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Indonesia

Broad Left Party Forms

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At the end of November, a new broad, left party will hold its founding congress in Indonesia. The National Liberation Party of Unity, or PAPERNAS, is an initiative of the main revolutionary organisation in the country, the People's Democratic Party, PRD. IV has been speaking to some of the leaders of the new party about the situation facing the left in their country, and the challenge of bringing together the different struggles against neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism. Those taking part were Dominggus Oktavianus, General Secretary FNPBI (National Front for Indonesian Workers' Struggle) and Chairperson of PAPERNAS; Vivi Widyawati, National Coordinator of National Network of Womens Liberation (Perempuan Mahardhika); Zely Ariane, International Relations Officer, PRD (People's Democratic Party); and Katarina Pujiastuti, International Relations Officer, KP-PAPERNAS (Preparatory Committee for the National Liberation Party of Unity).

IV: Eight years ago everyone on the left around the world was looking at Indonesia and was excited by that huge, apparently revolutionary upheaval that overthrew the corrupt and repressive Suharto regime. Yet now, the material benefits of democratisation seem to have been very slight for most people, the old system of corruption continues, there's has been a growth of religious conservatism, and the left looks rather isolated. So what went wrong?

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DOMINGGUS: What happened with the democratic movement post-98 is that structurally and conceptually it wasn't ready to lead the people's struggle at that time. So that upheaval and the uprising were used by the traditional elite to reassert their traditional politics again. That's the first thing. They very deliberately took the lead with a plan to channel people's consciousness back into their scheme of formal democracy, to stabilise the situation with free elections, a free press, and so forth. This was clearly shown in the 1999 elections, with 48 political parties taking part.

In fact with this new democracy the dynamic of people's struggles has been quite developed. But it is very fragmented, geographically around local issues, and organisationally, around different affiliations. This means that these popular organisations and this democratic movement cannot really give a lead or develop people's consciousness. Because it is so fragmented, they cannot present a real alternative or meet people's expectations.

ZELY: It's very dynamic, because after 1998 sectoral organisations just mushroomed all over the place. But they have no national links. So it's very dynamic but utterly fragmented. There is no national issue to bring them together or national force to lead them.

Give us a bit more idea of what these fragmented struggles are like. What kinds of things are people mobilising about, in their communities or wherever?

DOMINGGUS: You have to remember that under Suharto, the New Order regime allowed only one mass organisation for each sector. So for peasants, for example, there was just the HKTI (?), for workers just the SPSI, and so forth. So after 1998, with the 'Reformasi', the popular dissatisfaction with those traditional organisations led to people creating new organisations, especially in the workers' sector. There they could see very clearly that the SPSI, the traditional 'yellow' trade union organisation, had cheated and betrayed them, so they set up many other workers' organisations. By the year 2000, there were something like 12,000 independent workers' organisations that

had appeared on the scene.

What are we talking about here, local workplace unions?

ZELY: A whole variety of forms - workplace organisations, citywide organisations, regional organisations - they just spread all over the place, and all independent, around local issues or factory issues...

So what kind of issues have these workplace and local organisations been struggling around and organising around?

DOMINGGUS: Mainly economic issues, wages and layoffs, issues around outsourcing and social security. The tendency since 1998 has been for workers to organise around local, workplace issues. But at certain moments, for example when the government talks about the national minimum wage, once a year, they can manage to come together. The same applies to the reform of the Labour Law, both this last one and the one before. In fact there have been three Labour Law reforms since 1998. So around those issues only, there has been some unity. But when it comes to bigger political issues on a national level, they usually split again.

Presumably workers in stable employment are a minority of the population in Indonesia. So what kind of links are there with territorial, community-based organisations, issues and campaigns?

