Still an age of activism

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In Indonesia, it sometimes seems that the left is everywhere yet nowhere. Though one rarely hears the word socialism these days (it was sometimes used even by officials during the Suharto period), words that in other countries connote radical or leftist agendas are in Indonesia part of everyday political discourse such as 'struggle' (perjuangan), 'the people' (rakyat) and so on. And a radically anti-establishment discourse, usually expressed as condemnation of the elite and its 'games' (permainan), corruption and 'manipulation' (rekayasa), is common currency among a large sector of Indonesia's activists and wider public opinion.

Yet the organised left is very weak. When the PRD (People's Democratic Party) – the nearest modern Indonesia has come to having a radical mass-based left-wing political party – contested the national election in 1999, it won less than 0.1 per cent of the vote. Since that time the party has splintered, with many of its former activists abandoning it either to join mainstream parties or to found small activist groups of their own.

However, a broad left is visible in the domain of civil society. There is a tremendous profusion of people's organisations, trade unions and farmer groups and a multiplicity of small – sometimes tiny – organisations that campaign for the rights of this or that marginalised group in society, sometimes using dramatically confrontational tactics in pursuing their goals. But this diffuse movement lacks an organisational centre. There can be a lot of agreement on particular issues and campaigns, but there is little long-term coordination or agenda-setting.

Identifying the left

So how do we go about identifying the Indonesian left today? One problem is, if we think of the left very loosely as those groups who seek (to borrow from Wikipedia) 'social justice through redistributive social and economic intervention by the state', that at least two parts of this formula – social justice and state intervention – are widely shared, at least superficially, by many actors from across Indonesia's political spectrum.

The mainstream parties that occupy seats in the national parliament claim to care about people's empowerment, defending the poor and achieving welfare outcomes in ways that in developed countries would usually be associated with the left. The PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle) led by Megawati Soekarnoputri, in particular, has inherited much of the populist tradition of Megawati's father, Sukarno, and defines itself as the party of the 'little people'. The major Islamic

political parties, even those that pursue conservative social agendas, are generally also in favour of small-scale projects to assist poor farmers and communities, and often promote economic nationalist policies.

But these parties lack the third element of the definition: commitment to redistribution. They are still determinedly developmentalist, seeing their main role as growing the national economic pie in order to give everybody a greater share. In mainstream politics, it remains rare to find people who believe in a conflict of interest between poor and rich. All the major parties say they are both pro-business and pro-poor. And most of them are funded by, and in many ways serve the interests of, the oligarchs who reign supreme in Indonesia.

A problem here derives from one of the fundamental ordering principles of Indonesian politics: Indonesia has become a patronage society in which the glue that holds political networks together is the flow of resources from political leaders (patrons) to their followers (clients). These resources come in many forms – sometimes in suitcases full of cash (as some of the more spectacular corruption investigations of recent years have indicated), but more commonly in the form of development projects, construction contracts, emergency assistance packages, technical support packages and the myriad of other small-scale projects that are provided by the state to be divvied up and distributed at the grassroots of society.

Many mainstream political groups in Indonesia, including the major parties, espouse leftist-sounding rhetoric about empowering the poor from time to time because it provides cover for what they are really interested in: distributing benefits to their own constituents and supporters. Thus, for example, traditionalist Islamic politicians in political parties like PKB (National Awakening Party) and PPP (Unity Development Party) ensure that funds and projects make their way to the traditional Islamic schools that form part of their support base. In the provinces and districts, local government heads and parliamentarians distribute funds and projects to their own supporters, who pass them on through pyramids of political allies, brokers and operators. Most of this happens in the name of helping the poor, and some of the resources do end up in valuable development and poverty alleviation packages, even if a lot of it is skimmed off.

As a result, the boundaries between left and right are frequently blurred in Indonesia. Sometimes there are surprising alliances between left-wing activists and mainstream political forces. And although left-wing groups generally include the fight against corruption in their political programs, they can also be drawn into the web of patronage.

Legacies of the left

But there are other reasons why it is hard to identify the left. When people think about its history, they usually begin by looking back to the communist movement and its destruction in the mid-1960s. The PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) was a major force both in the anti-colonial struggle in the first half of the twentieth century, and in the struggle to steer a course for the new Indonesian republic in the first twenty years of independence. As is well known, by the early 1960s Indonesia had the third largest communist party in the world (after China and the Soviet Union), and left-wing modes of thought and organisation were influential far beyond the PKI and its affiliated organisations.

