

The politics of the poor - socialism in Indonesia

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Twelve years after one of the bloodiest military regimes worldwide ended, the radical left still faces a hard struggle in Indonesia. An interview with Indonesian activist Paulus Suryanta Ginting.

Paulus Suryanta Ginting - I'm a spokesperson for an organisation called Komite Politik Rakyat Miskin - Partai Rakyat Demokratik (Political Committee of the Poor - Democratic People's Party, KPRM-PRD) Besides work for my organization I have also been active in workers movements in Semarang, Central Java and Sidoarjo, East Java, and in student movements in Jakarta, on Java. In 2004 I was still a member of PRD and I was a member of the board. Later, in 2006, I became the general secretary of the National Student League for Democracy. I was active in the student movement until this year.

Alex de Jong - Can you tell us something about the daily issues facing people in Indonesia?

Paulus Suryanta Ginting - A large problem is unemployment - above thirty per cent. Especially workers from the textile industry have been losing their jobs. After 1998 many textile factories in Bandung, Java, went bankrupt because they couldn't pay for raw materials, imported for example from China, because the Indonesian Rupiah sharply declined in value. After 1998, the import axes on textile from China were abolished or sharply lowered - many Indonesian producers couldn't compete and went out of business. The Asia China Free Trade Agreement means that many products from China can be imported to Indonesia under no or very low import taxes - and just like with textile, the Indonesian industry has trouble competing with this. Education and health care are also problems form many people who can hardly afford them.

1998 is the year Suharto's regime ended but why was this also such an economic turning point?

Earlier, Suharto had already made huge debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the end of the nineties, Asia was hit by an economic crisis, caused for a large part by economic speculation. The IMF lend money to Indonesia on the condition it would implement so-called Structural Adjustment Programs. The agreement for these programs was signed by Suharto but these SAP's were implemented by his successor, Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie. Habibie also entered into new agreements with the IMF, just like Gus Dur, Megawati Soekarnoputri and the presidents after them, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. These programs meant a drastic liberalization of the Indonesian economy. The Worldbank also made liberalization and deregularization of the economy a precondition for aid. During the Suharto regime, the so-called New Order, Indonesia was quite popular among foreign investors. But Suharto and his cronies had controlled large parts of the

economy. Now, everything had to be privatized and government subsidies on health care, education, public transport and food were slashed. This meant that many people had to pay more for these daily needs after the fall of Suharto and the cost of living is rising. When I was studying in Yogyakarta at the turn of the century, a good meal would cost less than 2000 rupiah – now, it would cost you over 4500.

Since 1998 Indonesia is officially a democracy but in reality, democratic rights are lacking.

Indeed. Left-wing movements are regularly confronted with militia that are indirectly working for members of the elite. Many members of the Indonesian elite rose to power during the New Order era and still hold a lot of influence – you can even see that in some parts of the country they are gaining more power again. There also still exist laws outlawing Marxist movements. The democratic space is contracting. Another threat are religious conservatives. In Atjeh, there exist a civil police that forces women to wear headscarves, in Banten there are laws that are very close to Islamic religious law, Syariah, and severely limit the freedom of women. Women are for instance not allowed to go out in the evening without a man accompanying them. In Jakarta, a meeting about the human rights of sexual minorities was attacked by a militia of Islamic fundamentalists (FPI). This kind of militia was often set-up by the army in the nineties to attack the democratic movement. This led to fierce confrontations between the militia and the protestors who defended themselves with stones, sticks et cetera. In the end, the militia were defeated and the military regime had to step down.

During the massive protest against the Suharto regime in the late nineties, the PRD emerged as the most significant radical left organization in Indonesia. Why are you no longer active in the PRD?

We had two objections against the way in which the PRD operated. The first was the lack of internal democracy. And secondly we didn't agree with the electoral strategy of the PRD majority. To explain this, I need to tell something about the electoral system in Indonesia. To be allowed to participate in elections, a party has to be present in fifty per cent of the provinces and cities and in the cities be present in a quarter of the districts. This makes it for a small party almost impossible to participate.

After a number of failed attempts to participate on our own, the PRD decided to organize an electoral front, Papernas. This front didn't support an entire socialist program but put forward a number of minimum demands: nonpayment of the national debt, nationalizing the oil, energy and mining industries and a national program of industrialization.

This way, we tried to create a larger organization. We had some successes but encountered many problems. Several meetings of Papernas were attacked by Islamic fundamentalists. The group that is now the KPRM-PRD questioned certain choices that were made. We felt that the organizing of actions in the streets, the kind of actions that can radicalize people, were given less priority than the building of an electoral organization. In the end, Papernas couldn't participate in the elections. The majority of the PRD then decided to enter into an alliance with a reactionary religious establishment party, the Partai Bintang Reformasi (Star Reform Party)

This enabled them to participate in the elections but the price they paid was very high – like giving up their own demands and entering into an alliance with traditional politicians and with generals that are responsible for human rights violations. When the elections were approaching we were expelled because we objected to these maneuvers.

In Indonesia, hundreds of activists from the democracy movement have become candidates of powerful parties. Others joined NGO's and now limit themselves to objectives that remain in the framework of the status-quo.

What is the main focus of your activism now?

Most of our cadres are active in workers organizations, in alliance called Alliance of Workers Demands. This is an alliance of workers from different industries like textile, transport, electricity et cetera. The alliance campaigns for good wages, against outsourcing, organizes strikes and takes part in political campaigns. The alliance also has its own publications and organizes discussion meetings. The KPRM-PRD organizes public meetings to discuss with the workers what demands we should raise in the campaigns. The building of movements is the first priority.

We also take part in the student movement and we formed a women's organization, called Women's Liberation. Women from various layers of the population, like workers, students and farmers, are active in this group. In terms of numbers, the workers movement is by far the largest movement in the country - but workers can not mobilize very quickly, they have jobs after all. The student movement is important because they can mobilize quickly and it has a tradition of political mobilizations, especially around issues like democracy, abuses of power, or corruption. During the first of May celebration in Jakarta the Alliance of Workers Demands mobilized almost 7000 people - other groups also brought thousands of people into the streets. The total in Jakarta was almost 24.000.

Since 1998, political mobilizations have become part of Indonesian culture - this is an important heritage from the movement that ousted Suharto. Almost daily, there is new about rallies and demonstrations, often spontaneous. This willingness to mobilize is everywhere, not just in the cities but also in the countryside. Peasants for example resist being evicted from their land, sometimes in very radical mobilizations in which people use primitive weapons to resist the army.

We think the left can form an alternative to the traditional elite in Indonesia, if we cooperate we can be strong enough for this. The faith of the people in traditional politicians is declining and the ruling class is divided. The recent economic crisis hit Indonesia hard as well. All of this means people are looking for alternatives; there is a lot of interest in socialist ideas and in the progressive governments in Latin-America. I think that if we manage to make to different movements converge, we can win new victories.

P.S.

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