

Indonesia: Papernas leaders sow illusions of radical change through the ballot box

Friday 10 July 2009, by [ARIANE Zely](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2009).

The following article was written in response to an article by Kelik Ismunanto, a leader of Papernas (National Liberation Unity Party) titled “Indonesia: Tracing a path towards parliament” [1] that was published in the December 3 issue of Green Left Weekly. Papernas was formed in July 2006 by the radical left People’s Democratic Party (PRD) to present a radical anti-neoliberal platform in this year’s Indonesian parliamentary elections. Zely Ariane is a former PRD secretary-general and now a leading member of the Political Committee for the Poor-People’s Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD). This party was formed in November 2007 by members of the PRD-Papernas expelled for disagreeing with a Papernas leadership decision to enter into an electoral coalition with one of the existing parliamentary parties. The article has been translated by James Balowski.

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Simply stating that the people’s movement in Indonesia is experiencing a period of stagnation, so a “political breakthrough” is required through the parliamentary road, is irresponsible, ahistorical and opportunist. It would be more honest just to concede that this parliamentary road is actually being taken by the Papernas leaders through the political parties left over from Suharto’s New Order regime and the fake reformists. This is because these are the only two groupings of parties that are currently able to contest the 2009 legislative and presidential elections — there is no third grouping.

It is this kind of parliamentarist tactic that is being undertaken by the People’s Democratic Party (PRD) and its former electoral vehicle, the National Liberation Party of Unity (Papernas) — subordinating themselves under the Star Reformation Party (PBR), one of the fake reformist parties. It is tactics such as this that are contributing to the current retreat of the left movement in Indonesia.

Papernas was as an attempt to unite the activist left into a political party with an anti-neoliberal program. Through an orientation to the extraparliamentary struggles of the masses, it might have been able to draw into its ranks broader sections of the activist left. There was a considerable level of solidarity shown by many left activists towards Papernas. This solidarity, however, did not provide a material basis for it to develop into a stronger organisation than the PRD because the PRD-Papernas leadership chose to retreat from a strategic orientation to the extraparliamentary struggle, replacing it with a strategic orientation toward an electoral “coalition” with one of the existing parliamentary parties — a “coalition” achieved through PRD leaders becoming members of and candidates for the pro-neoliberal, fake reformist Star Reformation Party (PBR).

Parliamentary idiocy

The result was that all of the PRD's revolutionary political principles were dropped. Through justifying this electoral "coalition" as an application of the "united front tactic", the majority of the PRD leaders wholeheartedly embraced an opportunist orientation toward the forthcoming elections. Ismunanto argues that "those who sit in parliament as the genuine people's representatives need those on the outside to pressure the entire parliament to act in the interests of the people, to respond to their needs" because, according to Ismunanto, "parliament is the main edifice that needs to fortify the people against the ferocity of the free market".

This outlook, which Karl Marx called "parliamentary idiocy", has also been adopted by many other former left activists. Some of them — those who are now not leftists, but liberals — hold to the view that working inside the neoliberal parliamentary parties is the most sensible form of struggle at present. The majority, however, are largely motivated by the goal of advancing their individual political careers.

The issue, however, is not simply one of opposing or supporting the tactic of participating in electoral alliances with genuine reformists, since we can, of course, accept this at certain times and under conditions that do not sacrifice the revolutionary left's ability to publicly present its own politics. The PRD-Papernas however, simply respond with the vulgar accusation that those who refuse to subordinate themselves within the fake reformist parties such as the PBR or Megawati Sukarnoputri's People's Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) are sectarian, ultraleft and oppose revolutionaries utilising the parliamentary arena in principle.

Ismunanto also deplores the "lack of synergy" between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary sections of the left-wing movement. This arises out of the misguided idea that the majority of the Indonesian activist left is allergic to the parliamentary tactic. This is simply not the case. Not supporting the parliamentarist politics of Dita Sari (now running as a legislative candidate for the PBR), former PRD chairperson Budiman Sudjatmiko (a candidate for the PDIP) and former left activist Pius Lustrilanang (who has joined the Gerindra party headed by Suharto's son-in law, retired General Prabowo Subianto) is in fact a manifestation of the activist left's mistrust of these political parties — a mistrust that is in accord with the feelings of most ordinary Indonesians. In a TV debate Yeni Rosa Damayanti, an ex-comrade of Sari, Sudjatmiko and their friends from the student movement of the 1990s, criticised Sari and Sudjatmiko, asking what had happened to the PRD. "Why aren't you still fighting and continuing with the PRD any more?"

Electoral coalition

The January 2009 issue of the monthly newspaper Pembebasan (Liberation), published by the Political Committee of the Poor-Peoples Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD), carried an article titled "The Politics of the Poor", which stated: "Elections are one of the political variables in working out the strategy and tactics of revolutionary struggle, and electoral coalitions are just one of these tactical elements. But a coalition with whom? The understanding of a coalition that should be propagandised is: we can attack our mutual enemies, namely the colonial domination of foreign capital, the remnants of the New Order (primarily the Golkar party), the military, and the fake reformist groups, who represent a danger that is real and urgent ... it is quite reasonable in a coalition, and not a problem if only a minimal program can be accepted by our allies, but such a minimum program is not in contradiction with or counter-productive to our maximum or real program ... we can freely, and should without our hands being tied, endeavour (at every opportunity) to propagandise our real program. It is because of this therefore, that a coalition with the PBR is unacceptable!"

