

Indonesia's First General Elections

ALTHOUGH Indonesia's independence was formally recognized by the Netherlands more than six years ago, it was not until this month that the first elected Parliament of the Republic of Indonesia was convened. Since December 1949, when the Round Table Agreements between the Netherlands and Indonesia were signed,* the country had been governed by a Provisional Parliament composed of nominated representatives of the main political parties. One of the more important responsibilities of this Provisional Parliament was to arrange for Indonesia's first general elections, a task which took years of preparation during which great difficulties had to be overcome. That the election was held at all reflects great credit on the Indonesian people and demonstrates their firm determination to conduct their national affairs on a free and democratic basis.

As suggested above, organizational difficulties connected with the holding of these elections were formidable. In the first place, Indonesia consists of about 3000 equatorial islands. There were over 43 million eligible voters in 257 constituencies who had to choose from the representatives of some 150 parties, and a large number of independent candidates. Some of the electors lived in remote and almost inaccessible regions, isolated by thick jungle, swamplands and volcanic mountains. To compile the electoral rolls, officials had to travel through the islands on bicycles, in jeeps, sailing vessels, motor launches, canoes and aeroplanes. Those eligible to vote included all men and women over 18 and all married persons even if below that age.

The problem of geography was not the only one which confronted the election organizers. Some parts of the country are still harassed by armed rebels, supporters of local separatist movements and religious fanatics, who make periodic raids from the jungle on the villages, estates and plantations, and who it was feared might seriously hamper the holding of elections; extra security forces had, therefore, to be provided by the Government while the people went to the polls in areas where terrorists were known to be active. These were some of the reasons why the voting, particularly in the outlying areas, was extended over a two month period—from September 29 until the end of November 1955.

Political Parties:

The offices of the President and Vice-President were not in contest and the voting was for members of Parliament only. Since there are probably more political parties in Indonesia than in any other country in the world, the choice for most voters was by no means easy. Among the estimated 150 parties were a number of Nationalist and Socialist parties, several distinct Moslem parties, a Communist party and others pledged to protect the interests of special groups such as women, labour and landowners, or of minorities such as Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Arabs and Chinese. Furthermore, there was a large number of candidates who had no party affiliation.

Another difficulty was that many of the voters were still illiterate, despite the great progress made by the Government's anti-illiteracy campaign. In

* See "External Affairs", February 1950.