

## Chapter 74

# Elucidating Online Structure for Democratic Legitimacy: Case of Local Government Online Structure in Java–Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the impact of online communicative structures in local government Web disclosure on democratic legitimacy, after the implementation of e-government in Java, Indonesia, as a result of recent bureaucratic decentralization. Being at a very early stage in the e-government initiative, the analysis of 78 local government websites in Indonesia reveals that local government online structures present certain aspects of democratic and interactive appearance. However, the levels of democratized Internet mediated human interactions are restricted. These restrictions reflect the eradication of sensitive information, a low level of responses to citizens' solicitations, and disclosure of selective information in local government websites. This chapter suggests that restriction on local government online structure is due to the government's favor of more controlled media interaction influenced by the embedded authoritarian political culture due to many years of institutionalization. In a sense, websites merely function as a symbol of government legitimacy and power over citizens through media technology, which could suggest local government manipulation of democratization processes.*

## INTRODUCTION

The process of democratization and the struggle for democracy have been long-standing issues in Indonesian politics. Uhlin (1995) asserts that the study of the democratic process can be approached from the actor-structure approach, in which the relationship is reciprocal. In other words, actors affect the structure, and structures may also affect the actors (Uhlin, 1995). The creation of structure can restrict or support actions between actors involved in the promoting or demoting of democracy between the government and citizens. The influence of structure on democracy is evident in Indonesia's process of democratization, from the authoritarian and anti-democratic style of Suharto's New Order, to the recent transitional period of reformation.

In the New Order era, the Indonesian government imposed their political order and legitimacy by structuring and controlling society's communication process. During Suharto's 32 years of sovereignty, his regime always maintained strict media censorship by controlling the flow of information to citizens (Sen & Hill, 2000). In addition, a centralized government structure has resulted in fewer challenges to the state rules and political order in Indonesia. The structure has nurtured an embedded system that restricts and discourages the citizens' involvement in governance, thus delimiting the democratic process.

The occurrence of major breakthroughs in the form of disruption of government communication controls, during the transitional period of political reformation, and with the re-introduction of the Internet in the 1990's, are regarded as major determinants in the overthrowing of Suharto's regime in 1998 (Hachigian and Wu, 2003). The collapse of the authoritarian style of governance was also reinforced by the adoption of a decentralization of government structure in 2001. The liberalization of communication patterns in Indonesia was further strengthened through the enactment of the e-government Development Framework enacted

by Presidential decree No. 3 of 2003<sup>1</sup>. The primary goal of this decree was to enhance government transparency through interaction and communication and to assure government accountability through information sharing and dissemination.

The introduction of e-government has altered the relationship between the actors of democracy, particularly regarding communication. The proponents of e-government assert that its implementation would improve information sharing and citizen participation. Frequent interaction between citizens and their government would positively affect the citizen's level of trust, which is an essential component for democratic legitimacy. One important aspect of democratic legitimacy is the deliberation mechanism among actors of democracy that requires the linkage of political decisions to citizens' preferences (citizens participation) on the input side and the ability to produce an effective outcome (accountability) on the output side (Barnard, 2003).

Nevertheless, several caveats might inhibit the development of democratic legitimacy in Indonesia, regardless of the introduction of e-government. First, the embedded patrimonial culture and social norms might favor authoritarian styles. The patrimonial culture in Indonesia dated far back in the historical existence of Indonesia. Until recently, authoritarianism has also manifested in the norms practiced in Indonesian social interaction. For instance, Indonesian youth must respect, obey, and never question their elders. During the 1950s until ca. 1957, Indonesia experienced a period of parliamentary democracy, which proved to be a negative experience. This period was characterized by conflicts, instability, and chaos (Uhlin, 1995). Hence, it is essential to examine the magnitude of e-government's impact on asserting democratic legitimacy.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the extent of the online structure of the local government's web disclosure practices in Indonesia, and the impact on democratic legitimacy of local governments. The online structure is a configuration that

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