

New Indonesian Student Party greeted with criticism, scepticism and hope

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Jakarta — The sudden emergence of the Indonesian Student Party (Partai Mahasiswa Indonesia, PMI) has elicited a variety of responses.

The unexpected news was initially conveyed by People's House of Representatives (DPR) Deputy Speaker Sufmi Dasco Ahmad, who said that the PMI had been officially registered with the Department of Justice and Human Rights.

"A new party has been born, its name is the Labour Party. Then there is also the Indonesian Student Party. It has been officially registered at the Department of Justice and Human Rights", said Ahmad during an audience with representatives of demonstrators at the parliamentary complex in Senayan, Jakarta, on Thursday April 21.

The executive director of the Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) Central Leadership Board has invited all of the new political parties which have successfully registered with the Ministry of Justice to take part in the 2024 legislative and presidential elections.

Ahmad hopes that they can fight for the rights of the ordinary people along with the political parties that already have offices in Senayan.

"Now, we say welcome. Come on and join the competition, strive for a seat in the DPR so you can fight for your rights together with us", he said.

"The Indonesian Student Party, I've checked and indeed it's true, they have passed [the registration] at the Kumham (Kemenkumham), all that's left is to be verified [by the General Election Commission, KPU] for the elections. With so many students such as this, they must be able to gain a seat in the DPR to fight for the students' aspirations", added Ahmad.

"Likewise with all the students, with the millions of students, how can they not get 20 seats, so we in the parliament can struggle together for what must fought for, for the country and the nation", he said.

BEM response

A variety of responses have come from Student Executive Councils (BEM) on Indonesian campuses.

The National Association of University Student Executive Bodies (BEM SI) says that the move is perhaps a desire to return to Suharto's New Order regime where students were involved in the state structure.

"In the case of the Labour Party I don't know but in the case of this new student party Mas [Brother] I've heard about it, perhaps they want to return to the previous New Order era where there was an

opportunity for students to contribute within the state structure”, said BEM SI Media Coordinator Luhtfi Yufrizal when contacted on Friday April 22.

Yufrizal said that the BEM SI does not have a problem with the new PMI, although he warned the PMI to pay attention to society’s interests.

“If indeed its interests are [to benefit] society there’s no problem but if it’s just the same as those [political parties] that already exist perhaps it will be the opposite, defend your people so that everyone prospers”, he said.

Furthermore, Yufrizal also warned the PMI that there would be a big problem if it doesn’t defend the interests of the ordinary people. “The reverse would mean becoming a big problem if its interests are not to [defend] the ordinary people”, he said.

Elite backing

The BEM Nusantara (archipelago) has strongly condemned the formation of the PMI saying the party formed in the name of students will harm all Indonesian students.

“We from BEM Nusantara are very disappointed and strongly condemn the emergence of a party formed in the name of and using the word student in the party’s name”, BEM Nusantara National Secretary Ridho Alamsyah from the camp of the organisation’s General Chairperson Dimas Prayoga told Detik.com on Friday.

“This is a claim which will greatly harm all Indonesian students”, he continued.

Alamsyah believes that the formation of a party profiting from the name student is an effort to deflate student’s critical voice. He suspects there is a mastermind from an elite political group and a cukong (financial backer) who are the donors paying for the party.

“This is a very structured attempt to deflate and silence the critical voice of students”, said the student from Nusantara Muslim University faculty of law in Medan, North Sumatra.

“We also strongly suspect that there is an intellectual actor and a big wheeler and dealer from an elite group of the political oligarchy who is funding the formation of this party”, he said.

Taming the movement

Gajah Mada University (UGM) BEM Student Community (KM) Chairperson Muhammad Khalid meanwhile is sceptical and weary of the PMI and suspects that the party has been formed by the oligarchy to tame critical students.

“I’ve been hearing discourse about this for some time”, Khalid told Detik.com on Friday.

The international relations student from the social and political science faculty generation of 2018 explained his hypothesis that the PMI will emerge as a new challenge for the student activist movement.

This is negative and needs to be anticipated, he said, even though the emergence of new political parties is usual in a democracy. Political activism, according to Khalid, does not depend solely on a political party which can end up in parliament (the DPR), but there must also be an extra-parliamentary movement.

With the word “student” in its name, the risk that could emerge is that it will swallow the identity of students as a whole into one party.

“I regret that there is an effort to co-opt the student identity, as if it can be represented by one sole identity. When you try to generalise the identity of students, the representation will only be illusionary and imagined. Unfortunately if students’ views in this political system are only represented by one identity, this will very much narrow a diversity of views”, said Khalid.

Surabaya Airlangga University (Unair) BEM President Yoga Haryo Prayoga meanwhile believes that the formation of the PMI is not appropriate.

Nevertheless, he does not yet know if there are any Unair students who have joined the party. Despite this, Prayoga does not deny that as individuals, it is possible that some students have already joined parties, specifically national political parties.

“But in the case of Unair BEM as an organisation which is under the wings of an educational institution, is it ethical and constitutional to be allowed to join a party? Bearing in mind that education institutions must be independent and neutral in practical politics. So of course for me this isn’t appropriate”, said Prayoga when contacted by Detik.com on Friday.

Very positive

There are however some who support the move. One of these is Surabaya State University (Unesa) BEM President Ahmad Yusuf Alkhakim, who says the formation of the PMI is very positive.

“For me this is very positive. With the presence of a student [political] party, it is hoped that millennials, our student friends also will be able to formulate policies. As well as, managing the administration to priorities the ordinary people’s welfare”, said Alkhakim when contacted by Detik East Java on Friday.

Alkhakim will also not prohibit Unesa BEM members from joining the PMI, although Alkhakim himself has not yet thought about it. Currently, no Unesa BEM members have joined the PMI yet.

“If there is an interest then they are certainly allowed to take part, I’ll take it back to our colleagues concerned. [But] in my case, I still don’t have any plans to join”, he explained.

Alkhakim admitted that he has heard many rumours about the formation of the PMI but does not know which student figures are behind it.

“Perhaps, there have been many rumors doing the rounds, yeah, related to the formation of the PMI. Although there are many who support and oppose the formation of the party, I still hope that our PMI colleagues will continue to be a student barometer in politics”, he said in conclusion.

Valuable experience

National Awakening Party (PKB) Central Leadership Board Chairperson Daniel Johan says that they welcome the presence of the PMI and he is waiting for a breakthrough by students to bring change.

“Wow, a surprise, congratulations to the student party and hopefully it will continue smoothly until the end [when they get KPU verification], we’re waiting for a uniquely student breakthrough, especially as a force for change”, Johan told journalists on Friday.

The DPR Commission IV member then warned of the difficulties in building a political party. Despite

this, he appreciates the efforts of the PMI leaders to undertake the process of going through the stages required to take part in the elections.

Even if they don't get through, said Johan, it will be a valuable lesson they can take away from going through the verification process.

"Building a new party is extraordinarily difficult, so what the student party has been able to do so far is already extraordinary, if it can pass the verification later that's the next heavy challenge, but at least the students can gain a valuable experience by going through the process", he said.

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P.S.

Translated by James Balowski. Sub-headings were added during translation. The original title of the article was "Tak Terduga Kabar Terbentuknya Partai Mahasiswa Indonesia". Note that six paragraphs in the original article were a repeat of a previous comments by Muhammad Khalid and were not translated.

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