DOMINGGUS: In fact there is a very loose link between workers and local communities. Their movements are usually quite separate. They know of course, especially in cases of layoffs for example, that one thing will have an impact on the other. That it will increase unemployment for example. But there is no common force to bring them together and demand more. This is partly because, after 1998, the workers' organisations were largely educated and organised by international social democracy, like the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), attached to the German SPD, and the American Centre for International Labour Solidarity (ACILS), linked to AFL-CIO. These trained them to be very sectoral and only to raise their own sectoral issues. That's the first reason.

Is there a political link here, too, to parties like the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle - of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri)?

ZELY: No there's no connection.

DOMINGGUS: Some of the union organisations, like SPN, have affiliated to the big parties like PDI-P, or Golkar (former governing party under Suharto), or the PKS (Justice and Prosperity Party, a conservative islamist party). But the mass membership know little or nothing of this.

But when you talk about sectoral organisations mushrooming all over the place, what issues are these local organisations, neighbourhood organisations for example, organising and struggling around? Is it access to public service or what?

ZELY: In fact we do not have a tradition of neighbourhood organisations, or community movement. We have the urban poor movement, we have the womens' movement, we have the student movement. But we never had a community movement, demanding the paving of their street or access to running water, sanitation, and so on.

But at the pre-launch meeting in Jakarta for the new left party, PAPERNAS, most of the people there were from the Urban Poor Movement. So what are they fighting for?

ZELY: In fact we began to organise with the urban poor back in 1998 - because we realised that these urban poor could be a link between different sectors. For example in Jakarta, in Kapuk community, an industrial area, workers and the urban poor do work together. They live in the same places and they have the same basic problems, especially sanitation. So we organise the urban poor to raise issues like free health care, so this can unite workers and urban poor.

In fact three months before the PAPERNAS launch meeting, we began organising with the urban poor a campaign around health care, education and wages - it's a way of bringing together workers and urban poor across the city of Jakarta. And we will use this kind of strategy in other places too.

So from before 1998, and since 1998, we are the force that has always been seeking strategies to overcome this situation of fragmentation. PAPERNAS is the most recent one, but before that we have had a number of initiatives to promote a united front, trying to find common issue that can solve this problem.

I'd like to come back to the question of PAPERNAS. But one of the things that most people looking on from the outside think they can see going on in Indonesia - and they may be wrong - is an important strengthening of the religious right since 1998, including conservative Islamic forces. Now that may be partly an illusion resulting from the way the media reports on Indonesia, but is there some reality behind it and if there is, why has this happened?

DOMINGGUS: Structurally, the Islamic movement already existed under Suharto. There are two kinds of Islamic movement. One kind has no real ideological basis; these movements are just instruments in the hands of the old Golkar party apparatus or the intelligence services. The other kind - and there are only a few of these - are much more clearly ideological. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and his followers are in this category, which was repressed in Suharto's time. So if you look at the so-called "moderate" or non-ideological Islamic forces like the PKS, which is the biggest such force in parliament today, we have clear evidence that some its key leaders, like Suropto, have been trained and guided by the Indonesian intelligence service. These are part of the moderate force. They are different from Ba'asyir.

This movement really got its chance as a result of the crisis after 1998. Because this was a situation that combined liberal politics with an economic situation characterised by de-industrialisation - the destruction of Indonesia's already weak industrial base - and all the extreme social consequences of neo-liberalism. So for example you had rising unemployment among women leading to apparently more prostitution, a growing drugs problem, crime, and so forth. And they seized on these things as a moral issue, making this their banner, arguing that we have to return to our religion, and resist this kind of moral destruction. So they got their momentum from the extreme social impact of the crisis.

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At the same time, the alternative movement or force was not sufficiently prepared to make use of the situation and explain to people why this crisis was happening and what our solution would be, the scientific or political solution, not the moral one. We didn't have the momentum or the structures to take advantage of this situation. So for the time being you could say that they have won this time, they are the ones who have managed to take advantage of this situation.

How has this strengthening of conservative Islam affected poor Indonesian women?