This radical history was ended abruptly in 1965-66 when the military and its allies engineered one of the greatest political massacres of the twentieth century. Nobody knows the exact figure, but about half a million communists and alleged communists were killed. The PKI and its affiliates were banned, many of the survivors were imprisoned, their descendants persecuted and independent

organisation of workers, peasants and other marginalised groups effectively proscribed.

The legacy of this period was clearly massively destructive to Indonesia's radical tradition. But many of the modes of thought and action that had been associated with the pre-1965 left – notably, commitment to the interests of the 'little people', hostility to the 'elite', and the high value placed on mass action as a form of political engagement – lived on, in sublimated form, during the New Order. When that regime fell, populist ideas and mass mobilisation regained a place at the centre of Indonesian political life. However, the old organisational tradition of the left was broken and the discipline and intellectual rigour that had been associated with it was all but lost.

Even so, as time passed, there was increasing opposition to the New Order regime, much of it which focused on the plight of the poor and the empowerment of marginalised groups. But because repression made frontal or underground opposition very risky, most of this opposition took a gradualist, non-confrontational, even apolitical form. Most critics of the regime formed NGOs rather than overtly political organisations. They focused on this or that sector – helping a particular community that was threatened with eviction, focusing on empowerment of a particular poor urban community, organising theatre workshops in a working class neighbourhood and the like – and clothed much of their activity in the developmentalist language favoured by the regime.

By the 1990s, more and more foreign donor organisations were willing to fund NGOs working on environmental, human rights and similar issues. Such funding increased almost exponentially in the post-Suharto period. The result is that there is a large and diverse NGO movement in Indonesia, but one that it is intrinsically fractured. Different NGOs develop specialised expertise in different segments of Indonesian social and political life rather than focusing on broad agendas and alliance building. Most are organisations of professionals and intellectuals with no desire to build a mass base. They also compete with one another for donor funding. The dominance of this NGO model continues to be a chief source of the fragmentation and splintering that characterises Indonesia's broad left today.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were also attempts to revive and recreate a self-consciously militant leftist political agenda that went beyond the NGO model. Some student activists formed study groups and rediscovered classical Marxism, and read other radical works. There were also early attempts to revive independent peasant and labour organising. By the mid-1990s some of these efforts had crystallised in the formation of the PRD, a student-based group. The PRD tried to reinvent a tradition of militant class-based organisation and direct confrontation with the regime. It was small, but it played an important catalytic role in sharpening the tenor of the anti-Suharto struggle, and it was persecuted by the military as a result.

Fragmentation and co-optation

When the mass mobilisations that brought down Suharto came virtually out of the blue in 1998, no single organisation or alliance was in a position to dominate or unite the broad left. Fragmentation was the order of the day and it has remained so to the present.

The PRD is a case in point. When Indonesia entered its democratic phase in 1998, this was by no means the only leftist group in the broad opposition to Suharto, but it emerged with a certain cachet due to the special place it had in late New Order demonology. Since that time, however, the PRD has experienced a series of debilitating splits and reorganisations.

One early split came in 2000 when a group of the PRD's central leaders formed the PDS (Democratic Socialist Association), accusing the PRD of being sectarian and undemocratic. Later, when a front

party for the PRD called Papernas (National Liberation Party of Unity) was facing difficulties meeting the registration requirements for the 2009 elections, PRD leaders made an unlikely alliance with PBR (Star Reform Party), an Islamic party. About 100 PRD activists stood as PBR candidates but none were elected. Other PRD and Papernas activists denounced this alliance as an opportunistic marriage of convenience with a right-wing party, leading to the formation of KPRM-PRD (Political Committee of the Poor People – People's Democratic Party), which is now known as PPR (People's Liberation Party).

Another key group on the left is the PRP (Working People's Association) which has a separate history from the PRD, though it has also attracted some former members of the older organisation. But PRP has also split, leading to the formation of KPO-PRP (Committee to Save the Organisation – PRP). This split – like many on the far left – occurred over matters of internal organisation and democracy.

There are several other groups on the far left, forming part of a bewildering kaleidoscope. Among them, a group still using the PRD name also survives. Many of its members are now inside other parties, especially PDI-P and Gerindra, the party formed by the Suharto's disgraced son-in-law and former general, Prabowo Subianto. According to Max Lane, a long-time observer of the Indonesian left, 'The activist millieu on the far left is much bigger than in the 1990s or during the 2000-2007 period. PPR, PRP, KPO-PRP, Pusat Perjuangan Indonesia, Jaringan Militan, the Praxis network, local groups, independent left unions and other smaller local groups run by people learning Marxism from the internet or from earlier activists all total up to a much larger number than ever before, and then you can add left publishers, leftish student groups and so on.'

