2001, after just two years into his five-year term, they removed him from office. And there are plenty of reasons to be concerned about the quality of democracy in Indonesia over the 25 years since, including that we now have in 2024 a new president in Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, who is not only from a military background but was accused in the past of human rights abuses. So it's hardly a black and white story, but I think Indonesia has changed fundamentally in 1998-99 and has continued to be able to sort of build on that experience.

Liza Prendergast: And what lessons do you think we can take from the Indonesia experience generally?

Eric Bjornlund: I think one, I alluded to earlier, is that fundamental and rapid change is often possible, even when many people don't see those opportunities. And things can change quickly and without people expecting them [to]. I think a second thing is that people can sometimes force change, even when political elites resist. Public pressure, public engagement in politics can really make a difference, and good civil society leadership is an important factor. And then, you know, it's a cliché, but democratization is messy, and it's not always going to be progress as things keep getting better. There are setbacks that are to be expected, and yet progress can still happen.

Liza Prendergast: Thank you for walking us through the transition itself. I was wondering if you'd share what legacy did being in Indonesia at that time have on, not just you, but also your family? Since I know your family went with you.

Eric Bjornlund: They did. I, at the time, had young children, and a third child was born while I lived in Indonesia. So for me, professionally, it was an incredible experience, a profoundly important experience for me, probably the most important professional experience I had in my career: the opportunity to really kind of be in a place when a really significant transition was happening and have a front row seat to that, and be able to talk to the people that were involved in it at all times, and to feel like you were helping push in that direction. It was just a really important professional opportunity for me. And for my family it was wonderful. My kids learned Indonesian at a young age and loved being there and enjoyed the opportunity and had the opportunity to see that the world is a big place, and lots of places are different than what we consider home. My oldest daughter went back in college and continued to study Indonesian and brush up on her language and then went back another year to do a research project where she was able to interview political elites in Indonesian. My youngest son just joined a Gamelan orchestra in college this year because of that experience. So yes, it was a profound experience for all of us, and we really feel lucky that we were able to be there at that time of important change in Indonesia.

Liza Prendergast: Absolutely. Is there anything, Eric, that we didn't cover today that you think anyone listening to this should know about the Indonesia experience, or about the experience of working on supporting and advancing democracy at home and abroad?

Eric Bjornlund: Yeah, I think I really appreciate this opportunity to share these experiences and how important they were for me personally and for our country. I think this is important work, and we're lucky to be able to be doing it. I encourage everybody to get involved.

Liza Prendergast: Alright. Thank you very much. Thanks to everyone for listening to this session.

Eric Bjornlund: Thank you, Liza. Thank you, everyone.