VIVI: First, we should point out that the big conservative or moderate Islamic forces, like NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and

Muhammadiyah, have themselves organised women, but mainly middle-class women. They've organised them around religious issues, not on economic questions. This means there is a gap between the conservative religious movement and the movement of the poor. Because poor women may accept these religious arguments, but they don't really care much about them. These have nothing to do with their more pressing economic concerns.

But has this trend had an impact on their daily lives? Do women feel more constrained, less free?

VIVI: Let's put it like this. Poor women have nothing to do with the politics of conservative Islam in their day to day lives. But in some regions like Tangerang outside Jakarta, Aceh and some others, which have special sharia local laws, the women there are starting to feel this has restricted their activities. You know most women are workers, whether in the formal sector or in the informal economy. So often they come home late at night, and these laws make it difficult for them. So there is opposition from the women in some of these regions and in Tangerang the local government has had to delay implementation of this law. But in practice, these women have no choice about coming home late at night, whether or not sharia laws 'bans' this. If these are enforced, and they get arrested, then they begin to fight back.

So what form does this resistance to sharia law take?

VIVI: In Tangerang there have been demonstrations. Most of the women in Tangerang are workers and so they tend to be more political and more audacious. That's where the opposition to sharia law has been strongest. They've also taken legal action in the courts, and they've been lobbying members of parliament and so on. But in fact, we think that, paradoxically, this reinforcement of conservative policies shows that politically the Islamist forces are defeated. So they need to resort to the law to impose their moral policies. These issues, like sharia law, are being raised in parliament by the PKS and some other moderate forces because they have been losing their influence among the masses. Their preaching alone doesn't work anymore.

That's interesting, because if what you're saying is right, it suggests that for the majority of the Indonesian people there is no strengthening of conservative Islam...?

ZELY: That's right.

DOMINGGUS: Traditionally, there are two kinds of Islam in Indonesia. One is 'Islam santri', which is more religious, more closely linked to the Islamic colleges or 'pesantren', and the other is 'Islam abangan' which more of a mix between Islam and Javanese traditions of animism, Hinduism etc. This latter is the biggest, most widespread. Also, in the national consciousness after Indonesian independence, there was a strong national sense of identity among the people that recognised that Indonesia was not just Islamic, that there was wide variety of cultures, with a strong secular basis, so Indonesia could not become an Islamic state. And this consciousness is still strong.

Q. So you're saying that nationalism, because it has such a strong secular base, is one of the elements that means that this kind of Islamic fundamentalism is not, at present, workable in Indonesia?

DOMINGGUS: Yes, we can see that in results of the last national elections (in 2004), the only fundamentalist parties standing, the PKS and PBB (Partai Bulan Bintang), got only about 10% in all. While the nationalists like Golkar, PDI-P and PKB or National Awakening Party (the latter you could say is a religious-nationalist party, because it uses the ideas of Gus Dur or Abdurrahman Wahid, the former president), and also the Partai Demokratik, got far more

votes, almost 60% in all. So we can see from that how the ideas of fundamentalist Islam are still not so strong in Indonesia. We do recognise that they have made advances, and that they can mobilise quite large numbers on the streets. But at the same time we can see that nationalism still has a secular basis and that most people still believe in that.

Let's take specifically the case of the Anti-Pornography Bill. Just describe how this proposal came about and what its implications would be for women in particular.

VIVI: This Pornography Bill is still in draft form. It was first raised by the PDI-P government of Megawati Sukarnoputri. It's strange, but true that it was Megawati's Ministry of Religious Affairs that first came up with the idea. But it didn't go anywhere. Of course, as Dominggus said, the conservative Islamic parties like PKS and PBB always raise the issue of Indonesia becoming an Islamic state whenever they get the chance.

So it was the PKS that seized again on this Anti-Pornography Bill during the present SBY government (of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). They had two reasons for doing that. The first argument they use is the whole liberalisation of social life, things like the more revealing style of clothes used by many Indonesian women, which they of course reject on moral grounds.

