

The Indonesian left and Green Left Weekly

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For 17 years, from 1990 through to 2007, I regularly contributed articles on Indonesian politics to *Green Left Weekly*, a newspaper published by the Democratic Socialist Party (Democratic Socialist Perspective since 2005). During this period, *GLW* played a key role in building solidarity with the anti-dictatorship movement in Indonesia, and in particular, with its radical vanguard, Students in Solidarity with Democracy (SMID) and later the Peoples' Democratic Party (PRD).

GLW also covered the labour struggle in Indonesia, including giving focused coverage to the Indonesian Centre for Labour Struggles (PPBI), later renamed the Indonesian Front for Labour Struggles (FNPBI). *GLW* worked in collaboration with Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASIET), a solidarity group supporting the democracy movement in Indonesia and the struggle for freedom in East Timor. In Indonesia, the PRD was one of the main groups organising protest actions supporting the right to independence of East Timor.

By reporting the activities and explaining the perspectives of the PRD, *GLW* and the DSP played a major role, probably the leading role in the world, in introducing Indonesia's main left-wing party to the Australian and international left. By the time of the fall of Suharto in 1998, most people in the organised Australian left had become familiar with the PRD and its leaders.

Around this time, and since, *GLW* and ASIET organised public meetings in Australia where PRD, FNPBI and SMID leaders and activists spoke. What most people in the organised left in Australia and around the world knew about the PRD and left politics in Indonesia was due to articles that were published in *GLW*. It is therefore a huge disappointment that since late 2007, *GLW* has ceased to play that role, abandoning all responsibility to seriously and honestly report developments on the Indonesian left.

Turn to electoralism

In 2007 a major turning point occurred in the history of the PRD and the Indonesian left. A majority of the PRD central leadership voted on a drastic change in strategy — to enter into what they called a fusion with another party — the Star Reformation Party (PBR), which was a supporter of the incumbent government and that had a consistent record of supporting conservative policies in the parliament. The PBR was originally a split from the United Development Party (PPP), led by Islamic ideologue Zainuddin Muhammad Zein. Later he was ousted by a group of younger opportunist politicians, headed by Bursah Zarnubi, a former activist in Islamic and anti-communist groups.

Prior to this decision, the PRD had been trying to build an electoral party, the United Party for National Liberation (Papernas). The idea of fusing with the PBR came after it was clear that Papernas would not succeed in gaining enough members and branches to pass the stringent

electoral registration regulations. The PRD majority leadership also argued that the PBR would allow Papernas to maintain an identity of its own. The PRD leadership majority, headed by long-time PRD activist Dita Sari, argued that the new PBR leadership were amenable to such a fusion and would not demand a major watering down of Papernas policies.

When a minority voted against this new strategy, another vote was taken “inviting” these PRD leaders to “exercise the democratic right” to test out their own strategy separately. This was a de facto expulsion. All members of the PRD who disagreed with the turn to the PBR were offered the same choice: support the new line or leave. Over a period of several months about one third of the PRD membership refused to accede to the new line and started to organise themselves as a new formation: the Committee for the Politics of the Poor-PRD (KPRM-PRD). Eventually they were all formally expelled from the PRD, which became known as PRD/Papernas.

To this day, *GLW* has not reported, let alone explained these developments. Up until my expulsion from the DSP (along with 50 other members in a minority faction) in May 2008, the DSP leadership suppressed all written discussion of these developments among the membership of the DSP. In the pre-congress discussion leading up to the DSP’s January 2008 congress, written contributions on these developments by myself and one other DSP member were refused publication by the DSP national executive. An earlier report I had written, following hours of discussions with both sides of the conflict in Indonesia, and a reading of documents from both sides, was also refused circulation to the DSP membership. In the main international situation report delivered at the congress, no mention at all was made of the developments in Indonesia.

Defending PRD opportunism

In November 2008, *GLW* published an article “Indonesia: Tracing a path towards parliament” by a PRD leader, Kelik Ismunanto. The article defended the PRD/Papernas line of trying to obtain parliamentary seats through working in the PBR. The article clearly set out the PRD’s new political framework: “It has been shown that the important task of wresting back the people’s economic and social rights cannot be achieved simply through an extra-parliamentary movement. Parliament is the main edifice that needs to fortify the people against the ferocity of the free market. To demarcate between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary roads is not the right solution for building the people’s movement. As was explained by Dita Sari on television recently, the extra-parliamentary movement needs parliament to formalise the program they are struggling for.”

The idea that the extra-parliamentary struggle “needs” parliamentary formalisation and that parliament was the “main edifice” to defend the working people from the “ferocity of the free market” was a complete departure from the PRD’s previous politics. After the fall of the Suharto dictatorship, the PRD had participated in the 1999 parliamentary election. It had also tried to participate in the 2004 elections through electoral parties it had initiated. The PRD had always seen the usefulness of putting forward its politics in election campaigns but had never seen parliament as the “main edifice” for the defence of ordinary people’s interests. The self-organisation of the working people in their own mass movement was seen as the main way in which they could defend their interests.

