The 2011 ADI Pilot Test: Some Comments on the Reports

EDNA ESTIFANIA A. CO

First of all, let me thank the Third World Studies Center (TWSC) of the University of the Philippines for inviting me to this presentation forum on the Asian Democracy Index (ADI). Secondly, let me congratulate the TWSC and the other Consortium for the Asian Democracy Index researchers from Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, and India for being part of this democracy study in Asia. It is indeed important that each country and the citizens of that country do examine the state of their democracy.

Sometime in June 2011, I was asked by the TWSC to respond to the ADI survey—I am sorry that I failed to participate in the survey and interview. I did not evade the survey; I was simply caught in the web of responsibilities and activities at that time that the TWSC needed the survey. After reading the democracy index draft reports and having heard from the presentations today, I am pleased and thankful that I did not make it as a respondent to the survey. I would not want to be classified as either a citizen who has "L" (left) leaning, or "R" (right) political inclinations; neither do I want to be labelled as pro-government or anti-government. I don't think there is a straight jacket taxonomy of individuals given one's views on various issues and elements under study, and under movable times and circumstances. In other words, one's views on democracy and its various elements may change given differing or changing periods and circumstances, players, events and such other variables.

I am not going to comment on the substance and findings of the democracy studies on Korea, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Their scholars and people have the better right to talk about their own democracy.

Edna Estifania A. Co is professor and dean of the National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines-Diliman.

On the ADI Methodology

I appreciate three things about the study, namely the identification of a) an initial focus, b) the benchmarks used across countries, and c) the attempt at rigor in putting together the survey data and information alongside the insights and analysis of the expert-reviewers. However, somehow, somewhere I feel that the analysis drops and fades due to a lack of a clear agreement on fundamental concepts of democracy. I also hope to see an analysis that establishes the causation of democracy—at whichever state it is observed in a country. I did not see much of that analysis in the reports.

I must admit that I am not a great believer of the American Freedom House approach nor am I a fan of the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index. At best, I could only acknowledge the efforts done by the so-called many experts on democracy worldwide—and how they measure democracy including the use of metrics. It may be good to know the state of democracy of a country or of countries with the use of metrics, rating and ranking. And for some academics, such information are worthwhile "good-to-know" sources based upon certain indices and comparative barometers shown by scores and rankings. I welcome these approaches and the data that result from such rankings. After all, ours is a liberal world. However, I believe there are other ways of examining democracy, and especially so, by the citizens of a country whose democracy is being scrutinized. I think the ADI approach reflects a cross-section of opinions about certain indicators of democracy—from autonomy, competition, pluralization, and solidarity which fall under the broad principles of liberalization and equalization. I certainly agree that these are among the universal principles of democracy and their subprinciples, so to speak. However, I think the measures of democracy could still be expanded and that these core and subprinciples could still be broken down to articulate: a) other normative values of democracy such as representation, participation, effectiveness and accountability among others, as well as b) the dynamism of democracy which is mirrored for example in the various institutions, mechanisms, operational platforms and programmes, including the dynamics between and among the institutions and other bearers of democracy in a country at a given time or period. As we know, the time or period under which democracy is assessed is pivotal. Citizens should regularly examine their own democracy because events, issues, and challenges to democracy are moving and they do change from time to time.

One may also examine the presence of laws and policies that warrant democracy and the practices of these policies and laws, as observed and

witnessed by the community of democracy. If I may add to suggest, one can include as well the negative indicators that are observable.

To me, a study on democracy should be a conversation among peoples and groups in a particular society. A conversation among citizens of a country is important if one wants to see a truly cross-sectional view on democracy and the state of democracy. A conversation about democracy draws in many more players—perhaps not just the so-called "experts" from the private sector, the academe, the nongovernment organizations/civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs) as are the sources of information/data adopted by the ADI study. A conversation about democracy is important and should be much more inclusive.

To my mind, it is important to draw in the ordinary citizens as among the experts of democracy. For example when one speaks of the "Rule of Law"—are the victims of injustice and those who seek justice part of the circle of informants? Are they considered "experts"? Are the marginal members of indigenous communities and Muslim population included as among the key informants in a meaningful search and understanding of democracy where rule of law and justice are measured? What if there are different rules of law brought about by culture, ethnicity, and by political tradition and history, thereby making local informants the main and best sources of information on democracy and rule of law? Or are the marginal groups such as labor, farmers, indigenous communities considered as "experts on democracy" benchmarked by economic and social rights? Are they represented in the dissection of the subprinciple of competition?

