

Democracy award for Indonesians

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Indonesia's relatively peaceful transition into democracy over the past nine years, particularly the free and fair elections in 2004, has earned the citizens of try the prestigious Democracy Award from the International Association of Political Consultants (IAPC).

"Indonesia is a shining example to the world," Ben Goddard, president of the IAPC, said while presenting the award to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on Monday.

"Indonesian people, through demonstrations, brought about the collapse of the tyrannical Soeharto regime in 1998, and in 2004, the country held the largest single-day election ever held in the world, which went peacefully," Goddard said.

Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, also showed to the world that Islam and democracy not only can coexist, but that they can be compatible and support one another, he said.

The award is given annually by the association, usually in recognition of leaders or figures who work for democracy. This is the first time that the accolade has been given to an entire nation. The IAPC is holding its annual meeting for the first time in Asia.

Goddard also acknowledged the role the Yudhoyono himself had played.

"He is a natural leader who inspires his people. He is imparting a vision for the country which the people believe in," he said in introducing the Indonesian president for the award after going through the long list of his achievements in the military and in public service.

Accepting on behalf of the 240 million people of Indonesia, Yudhoyono said: "What took you so long?"

Yudhoyono, who won Indonesia's first ever direct presidential election in 2004, said Indonesia's journey towards democracy had not been without its share of criticism, self-doubt, stubborn resistance and other hurdles.

"Democracy, some said, would not last long. The people were not ready. The country was too big. The nation was too complex. Democracy, they said, would lead to chaos and even the break up of Indonesia. Others said what happened in Indonesia was just a regime change," he said.

"My favorite columnist Thomas Friedman lamented that Indonesia was becoming a messy state. And there are those who predicted democracy would unleash extremism and radicalize Indonesian politics."

"Today, we can take a sigh of relief as the good people of Indonesia have convincingly refuted these concerns," he said.

"Despite the early years of turbulence, where we changed presidents four times between 1998 and 2002, our democracy is now producing stability and economic growth, the highest since the financial crisis (of 1998)," he said.

Past winners of the IAPC Democracy Award include Ukraine President Victor Yushenko (2005), Iranian children's rights campaigner Shirin Ebadi (2004), Yitzhak Rabin of Israel (posthumously, in 1996), and Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi (1995).

The three-day IAPC conference will hear from seasoned politicians and political consultants, including Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, Hong Kong democratic leader Martin Lee, and Indonesian House of Representatives Speaker Agung Laksono and former environmental minister Emil Salim.