

Indonesia: Union militant to contest elections

Thursday 28 August 2008, by [HEARMAN Vanessa](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2008).

Indonesian labour activist and chairperson of the Deliberative Council of the National Liberation Party of Unity (Papernas), Dita Sari, has declared that she will run for the Star Reform Party (PBR) in the 2009 legislative elections.

Sari and around 40 other Papernas members have declared their intention to contest the elections as part of the PBR.

Sari will occupy the number one position on the party's candidate list for an electoral district in Central Java that incorporates the towns of Klaten, Boyolali, Sukoharjo and the city of Solo.

According to Indo Pos, the district where Sari will run is a hotly contested area, with other candidates including Puan Maharani, daughter of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, running for the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Hidayat Nurwahid, speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly from the Prosperity and Justice Party (PKS).

Klaten, Boyolali, Sukoharjo and Solo were strongholds of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) during the 1950s and '60s. It was in these areas where the worst massacres in Central Java took place in 1965-66, as General Suharto seized power and physically exterminated the PKI.

Dita Sari's decision to run under the banner of the PBR, a party that began as an Islamic party, has created controversy. Papernas has been targeted consistently by right-wing Islamic groups, such as the Defenders of Islam Front (FPI), and dubbed the new PKI.

Some Indonesian political commentators have posed the question of how anti-communist forces will respond to this instance of left activists running inside a party that has Islamic origins. It is understood that Papernas has been in negotiations with the PBR leadership since at least 2007 to discuss a joint platform or some form of electoral collaboration in 2009.

PBR

The PBR began as a split from the United Development Party (PPP), a party that was created out of the forced amalgamation of a number of Islamic parties in 1973 and sanctioned by the Suharto's New Order dictatorship.

The PPP was recognised as one of three parties, alongside Suharto's Golkar party and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), allowed to exist and run in elections throughout the New Order period.

The key founder of PBR, Zainuddin MZ, an Islamic religious leader with a huge following, was a member of PPP until he and several others left to establish PPP Reformasi in 2002. PPP Reformasi was established in the aftermath of Suharto's 1998 overthrow, when restrictions to establish and join political parties were lifted.

Zainuddin argued that PPP Reformasi was to be “the smiling party” — leaving behind notions of “political revenge and sins” of the past and intent on reforming the political and economic system of the country.

Zainuddin explained that the party stood against corruption, in favour of justice for the poor and for “clean” politics. At an extraordinary meeting of the party in 2003, its name was changed to PBR, the Star Reform Party. Zainuddin left the PBR last year.

Some PBR leaders, such as Bursah Zanubi, have their political origins in the Islamic Students’ Association (HMI).

Sari explained that Papernas would continue to exist and not be liquidated into PBR. She told Indo Pos that she was not perturbed by PBR’s Islamic origins, pointing to the aspects of the PBR program that she agreed with — for example economic independence, free from foreign domination, the abolition of the foreign debt and prioritising development of the rural economy.

She argued that Papernas had made strenuous efforts to meet the requirements to be registered as a party able to participate in the elections, however only 34 parties have successfully met all the bureaucratic requirements to run.

Deputy secretary-general of PBR’s central leadership board, Yusuf Lakaseng, argued that there were common areas of struggle between Papernas and the PBR. He said, “Indeed we are opening ourselves up towards the activist currents”.

In the 2004 elections, PBR only achieved 2.5% of the vote but will be aiming for around 7% in these 2009 elections. Lakaseng is confident of achieving this target, as the party now has set up structures throughout the country, compared to four years earlier. The party claims 780,000 members and 60,000 branches.

Youth

According to Lakaseng, himself a former member of the predominantly young People’s Democratic Party (PRD — the left-wing party that helped found Papernas and that Sari is also a leader of), the PBR is prioritising youth candidates.

The PBR is putting in place a quota system of 60% for candidates below the age of 40. The party also aims to have women compose 30% of its fielded candidates.

Chairperson Bursah Zanubi said that his party tried to embrace as many young people as possible, with 30 legislative candidates under the age of 30 and a policy of two maximum terms on the leadership board of the party.

On July 12, Zanubi explained to Kompas that his party would focus on the issues of food and constructing an economy oriented to the needs of people and workers. He said that the PBR would campaign through meetings, discussions and gatherings, aiming for 50-100 people at each event.

Sari said that no party was completely “clean”, but that the challenge in Indonesian electoral politics was to “seek the best out of the worst”.

In response to the case of PBR parliamentarian Buylan Royan, who arrested on June 30 under order of the Corruption Eradication Commission, the PBR central leadership board sacked him from the position two days later and declared its willingness to cooperate with the commission’s investigation.

Royan was accused of receiving bribes for procurement of government patrol boats.

P.S.

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