But secondly, and they have explicitly admitted this in talks they've had with us, this proposal was aimed at boosting their support ahead of the 2009 elections. Because they realise they have been losing support because of their backing for the current SBY government, including their eventual backing of last year's fuel price hikes, as well as others of SBY's liberal economic policies. So they believed this proposal could win them back some of the popular support they had lost.

So what impact would this bill have on women?

VIVI: Before getting to that, I should point out that apart from PKS, most of the parties in parliament currently support this bill, including the PDI-P. The main target of this bill is women, because there are some articles in the draft that effectively criminalise women.

There is one article in particular that states that women should be banned from revealing the "sensual parts of their bodies", by which they mean legs, breasts, belly. So, as some people put it, it seems this government is more concerned with managing people's bodies than with managing the economy!

The second main impact will be on women who work at night, which includes not only prostitutes but also any women working in bars or clubs or whatever. And it's very much targeted personally at women as such - so for example in the modelling industry it's the individual women models who would be at risk of prosecution, not the industry that puts them in that position.

ZELY: So in fact it's very much a middle-class issue.

Why so? Doesn't it affect working class women's bodies just as much?

VIVI: The point is that it is mostly middle-class women who respond to this kind of issue because they are the ones who have a greater awareness of their rights as women to manage their bodies, while poor women have never cared

so much about that.

But in practice the government is going to get itself in a big muddle if it tries to implement this law. Because in practice many poor women live in very open situations. For example their bedrooms are not fully enclosed, they take a shower in the yard or they bathe in the river, maybe naked, and that's not a problem, there is no harassment or abuse. So this law will in fact be impossible to implement. You would have to arrest vast numbers of women! The government also realises that lives of poor women in the neighbourhoods is "immoral", in those terms, for economic reasons.

So the real impact of the law is likely to be felt among women who work at night, in clubs and so on. And that is something mainly middle-class women are prepared to mobilise around. In fact opposition to the bill on these grounds - of the democratic right to manage our own bodies, has decreased recently. The main opposition now is based more on arguments of cultural diversity, like the argument that we have so many different ethnic and cultural groups in Indonesia, like Papuan women, some of whom don't cover themselves with clothes, and so forth.

So you're saying there's been a kind of ideological retreat by the force opposing the anti-pornography laws?

VIVI: It's become a question of tactics. Basically the women's movement will use any means to block or at least postpone the passing of this law. And the argument of diversity is more widely acceptable. Because they are not capable of taking on directly a battle with Islamic forces. And this question of the democratisation of the body is a very sensitive issue.

You mean it's easier to defend Papuan tribal customs ?

ZELY: That's right. In fact there are two fronts fighting this. The first is still on the question of the democratisation of our bodies, and the second is the issue of cultural diversity. And on the basis of this second argument it's possible to win rejection of the bill in, say, Bali, which is mainly Hindu, also in Manado, North Sulawesi, where Islam is in a minority compared with Christianity, and in Papua and in other secular or mainly Christian provinces. So it's going to be very difficult for them to implement this.

So what is Perempuan Mahardhika's strategy for dealing with this?

VIVI: Of course we reject this Anti-Pornography Bill. But in practice our strategy is not to prioritise this issue. Our strategy is to push forward both existing fronts we just described that are opposing this bill. The broad campaign is now around the cultural diversity question, but within this we fight to always raise the real issue, which is about democracy. And we campaign specifically around how this anti-pornography law will have an impact on poor women, for example on women who work at night. For example, we just organised a demonstration of poor women around health issues. And within this, we sought to raise the question of the anti-pornography bill, and the situation of women night-workers actually bridges these two issues.

Basically this law will have an impact on women of all sectors, especially poor women. But as we said, it's very hard to make a movement of poor women to oppose this law. So it's become a responsibility of middle-class women to spread their understanding of the issue and raise people's consciousness.

