

Indonesia

“The new government has failed”

Interview

Sunday 4 September 2005, by [BARNES Mel](#), [McILROY Jim](#), [SARI Dita Indah](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2005).

Dita Sari, president of the Indonesian People's Democratic Party (PRD), and a leader of the militant Indonesian National Front for Workers' Struggle (FNPBI) union federation, was a special guest speaker at the fourth Brisbane Social Forum on July 29-31. She spoke to Green Left Weekly's Mel Barnes and Jim McIlroy.

What is the current state of Indonesian politics?

There is an effort being made by the government to hide, to manipulate or to mislead people about the failure of this government after it has been in power for nine or 10 months.

For years, the anti-corruption sentiment among the people has been very high because corruption is everywhere, and right now one of the most outspoken people about anti-corruption is the president [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono] himself. So the government is trying to convince the people that they finally have a government that is very serious about smashing corruption. Small players are being arrested now - people who stole a little of other people's money, but whose arrest has no impact on the economy.

We say that if the government is serious about cleaning up corruption they should go after the major players who have been robbing billions from the people. They have to go after the cronies of [former president General] Suharto. With this corruption issue the government is trying to hide its failure on two issues: education and health. In these areas the years of crisis are now having an impact, especially for the poor. For instance, now we have 5 million children suffering from malnutrition and 11 million cannot go to school and there are thousands of cases of polio because the nutrition of pregnant women is so bad. We cannot let ourselves be manipulated by the government.

What is the PRD and other progressive groups concentrating on at the moment?

At the moment we are participating in local elections. We try to put up our own independent candidates, but if that is not possible, we support the other parties' programs on education and health, and also anti-corruption. If there is no good candidate or the candidates refuse to campaign around these issues, we will mobilise the people to force a postponement of the local elections, in order to give ourselves time to get a better candidate.

The second thing we are trying to do is to consolidate the opposition on the national level, from the left up to the centre opposition. First, we are trying to consolidate around issues of local elections. But then we found out that many of the national leaders really do not care about the local elections,

so there is a division between what's happening on the local level and the national level. We are campaigning for an anti-corrupt and democratic government, focussing on health, education and [getting rid of] corruption. Because this is the area where people felt most betrayed and angry. Most of the national opposition agreed with this program.

We are trying to build a strategic alliance with some of the opposition groups on a national level, which also very interestingly includes some of the religious leaders. This is new, because previously the PRD orientated itself to students, union leaders, NGOs and politicians. But now we are trying to expand by also approaching religious leaders from various religions, and economists who are against neoliberalism.

Together we say the government should not follow the global [neoliberal] policy when it is clear the people suffer from it. We understand that religious leaders have limitations, but people are angry with the president and cabinet and some people still trust the religious leaders. Many of the religious leaders have a good view of the people and we are trying to work with them and have them speak out for our party's program of health and education.

The economic crisis is worsening: 75% of Indonesia's economy lies in the informal economy, such as street vendors. Almost 45 million people are unemployed and that number is growing. The value of the rupiah is becoming weaker against the US and Australian dollars. The government has just signed an agreement with China to lift the tariff on 8000 items of agricultural and manufacturing goods, so this will destroy domestic production.

Every day the media presents us with stories, and people started to think that we need a forum to talk and meet. This creates a good way to consolidate people.

We set up a political party in 2003, but because we set it up so close to the 2004 elections, our time was limited and we could not fulfill the requirements of the government to [participate in the] election. Based on that experience there was [a discussion within the PRD about getting the coalition to] organise for the next election in 2009.

What is the current situation with the trade unions?

They organise around economic issues, like the increase in fuel prices. Trade unions do not get involved very much in Jakarta. When the government raised the fuel price, at that time there was also a raise in the minimum wage. The trade unions preferred to respond to the minimum wage rise rather than to combine these two things.

Around the issue of local elections they do not want to participate ... they say this is politics, we do not engage in politics, even though the mayor or the governor may set the minimum wage in their area. It is very important to participate, so that they get a good mayor who sets a decent wage. But they don't feel it's part of their work.

The police and the military don't need to smash up trade unions because they've already been smashed from the economic crisis. Thousands of workers from different companies have been sacked. The neoliberal economy is destroying trade unions, and their leaders are not helping those workers. We actually hope this whole misery will bring workers into action, because most of the bureaucrats from these trade unions are the same people as under Suharto - they haven't changed, so their policies are the same.

How is the FNPBI going?

We are trying to build from the local level, starting in the factories. Because that's where the most

genuine leaders are. But the problem is because of the betrayal of the big trade unions, many local trade unions have declared themselves independent. So they are not affiliating with any national trade union.

What about the recent Aceh agreement signed in Helsinki?

Whatever efforts are being made for peace should be supported. But the problem is that first, we're not really sure [about this agreement]. The government said they would withdraw their "non-organic" [non-Acehnese] troops from Aceh, while at the same time the Free Aceh Movement will be disarmed. We know that even if the government withdraws the non-organic troops, the government has already said they will add more military police in Aceh carrying machine guns.

Secondly, we are trying to find out whether the people of Aceh still want independence. It probably isn't their priority right now. They want to rebuild their houses and their lives ... as far as we can tell most people are happy with the Helsinki agreement. It is a new situation - national liberation may not be a priority right now, and maybe people just want peace, so we will keep trying to find out.

What is the role of the TNI in Indonesia and the role of the Australian government in pushing to completely re-establish support for the Indonesian military?

From the beginning we knew that the Australian government were the ones who supported the East Timor invasion in 1975, we know they are the ones who supported the yellow trade unions, they supported the dictatorship, they trained Kopassus - the special forces - for years in Australia. They have also campaigned against Muslims, and Indonesia is the most Muslim-populated country in the world. So neither a Labor party government or a Liberal government has misled us - they are actually the ally of the United States and of Britain and could not be trusted at all. So if they now start to help the TNI, to fund them and train them again, well this has happened before so if they do it again it will only strengthen our belief that they cannot be trusted at all in whatever they say. Also Australia has appointed an extremely right-wing and racist person as ambassador to Indonesia.

P.S.

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