



Concept Paper

The 13th BALI DEMOCRACY FORUM DEMOCRACY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Bali, Indonesia, 10 December 2020

Background

The Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) was established in 2008 to create a progressive democratic architecture in the Asia-Pacific region. In the past decades, the Forum facilitated dialogues through sharing experiences and best practices in managing diversity that encourages equality, mutual understanding and respect. Throughout the years, this has become the foundation of the Forum. In doing so, the BDF has also been active in advocating the principles of democracy – namely that it must be developed based on internal initiatives (home-grown); that it upholds the values of pluralism and diversity; and that it must be inclusive.

Over the years, the BDF has succeeded in making democracy a strategic agenda in the Asia-Pacific. It has encouraged countries to establish a balance between economic and political development, between creating peace and security, and promoting human rights and fundamental freedom as well as respecting humanitarian values. All of which is reflected in the three founding pillars of the United Nations Charter.

The various themes that have been discussed in the BDF have resulted in new ideas being further promulgated and shared amongst countries. Thus, in its second decade, the BDF is expected to continue contributing to the region's peace and stability, to the promotion of human rights, and especially to further encourage the healthy balance between economic growth and political development.

Theme

The 13th BDF of 2020 will address the theme of “Democracy and the COVID-19 Pandemic”. The theme is derived from the following deliberation:

1. Democracy faces challenges, recession and growing skepticism even before the pandemic
2. Pandemic leads to multi-aspects crises and puts the test on democracy to prove its resilience and effectiveness in dealing with the crises.
3. What will be the way forward in ensuring democracy remains effective to bring prosperity and justice to the communities

Pandemic brings multi crises across the globe and threatens the lives and livelihood of people, drastically shaken public health and economic structures. Political aspects are also not an

exception, the pandemic may further put a test on democracy that seemingly already in the retreat.

Even before the pandemic, Freedom House in its 2018 report suggests that in the last 12 years, democracy has regressed. Between 2005 and 2018, the share of Not Free countries rose to 26 percent, while the share of Free countries declined to 44 percent. The pillars, principles, and values of democracy are being questioned in countries traditionally known as champions of democracy.

The report made further references on cases where the press is being undermined, social media is being used to spread hoax and hate speeches are heavily used for narrow political interests. Efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 by limiting people movement and interactions in various countries have unfortunately widened inequality gap. Some of the population suffering disproportionate effects from COVID-19 are, among others, women, prisoners, students, and person with disabilities.

There is a growing concern from measures taken by the government to address the pandemic that may derail some core principles of democracy, including exercising excessive restriction and surveillance on its people, and put democracy itself in peril consequences in the long term even after the pandemic recedes.

The spirit of democratic decision-making lies in transparency, accountability, and support from those it represents. But the pandemic likely will change the course of democracy itself by altering the electoral process, civic mobilization, government control upon its people/centralization, the transformation of the role of non-state actors, socio-political cohesion, etc.

Yet, as shown by the study conducted by John Hopkins University and International IDEA, a self-motivated and well-informed population is far more powerful and effective than a controlled, ignorant population. The study shows that resilience to the pandemic not solely depends on enforcement capacity but greatly affected by civil society participation:

Pandemic shows that the world needs more transparency, civil society participation, free speech/press, inclusivity, close cooperation between government and its people, which means that the world needs democracy even more during and after crises. This is in line with the results of a survey conducted by *Dalia Research* and *the Alliance for Democracy* which shows that in the global average 78% of people believe that democracy is important.

On economic aspects, based on data from the World Bank and International IDEA, democracy, hybrid-democracy and non-democracy countries face the same challenges. The economic growth contraction on 2019-2020 is forecasted between 1% - 8%. However, political and social structures' trajectory between the three would likely differentiate on its way to the end of the crises. Strong support and participation of the public to the government is one of the determining factors.

Democracy enables society to build social trust, empower them, give free speech to the media to do its role, protect individual liberties, maintain sustainable balances of societies, and create accountable governments. Inclusivity for civil society to take part in combating the outbreak,

to access information, and/or to access medical treatment/services will strengthen public-government cohesion. It will allow the government to exercise accountable measures and provide space for public to support the government's efforts.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that democracy does not guarantee effective leadership and governance, but it enables self-correction. Through democracy, citizens and their elected leaders can learn and grow. And crises provide the best opportunity to prove that.

What are the implications of COVID-19 to Democracy? What are the consequences of the responses to the Pandemic on democracy? Can we sustain democracy post-pandemic? How and in what conditions? What will be the way forward to ensure democracy remains effective to bring prosperity and justice?

These are some of the critical questions need to be answered not only conceptually, but also strategically. As a forum of sharing experiences, dialogues, and building initiatives for democracy supports in Asia-Pacific, the roles of BDF and its pillars are critically relevant. The declining of democracy and the challenges brought by the Pandemic COVID-19, necessitates the profound responses.

Outline of the Forum

The main objective of the Forum is providing platform for sharing experiences among state actors and invited stakeholders to identifying the possibility of the shift in public preference towards governance caused by the pandemic, to understand better the sequent move by stakeholders. It aims at seeking answers about the future of democracy in the wake of global crisis.

With the adjustment due to the Pandemic, the 13th BDF will be convened on hybrid format. Its three main pillars: *Bali Civil Society and Media Forum* (BCSMF), *Bali Democracy Students Conference* (BDSC), and *Panel of Inclusive Economy*, have conducted early discussion on The Road to BDF series on October and November 2020, as an attempt to discuss the main theme for this year's BDF.

The BCSMF is intended to optimize the participation of the civil society and media, as they are also part of public policy making. The Forum will be attended by participants from various backgrounds, such as community leaders, NGO activists, academicians, researchers, journalists, and public figures.

The BDSC is where students, both locals and internationals from various universities in Indonesia and overseas, will have the opportunity to deliberate and express their views about various topics relevant to the theme of this year's Forum.

The Panel of Inclusive Economy was introduced as part of the BDF main pillar since last year. As the key elements highlighted the significance of the participation of all stakeholders, particularly the private sectors. The collaboration between the public and the private sector are believed to enable strengthening of the democratic system, development, and to promote

beneficial conditions to all. It will further serve as a platform to thoroughly discuss issues at hands and recommend concrete actions in addressing economic challenges.

The 13th BDF Opening Session will be attended by participants and observers of the BDF *in-situ* and virtually, the BCSMF and the BDSC as well as the Panel of Inclusive Economy representatives. The Session will consist of the opening remarks by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia followed by messages from VVIPs (Ministerial Level).

Following the Opening Session, there will be a “Ministerial Session: Perspective of the World” session to signify the sub-theme of “Upholding Democracy amid Pandemic”, derived from the general theme of “Democracy and COVID-19 Pandemic”.

This “Ministerial Session: Perspective of the World” session focuses on the good practices of countries in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. The “Ministerial Session: Perspective of the World” session will also be a platform to share a set of policies of countries to prevent and maintain the pandemic, in which have been enacted according to each country’s assessment.

Following the “Ministerial Session: Perspective of the World”, there will be High Level Panel which will present the speakers from the Ambassadors and/or Head of Missions of foreign representatives residing in Jakarta, to discuss on the Role of States and Policy Maker in COVID-19 Pandemic.

The Forum will assemble in the cross panel plenary, where representatives of each pillar would serve as panelists to report and engage in the dialogue regarding “Agenda Setting for Democracy in Global Crisis”. Each pillar organizes series of meetings in October and November on the occasion of “Road to BDF” to formulate some insights and recommendations.

Jakarta, December 2020