I raise doubt about the inclusiveness of the NGOs/CSOs—the NGOs/CSOs are a strange nomenclature these days, when even political elites' foundations could be categorized as NGOs or CSOs. I have my doubt about civil society organizations—a nomenclature now challenged globally—because the CSOs do not necessarily reflect the membership-based, warm bodies of citizens that make for a more inclusive citizenry. To ensure a reference to the broad constituency of people—I would rather seek the direct participation of citizen groups in the data gathering exercises rather than simply pick representatives of some civil society groups.

Let me humbly share our experience in assessing democracy. Bringing people from a cross-section of society on democracy or principles of democracy has been an amazing experience. In fact, bringing diverse people together serves as an instant triangulation of views, understanding, and dissection of democracy. We did this when we touched base with a cross-section of Muslim women, indigenous peoples, health workers, local municipal health officers, private health practitioners and district health officers—all considered

"experts" on health under our assessment of people's economic and social rights. Prior to this, on our corruption assessment, we brought together church advocates, public school teachers, barangay officials, and NGO representatives in trying to assess the nuances of corruption and how corruption or its absence is a measure of democracy. With an ongoing examination of local democracy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, we engage and converse with the Ullamah, the local leaders, the unschooled folks in villages, the local election advocates and former officers of the Commission on Elections among others. We also engage legislators from the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The cross-sectioning of "experts" instantly brings with it differences in views, itself a plurality of ideas, itself democratic in process. The diversity of views are recorded and noted by the assessors. No censorship, no editing. But certainly the data come with evidence-based analysis.

I should also think that a conversation about democracy should include government and its many offices or representatives. For how could one dissect democracy and the state of democracy, and yet not include the supposed protectors and those who ought to be the ardent promoters of democracy? How could one dissect political democracy from the point of view of bystander experts of elections, and yet not include the men and women who make elections happen and who ought to make electoral democracy work? Their absence would indeed make for a biased perspective on the workings and performance of democracy.

It is interesting that in Mongolia for example the initiative to scrutinize democracy was taken by the government of Mongolia itself—working with academics, community people, and government channels. Such democracy assessment in Mongolia has led to a suggestion for a ninth Millennium Development Goal (MDG) relevant to their country, on top of the eight United Nations Development Programme-prescribed MDGs.

How could one dissect democracy and the subprinciples of subsidiary and pluralization or solidarity when for example, local government officials are not considered as among the "experts" or the source of information?

How could one examine democracy measured by the rule of law and access to justice and the extent by which democracy exists without involving lawyers, judges, policemen as enforcers, barangay officials who are the basic arbiters of justice, the victims of injustice, the poor who are usually kept out of the loop of justice, and the Supreme Court which is the ultimate protector of justice?

Democracy studies are interestingly a democratic exercise in themselves—they should be inclusive in terms of "sources of information," of "experts,"

and of process. The people of such country are themselves the experts on democracy and on the state of their democracy.

I imagine that there are no clear cut and dried answers to democracy enquiry—hence, there is not a fixed score or rank in the democracy ladder. Beyond the scores or the rankings determined by outside experts, there is the collective, albeit diverse interpretations of the state of democracy by the citizens of that country.

Finally, what is pivotal to a democracy enquiry are the questions asked to assess democracy— the quality of these questions and how these questions are framed. The questions should be able to help fathom the breadth and depth of democracy, its many measures, the roles of institutions, players, and the processes. The answers to the query on democracy are in the hands of various respondents and informants and there are probably no singular, correct answers to the democracy questions. What is vital is the solidness of the questions that we raise and how they are framed enough to generate responses from an *inclusive* set of informants.

Democracy Study: What for?

Let me end by asking the question:

What does a democracy study serve? In my view, it is meant to move democracy forward, or at least to face up to the challenges of democracy through the collaborative efforts by those I call here as representatives and "experts" of democracy—the government, the middle class, the academics, the poor, the women, the labor sector, the poor, the policymakers, and so on. The purpose of a democracy study is something not for the shelf to keep and to collect dust. It is something to touch base with and to pursue precisely so that we could realize or strengthen democracy.

Having said so, we in the democracy assessment wagon always say that our democracy study and its findings are a platform upon which we wish to continue to engage our citizens and our policymakers in addressing democracy. By doing so, we are not only "expert academics" but are also active citizens who have a mission in the public sphere. We hope to use our democracy study to pursue our conversation with people and sectors who matter in shaping democracy.