In reality, the PRD-Papernas is not part of a coalition, but rather have liquidated themselves into the PBR — although this has never been acknowledged by the PRD-Papernas leadership. However, the proof of this is that Papernas no longer appears publicly in Indonesia (other than on its website). They have dissolved the PRD, which no longer issues any political statements and no longer even has a website. All of its political assets, including the campaigning organisations that supported Papernas, are increasingly focused on the job of getting the Papernas candidates of the PBR elected.

In order to enliven their “extra-parliamentary” profile a new grouping called Spartan (Volunteers of the People’s Struggle for the Liberation of the Motherland) has been formed with a far more modest program than Papernas, centred on opposing the exploitation of Indonesia’s resources by foreign capital. This “bourgeois-nationalist” platform is far more modest even than the platform adopted by the Indonesian nationalist movement in the early 20th century.

In organisational terms, the Papernas leaders have fragmented their forces into various parliamentary and exclusive electoral avenues, as part of their opportunistic parliamentarist game plan. Almost all of the PRD-Papernas’s activists have become PBR legislative candidates in electoral districts where the PBR is running, but in the 2004 legislative elections, failed to obtain a seat. Conversely, in electoral districts where the PBR is strong, they have had to make way for their PBR “allies” and have not been allowed to become candidates for the party.

Other PRD-Papernas activists who have not become PBR legislative candidates can be divided into three or four groups that collaborate with each other: (1) those working to ensure the victory of the Sultan Hamengkubuwono (Golkar Party) as a presidential candidate under a campaign election team referred to as the Merti Nusantara (Ismunanto is part of this group, but he is also a PBR candidate for a provincial parliament.); (2) those nominating themselves as candidates for the regional parliaments through independent channels; (3) those supporting former economics minister Rizal Ramli as the presidential candidate for the PBR; and (4) those who have become legislative candidates for parties other than the PBR.

What do they hope to achieve through such activities? What kind of “united front” do they hope to create? Are they just aiming to provide “the broadest possible propaganda to the people”: saying on the one hand that the PBR is the “people’s party of choice” in the 2009 elections, but on the other hand, wanting to nominate Rizal Ramli or Sultan Hamengkubuwono, or even Prabowo Subianto (responsible for the abduction of PRD activists in 1997-1998) as their “alternative” president, while Spartan represents “those on the outside to pressure the entire parliament to act in the interests of the people, to respond to their needs”?

From what angle can these kind of tactics create the so-called combination and synergy between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary movements? Is this not all just aimed at confusing the people — by saying that the remnants of the New Order (and even the abductors, the human rights violators) and the fake reformists have changed and become “progressive” (or “religious-socialist” as is claimed by the PBR)? And why are they urging support for rival presidential candidates? Is this a “clever” tactic to try to ensure that Papernas is not “isolated” from the winning candidate, even though it means getting the people to divide their vote among the contestants? Or is it just the crass, opportunist stupidity as it appears to be?

Even worse than this, the PRD-Papernas, through their “mass” organizations, have politically blunted their extraparliamentary mobilisations for the hope that such “moderation” will help it get some of its leaders elected to parliament. No longer are there any significant actions taking up Papernas’ minimal program of Tripanji (three banners): Repudiating the foreign debt, nationalising the mining industry and building the national industry for the welfare of the people.

None of these political tactics can even pretend to seek justification under revolutionary Marxist theory. Instead, Papernas now exhibits the characteristics of a political group zig-zagging away from revolutionary politics toward reformist politics, what the exiled Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky described in 1934 as “centrism”: “In the sphere of theory centrism is impressionistic and eclectic. It shelters itself as much as possible from obligations in the matter of theory and is inclined (in words) to give preference to ‘revolutionary practice’ over theory; without understanding that only Marxist theory can give to practice a revolutionary direction ...

“The centrist, never sure of his position and his methods, regards with detestation the revolutionary principle: State that which is; it inclines to substituting, in the place of political principles, personal combinations and petty organizational diplomacy ... The centrist swears by the policy of the united front as he empties it of its revolutionary content and transforms it from a tactical method into a highest principle ... Under the pressure of circumstances the eclectic centrist is capable of accepting even extreme conclusions but only to repudiate them later indeed.”

What is currently being undertaken by the PRD-Papernas leadership within the PBR is not a combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary tactics, but rather a channeling into the ballot box of the people’s desire for radical changes in the way society operates, because, as Ismunanto so explicitly states, “parliament is the main edifice that is needed to fortify the people against the ferocity of the free market”.

P.S.

* From Direct Action:

http://directaction.org.au/issue9/papernas_leaders_sow_illusions

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Indonesia: Tracing a path towards parliament](#)