



The Centre for Democratic Institutions

**Report on volunteer placement within
House of Representatives (DPR) of the Republic of Indonesia
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One of the crucial issues in the transition to democracy for Indonesia is the ability of senior public servants and administrators to communicate across cultures, and to access the wealth of information about reform and democracy, much of it in English. Due to a request from the Indonesian Government to the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), I am currently working as an Australian Volunteer with the Secretariat General of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia as an English Language Consultant. This is a two year placement that has been co-funded by CDI and Australian Volunteers International (AVI).

My roles and responsibilities centre on enhancing the capacity of staff here to communicate with counterparts in foreign parliamentary services. I am doing this through programs to improve English, and by assisting with a program of English conversation centring on topics relevant to the work of the secretariat.

For somebody interested in parliaments, this is a dream job, particularly here in Indonesia at present, where efforts are being made to define and implement 'the best system' of governance. What makes it all the more fascinating is that the Indonesian way of conducting its political life is so different from our own,. The people with whom I work are constantly questioning their national system since it has been decided that these must change in this post-Suharto era.

In an effort by the Indonesian Government to streamline the public service, very few graduates have been recruited into the Secretariat but 21 law graduates have recently joined as legal drafters. There are also seven economics graduates who have been recruited to develop new budgetary processes. I am lucky to be teaching them all. It is extremely interesting to see these young people learn how to be satisfactory public servants. Their idealism and eagerness to learn are humbling.

Most of the people I teach are senior public servants. Many of them have quite a good knowledge of English. I need to be flexible about when I teach them because my students are often called out of class to snap-meetings, or sent off to other training courses. My teaching agenda is long-term, and will continue for at least a year.

Further to my role as an English teacher, I am involved in the process of ensuring that written parliamentary texts are in good English, and in editing and proof-reading speeches, announcements, media releases and other documents. Indonesian administrators and parliamentarians need to be able to convey their ideas in international forums as clearly and

concisely as possible, so checking papers, letters and speeches is important to them. It is exciting for me to see what many of the country's representatives have to say because of the dynamic change that is occurring in Indonesia's political process.

I have also been actively involved in the editing of various information booklets about the parliament, including its physical appearance. I am currently revising the Parliamentary rules of procedure, some of which must be changed in keeping with what is planned for the national elections in 2004.

A number of my Indonesian colleagues have been to Australia and thus have an inkling of how our system does and does not work. They are eager to know a lot more about it. Of great interest is the 'asset test' for politicians and senior public servants, which is as much prone to abuse in Australia as it is here. Some are interested in how political parties are formed; how they are voted in or out, and how ministers are appointed. For others it is the drafting of laws that is of particular interest. Seemingly ad infinitum, but always with interest, we analyse the differences between 'their' system and 'ours'. These discussions are central to my objective of assisting with research in the processes and procedures of foreign parliaments.

Obviously I am not privy to any state secrets, but allowing for national and personal sensitivities, who else but a language teacher can expect to have discussions on all kinds of subjects? They are all keen to talk even if I tell them that I cannot 'hear' Indonesian.

The office is set in beautiful grounds, from which I can see the Indonesian democratic process at work, with an active civil society conducting frequent protests. I have been fortunate to see the opening of the new Parliamentary year and the commemoration of the Independence at the Palace. This is indeed a privileged professional and personal development opportunity.