The splintering and fragmentation on the far left is mirrored in all segments of left wing politics. For example, there has been an explosion of labour activism since 1998, with the formation of literally thousands of new unions. But many of them are tiny, being based in particular firms or localities. Attempts to coordinate union activity on a national level have made great strides, but still face many obstacles. There are three – or four, depending how you count them – major rival national federations in operation, but only a small proportion of all unions in the country are affiliated to them and they are divorced from their affiliate unions and lack resources. Left-wing unions have, on the whole, been relegated to the margins.

Likewise, there was a dramatic increase of peasant activism after the fall of Suharto, with the formation of new mass-based peasant unions in many parts of the country, especially in land dispute hot spots such as North Sumatra, Bengkulu and West Java (see the article by Dianto Bachriadi in this edition). However, most of these, too, have suffered debilitating splits and many of their leaders have left to make careers for themselves in mainstream politics at the local level.

There are many reasons for the fragmentation. One of the most important is the much more complex political terrain that radical activists need to negotiate in a liberal democracy. As one former PRD member, Anom Astika, explains, unity was easier to achieve under Suharto when there was only one enemy: 'now there are many enemies'. In this, Indonesia is not unique: radical movements often thrive best under right-wing dictatorships and fracture once the dictatorship collapses. Another problem is that patronage society has penetrated into the left and its base. Another former PRD member, Web Warouw, suggests that even ordinary people now want to get material benefits from political participation: 'Demonstration participants now expect 50-100 thousand rupiah each … It's all project-oriented.'

This reference to the 'project' orientation points to yet another factor: the continuing influence of the NGO model on left-wing politics and, more broadly, of the pull of money and material comfort. Many activists, especially as they age, want to have the same lifestyles that their friends, former class mates and relatives are enjoying as part of Indonesia's increasingly robust middle class. To do

so, they don’t necessarily have to abandon political life. People can become relatively comfortable by being involved in a successful NGO, and securing project funding. They can become wealthy by engaging directly in the world of mainstream electoral politics.

Joining the mainstream

In fact, the problem for the left might be not that it has too many enemies, but too many friends. Over the last decade, mainstream political parties and patrons have recruited many former radical activists. Again, just keeping the focus on the PRD, Budiman Sudjatmiko, who was the head of the organisation when it was first founded (and who was jailed as a result), joined the PDI-P, eventually becoming a member of parliament. He brought several dozen former PRD members and other activists with him and formed a mass organisation affiliated to the PDI-P called Repdem (Struggle Volunteers for Democracy).

Andi Arief, formerly the head of Indonesian Student Solidarity for Democracy (SMID) (PRD’s old student affiliate) has moved into President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s inner circle, becoming first a commissioner for the postal service and then a special adviser to the president in the areas of social assistance and natural disasters. The former head of PRD’s labour affiliate, and another former leader of the party, Dita Indah Sari, has become a spokesperson and expert staff for the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration. Gerindra has also recruited a large number of former PRD activists.

Overall, this phenomenon reflects a familiar pattern. Indonesia is not the only country where young militant activists become more conservative as they get older. Nor does this process mean that they all abandon their previous commitments, or that they do not use their new positions of influence to achieve reforms from within the system. As Dita Sari puts it: ‘In the past the furthest we got was the fence out there [she says while pointing outside the ministry building], but the real battle is here, inside the bureaucracy.’ She points to new policies she has helped to initiate, such as better social welfare insurance for public transport workers and migrant labourers.

Nor have all those who have joined the mainstream necessarily been personally corrupted by patronage politics, although all of them must encounter corruption in their daily political lives. As one former PRD member who had joined a ministry explained: ‘My struggle here is to be clean in a dirty place. In the PRD, we were surrounded by people who were also clean, and we didn’t have money, so it was not hard. Here just remaining clean is a struggle.’

But, despite these qualifications, it is hard to avoid concluding that the pathway these activists have taken reflects, above all, the failures of radical, mass-based politics in post-Suharto Indonesia. In mid-twentieth century European and other developed countries, it was traditional for Marxists to attempt to penetrate social-democratic labour parties in order to gain access to their working class base. There was conscious strategy behind such moves. What is striking about what’s happened in Indonesia is how activists’ entry into political parties has mimicked the broader pattern of fragmentation visible on the left. Activists have joined not only PDI-P, PBR and Gerindra, but also PKB (the National Awakening Party), PAN (National Mandate Party), Partai Demokrat and even Golkar, the party of the former Suharto regime. This fact alone makes their entry into the mainstream look more like a counsel of despair rather than concerted strategy.