GLW neither presented its own critique of this new political direction nor reported on or explained the criticism of it espoused by the KPRM-PRD. It seems clear the DSP leadership had decided to defend the new PRD/Papernas line. This was confirmed at the April 2009 DSP-organised World at a Crossroads conference when a DSP member presented a workshop defending the new PRD/Papernas line.

Between November 2008 and the holding of the Indonesian legislative elections in April 2009, *GLW* made no attempt to either report on the PRD/Papernas/PBR electoral campaign or its results. Nor did *GLW* report any of the views or activities of the KPRM-PRD or other Indonesian left groups. There was a massive collapse in the PBR vote from 2.3% in 2004 to 1% in 2009. The PBR lost all its seats. While the PRD-Papernas stood more than 100 candidates under the PBR banner, none, including Dita Sari, were elected.

However, last month *GLW* published another PRD/Papernas article, again with no critique nor reporting of KPRM-PRD or other Indonesian left perspectives. Entitled "Indonesia: Challenging the neo-liberal regime", it was compiled from an article by PRD leaders Dominggus Oktavianus, Ulfa Ilyas and Rudi Hartono and translated by Canada-based Papernas member Data Brainanta. Without giving any analysis of the failure of the PBR tactic, the article presented a new PRD/Papernas line. Both in what appears on the Papernas website in Indonesia and in the pages of *GLW*, the line of "tracing a path towards parliament" seems to have just vanished into the ether.

Now the PRD/Papernas line is framed within the assertion that in the 2009 presidential election there was a "contest between pro-people policies versus pro-capital ones". The alleged champion of the "pro-people policies" is "Prabowo Subiyanto, a retired lieutenant-general who commanded the notorious Kopassus elite troops involved in the kidnappings and killings of pro-democracy activists in 1998". The article stated that in the recent period "the content of Prabowo's speeches are almost identical to the arguments of progressives in recent years. This is both the way he explains the nature of neoliberalism as well as, to a degree, the proposed economic solutions."

The new PRD/Papernas line was oriented towards giving electoral support to General Prabowo, a multi-millionaire businessman, who ran an electoral campaign using the slogan "people's economy" and attacked the government of incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for being neoliberal. Sometimes, however, Prabowo makes his real politics clear. According to the January 23 *Jakarta Globe*, at a launching of *A Testimony of Indonesian History: From Pak Harto to Indonesia*, a book written by Probosutedjo, Suharto's stepbrother, "Prabowo said he favored Suharto's model of iron-fisted development. He said politicians leading the country after Suharto's fall have been 'too naive' in trying to apply Western political theories to local governance. He argued that despite allegations of human rights violations during Suharto's rule, the people benefitted."

Another glimpse at what Prabowo really means by "people's economy" came out when we was addressing the foreign correspondents' club in Jakarta on February 20. Journalist Aboeprijadi Santoso, reported that Pabowo said: "My model is Lee Kuan Yew, a strong leader, a socialist and pro-market." Lee Kuan Yew was prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990 and is "Minister Mentor" to his son, current PM Lee Hsien Loong. Singapore imposes significant restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, particularly on critics of the government, the media and peaceful demonstrations.

None of this was reported in the *GLW* article. Not only was there no mention of the PRD/Papernas line of "tracing a path to parliament", but there was also no mention in the article or anywhere else in *GLW* that Dita Sari, the most prominent PRD leader, gave full support to the election of Jusuf Kalla, Golkar chairperson and Yudhoyono's vice-president for the last five years. Kalla's running mate was General Wiranto, who has been indicted by the UN Serious Crimes Commission for crimes against humanity in East Timor. As the newspaper that introduced the PRD and Dita Sari to the Australian and international left, *GLW* has failed in a major responsibility to provide any honest information on this and all other developments with regard to the PRD.

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P.S.

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http://directaction.org.au/issue14/the_indonesian_left_and_green_left_weekly

* Direct Action, the publication of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), is trying to continue where GLW left off in late 2007. Our own assessment of political developments in Indonesia is reflected in our reporting, in the analysis we openly present and in our solidarity with the KPRM-PRD. We also try to report the activities of other Indonesian new left parties, groups and non-party left activists that are emerging in Indonesia, often acting together in coalitions around different issues.

Direct Action has sponsored the visit to Australia in June of KPRM-PRD leader Zely Ariane and is organising a visit by KPRM-PRD activist Vivi Widyawati in September-October. Direct Action is a monthly publication; for those wishing to follow Indonesian politics more closely, we recommend visiting the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Network news service.