

Indonesia: Left confronts fuel price hike

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Fuel price hikes have always sparked widespread mass protests in Indonesia since the overthrow of the dictator Suharto in a popular uprising in 1998. However, the timing this year was special.

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The hike occurred near the time of the 10-year anniversary Suharto's fall on May 21 and the National Awakening Day on the 20th, which commemorates the birth of Indonesia's first nationalist organisation. Three leftist fronts, each representing different tactics, took to the streets to reject the policy.

Three fronts

At one end of the left spectrum is the People Demands Front (FRM) that includes the National Liberation Party of Unity (Papernas) — a coalition party initiated by the People's Democratic Party (PRD) — and other organisations like the National Students' League for Democracy (LMND) and the Indonesian Poor Union (SRMI).

The front also includes other students and political groups affiliated with larger opposition parties, as well as several well known figures who occupied positions during president Abdurrahman Wahid's administration — such as ex-finance minister Rizal Ramli who was imprisoned by Suharto for criticising his economic policy and ex-presidential spokesperson, Adhi Massardi.

The front chose May 20 as the major day of protest, although some smaller demonstrations had been carried out for more than a week before. Papernas' leader Dita Sari gave a speech during the big rally, but the mainstream media positioned Rizal Ramli as the protest leader. More than 8000 people joined the protest.

The other two coalitions, People's Struggle Front (FPR) and National Liberation Front (FPN), consisted mainly of students, leftists, grassroots organisations and NGOs.

The main constituents of FPN are labour coalitions like Workers Demands Alliance (ABM) and Congress of Indonesian Trade Union Alliances (KASBI), some leftist groups such as the Working People Association (PRP) and Poor Peoples Political Union (PPRM), and a militant student group — the Indonesian Students' League (SMI). It was formed after May Day this year to confront the planned fuel price hike.

FPR was initially formed as a coalition for May Day actions and was dominated by the big peasant organisation, the Agrarian Reform Movements Alliance (AGRA). Ideologically-related organisations, such as the student group National Students' Front (FMN), and the Indonesia Independent Labour Union (GSBI) are also involved. FPR also includes some more moderate student and religious groups.

Both FPR and FPN chose the 10th anniversary of Suharto's fall as their day of action to reject the fuel price hike. Thousands of protesters staged their protests separately, with various visits to the state palace. More than 500 people from FPN and 300 from FPR marched side by side. About 150 people from FRM's student organisations also took to the street along with other student groups.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the city, about 3000 students from All-Indonesia Student Executives Bodies demonstrated against the hike in front of the parliament building. The protest in front of the state palace and some in other parts of the country ended with clashes and arrests.

Tactical differences

While FRM concentrated their attack against pro-neoliberal ministers in the government, FPN outrightly rejected any non-leftist "elite" politicians inside and outside of the government. In an interview with Metro TV, an FPN activist declared that theirs is a "pure movement" and not "a movement steered by politicians".

Both FPR and FPN believe that politicians who support anti-fuel price rise protests do so to delegitimise the president and to gain popularity needed for their electoral goals. Consequently, both groups are moving towards a boycott of the 2009 elections.

The demand that differentiates the FPR from the rest of the leftist coalitions is for agrarian reform, which reflects the peasant base of their biggest organisation, AGRA. The absence of any public demands for the nationalisation the oil and mining industries (raised by both the FRM and FPN) also sets the FPR apart.

The FPN advocate nationalisation and add the clause "under workers' control". This is a departure from its earlier focus on cutting the price of basic goods and rejecting workers' outsourcing. The FRM has also not mentioned nationalisation in its statement, although Papernas has been strongly campaigning for it. According a Papernas leader has explained that there is an internal discussion in the FRM on nationalisation demands.

Indeed, the issue of nationalisation has risen to the surface as a fraction of the parliament, affiliated to Wahid's party, suggested: "If necessary, following the courage of Latin American leaders, the government should consider the nationalisation of strategic national industries in energy and mining sectors."

The government, on the other hand, seems unmoved. On May 23, two days after the initial protests, a 30% fuel price increase was announced, sparking another round of protests across the country. Student demonstrations, involving the burning of tires on university campuses, were dealt with harshly by security forces. The most well known incident occurred at the National University, Jakarta, when police stormed the campus and hunted down students.

As waves of protests continued, the LMND with a newly formed students coalition held hunger strikes in several cities in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the FPN and FPR strove to maintain the momentum

with mass mobilisations. On May 29, about 500 people from FPN protested in front of the state palace.

A member of parliament came to the protest to express solidarity with the demonstrators, but FPN protesters told him to go away. On June 1, about 200 people from FPN and 500 from FPR took to the street separately.

On the same day, an unrelated incident unfolded and temporarily overshadowed the fuel price issue. A Muslim fundamentalist right-wing group, Defenders of Islam Front (FPI), whose foundation was initiated by elements in the military, attacked and beat protesters from a broad civil society coalition — the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Faith (AKKBB).

The latter had defended the rights of a Muslim sect, Ahmadiyah, that is currently under attack by the fundamentalists. In the days following the attack, the mainstream media magnified the incident, thus drawing attention away from the already declining fuel price protests.

In response to this, FPR and PRP issued statements denouncing the violence as the government's deliberate attempt to distract public attention from fuel price demands. This pattern is not new; previous protests were also dampened when public discontent was diverted by terrorist bomb attacks or other sensational incidents.

Leftist rivalry

Clearly, there exists a fierce rivalry between the three fronts. Three organisations from the island of Ternate in North Moluccas who were related or in cooperation with PPRM and FPN issued a statement condemning LMND for mistakenly claiming that all 14 protesters arrested there were LMND members. Apparently one of the detained was a PPRM member, while two were from LMND.

Furthermore, they accused LMND of being one of a number of "people-deceiving organisations", which, they said, must be supervised and rejected by all pro-democracy movements.

In Yogyakarta, the People United Committee (KRB), an FPN affiliate coalition, experienced a dispute with one of its own member organisations that was accused of sabotaging the protest and collaborating with state intelligence. The accused activists responded by attacking the other coalition members.

Many activists have expressed concern at this development, as can be seen from comments in some internet mailing lists. An Indonesian leftist website, <http://rumahkiri.net>, for example, carried the heading "Leftists, stop fighting each other, end sectarianism!"

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P.S.

* From Green Left Weekly (GLW), Australia, issue 755.

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