

Indonesia in the 1990s: The clandestine PRD, from jungle meetings to religious camouflage

Saturday 25 August 2012, by [SIMANJUNTAK Laurencius](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2012).

Laurencius Simanjuntak — Founded on July 22, 1996, or when Suharto's New Order regime was still savage and cruel, it was not an easy time for the People's Democratic Party (PRD). Moreover the social-democrat orientated party explicitly declared its opposition to Suharto's power.

"The New Order has been in power for 30 years, eight months and 22 days", cried PRD General Chairperson Budiman Sudjatmiko, counting the time that Suharto had been in power. Sudjatmiko's speech, which later became known as the *Party Manifesto*, was read out on July 22, 1996, or 16 years ago.

The PRD's declaration at the offices of the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) in Central Jakarta was clearly not a 'sporadic' movement because the New Order was completely ruthless. But the PRD's revolutionary ideals at that time were indeed serious. Long before it was declared as a party, the PRD, which was originally called the People's Democratic Union (Persatuan Rakyat Demokratik, PRD), had already been operating clandestinely.

"We usually held consolidations by constantly moving from place to place so that the intelligence officers wouldn't get wind of us", said Sudjatmiko when speaking with Merdeka.com in Jakarta on Wednesday July 25.

As everyone knows, during the period when he was in power, Suharto deployed security officers down to the village level to sniff out indications of movements opposed to his authoritarian administration. "If a single hair fell, Suharto would know", went the phrase about the ruler in those days.

It was in order to stay under Suharto's radar that the PRD often avoided public gatherings when they wanted to hold discussions or consolidation meetings. But the jungles and mountain slopes provided an alternative.

"We once held a meeting in a tobacco plantation at the far eastern end of the Jakarta sea, which we reached by riding a boat for hours", related Sudjatmiko, who is now an Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) legislator in the House of Representatives.

Most of the time however, said Sudjatmiko, meetings were held at pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) or seminaries. "Because coincidentally many PRD activists came from pesantren circles or aspiring priest that failed", said Sudjatmiko laughing.

In the task of camouflaging meetings, Faisol Riza was the champion. With a pesantren background, the slim young man who is now a special staff member to the Minister of Labour and Transmigration, often used his networks with Islamic teachers (kiai) at the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) pesantrens as a place to conduct their slander. For seminaries meanwhile, the PRD often used the networks of one of its members, Fransisca Ria Susanti.

"Once there was a time when security personnel forced their way in, we immediately placed the

Koran in front of us and hid the congress documents by sitting on them”, he said.

In order that they would be easy to hid, said Sudjatmiko, the documents or discussion reading materials were printed in the form of small brochures. “So the font was very very small”, said Sudjatmiko frowning.

However the spiritual gathering camouflage did not always go smoothly. If they got wind of intelligence officers, said Sudjatmiko, usually pesantren kiai or pastors who took care of the seminaries would use their authority to prevent the intelligence officers from entering.

“The reason [they would give] was that those inside were religious pupils who were studying or university students who were on a spiritual retreat”, he said.

All of those in the clandestine movement faced these kinds of dangers, said Sudjatmiko, pointing out that the struggle for democracy against the New Order dictatorship was not just a physical or practical struggle. “But also a theoretical struggle”, he said.

Meaning, continued Sudjatmiko, the PRD demanded that their cadre were not only adept at organising the masses, facing the muzzle of a gun or teargas, but they were also obliged to read and write articles to explain the arguments behind their political positions.

“They had to be ready to train in everything without facilities. They had to be ready for any kind of situation, in plantations, in jungles, on beaches, in pesantrens, on campus or seminaries”, he said.

Although the revolutionary ideals failed in the end, the underground PRD movement after so many years brought about results that were not too disappointing. The PRD was able to establish no less than 14 offices at the provincial level and 150 or so branches at the regency or municipal level. In the 1999 elections, the party allocated number 16 on the ballot paper and still in its infancy succeeded in garnering 78,000 votes.

The Diaspora of PRD cadre has also been diverse. There are those that have become legislators, special staff to the president, ministerial spokespersons, senior NGO figures, reputable journalists, trade union leaders, defenders of tobacco farmers and regional political party leaders. And none of this would have been possible without struggle.

See also: [Indonesia: The PRD Diaspora, 16 years on](#)

P.S.

* From Merdeka.com – July 25, 2012 (Klandestin PRD, rapat di hutan sampai kamuflase pengajian).

* Translated by James Balowski.