The health of democracy

But for all this, some of the classic issues that have defined left-wing politics over the last 100 years have made their way into the political agenda of government. The irony is that they have done so largely without pressure from an organised left.

Take the issue of access to healthcare for the poor, a classic concern of the left in all countries. Over the last five years or so, access to quality healthcare has become a crucial political issue in Indonesia. Nowadays, in virtually every local government election, candidates who want to have a chance of winning have to promise free healthcare. Local governments have introduced a large variety of schemes. The JKA (Aceh Health Guarantee) scheme introduced by Aceh's governor, Irwandi Yusuf, provides free, universal coverage to all residents of Aceh and flies critical patients who need surgery or care of a type that is not provided in Aceh's public hospitals to Jakarta at public expense. Similar but slightly less ambitious schemes are in place in at least five other provinces. Numerous districts and cities around the country are also experimenting with better public health coverage.

There is much variety in these local schemes in terms of the universality of their coverage, the quality and extent of services they provide, and in whether they are funded by government or by compulsory insurance premiums. In many places, too, local governments struggle to cover the costs of these schemes, and the quality of care they provide is often very poor. Even so, there is no doubt that the issue of healthcare has moved to the centre of political life.

Another example is the social security law passed in late 2011, following a 2004 law that established the framework for a national social security system. The laws promise a system of universal social insurance for healthcare and other benefits such as pensions and workplace accident insurance, to be funded by employer and employee contributions, as a set proportion of wages, for workers in the formal sector. Informal sector workers will also be covered, but they will have to make payments into the scheme. Government contributions will cover the poor, though the precise rates will be set by government regulations.

The national social security scheme has divided left-wing groups. Large numbers of workers and students protested in favour of the law, storming the parliament premises on the day the bill was due for final debate, prompting legislators to hurriedly approve it. The group leading these protests was KAJS (Social Security Action Committee) which described the day the law was passed as an 'historic day for the Indonesian nation'. But even as KAJS proclaimed it was convinced the scheme would produce 'social security and dignity' for the people, it was set up a watchdog body to monitor its implementation. Other groups, such as the People's Health Council (DKR) criticise the scheme for using an 'insurance business' model, a reference to the reliance on compulsory employee and informal sector contributions in place of a fully government-funded scheme.

Social security is one area where there has been sustained mobilisation by left-wing groups. But the extent of this mobilisation does not come close to explaining the changes that are taking shape in local and national social security regimes. Instead, we (again) see left-wing issues and ideas creeping into the public political domain, and becoming formal policy, without a strong left-wing political movement, let alone a strong labour-based or left-wing political party. It seems that opening the floodgates of democracy and subjecting politicians to the spur of competing for popular votes, as well as the continuing influence of a general leftist sensibility that proclaims defence of the interests of the poor, have combined to provide space for a social justice agenda.

_Politics without the left?

Over the last decade or so, a conventional view of post-Suharto Indonesian politics has arisen among many observers: this is the age of oligarchs (see the analysis by Jeffrey Winters). At the centre, such observers point to the political ascendancy of the super-rich like Aburizal Bakrie, one of Indonesia's richest men, who has risen to position of great influence as chair of Golkar. In the regions, a breed of even more rough-and-tumble local bosses and dynasts are building miniature political and business empires. The plundering of state resources for the benefit of the rich, in this view, is the defining feature of Indonesia's contemporary political order.

This analysis is certainly not wrong, but it is not the whole picture. Indonesia made the transition to democracy not because of the machinations of the rich, but because of pressure from below. People's movements – to say nothing of the political left – were insufficiently organised or powerful to be able to capture control of the new institutions of democracy because they were weakened by decades of repression. The inability of such movements to become much more powerful in subsequent years has a lot to do with the nature of Indonesia's contemporary society and polity, especially the ubiquity of patronage distribution as a means of mollifying class resentments and building political bonds.

But the left is not an empty space on Indonesia's political landscape, even if outside observers often ignore it. Ideals of social justice, of state intervention to assist the poor – and even of redistribution – are deeply embedded in the contemporary political culture, even if the political movements that articulate those ideals most consistently remain marginal and splintered.

P.S.

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http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature/still-an-age-of-activism-22012883