Poor women will spontaneously reject the law in so far as it adds more problems to the economic difficulties they already face. But they simply

have more pressing bread-and-butter needs to address so they will not easily organise around the question of the anti-pornography bill. In fact it's quite confusing, and it's very, very difficult to build a broad movement of women around this, because poor women do reject the proposal, but on the other hand they really don't care enough to mobilise around it. I'm sure they will be very annoyed if it is passed. And they simply aren't going to wear veils or whatever. So they don't see it as an issue.

DOMINGGUS: In fact if you go into the poor neighbourhoods, you'll see women's life is quite 'liberal'. They wear shorts and T-shirts and smoke... So they simply won't accept this law. In fact maybe this is a kind of tradition in Indonesia. They pass a law but it's just a law - nobody expects it to be really implemented.

I hear what you're saying but surely there were maybe one million people in the street on the demonstration the PKS mobilised in favour of these anti-pornography laws. And surely most of them were working-class or poor, and many of them were women, some from them peasant women ?

ZELY: Not really, no.

DOMINGGUS: In fact not. These are mostly middle-class women, students, white-collar workers, wives of...

ZELY: They're not poor. Maybe middle-class housewives... they don't even come from rural villages. The PKS and the Islamic movement is mainly based in the urban middle class.

Let me move it on a bit. Am I right in thinking that the founding platform for PAPERNAS, the new left party that you are launching, does not mention the anti-pornography laws. Is that because you think it's too difficult, that there is too much disagreement among the different strands of the popular movement on this issue? Or is it because you think nobody cares about this issue? Or why?

DOMINGGUS: Actually this is something we've become quite concerned about this. In fact we are trying to explain to people the real problems they face, all the issues linked to neo-liberal economic policies and so forth - privatisation, the foreign debt, de-industrialization... So we are trying to insist on this to show people that the problems we face are not moral or religious questions, but economic and political ones.

These are the basic things facing people's lives. But we also see that this Islamic movement is the result of the lack of alternative in this situation. And they are able to grow so fast because for most people there is no visible alternative that offers any solutions to their fundamental problems. So these forces campaign on the basis that Islam is the alternative, the solution. And we just have to explain to people that no, that the alternative lies with the anti-neoliberal movement and the fight for a government that will free us from neo-liberal globalisation. But we don't have any specific campaign on the subject of fundamentalism. This is a sensitive issue. Because you have to remember that after the 1965 massacres there is deep stigma in Indonesia connecting anti-religion sentiments and communism.

So what is the main political platform of this new broad party, PAPERNAS, that you are involved in launching?

KATARINA: Our main programme is what we call the three banners of unity - repudiation of the foreign debt, nationalisation of the oil, energy and mining industries, which is a basic question of national sovereignty, and a programme of national industrialisation that we believe will create jobs.

What are the different forces involved in setting up PAPERNAS?

KATARINA: At the national level there are three trade union bodies coming together, the FNPBI which is my organisation, the SPB (Workers's Solidarity Union) and the Automotive Workers' Union, from the car industry. There is one progressive party, the PRD, as well as national student organisations, like the Buddhist Students Organisation and the LNMD (National Students' League for Democracy), and the Urban Poor Movement (SRMK).

But the founding organisations are not only national. We have a number of local organisations, peasant unions, local trade union bodies and student organisations that are independent of the national organisations. So we are trying to organise local launch conferences of PAPERNAS around the country too, to bring together as many local organisations as possible into one movement.

So why now?

KATARINA: The key thing is uniting the movement to make it stronger. People have been resisiting neoliberalism in all sorts of ways, but in a very fragmented fashion. We never managed to come together as a stringer force to show that there really is an alternative.

So how does all of this fit into the wider situation of the anti-neoliberal movement in Asia? I recall someone saying a few years back that the Global Justice movement had transformed the political situation for the left in Europe and in different ways in North America and in Latin America. But that it would never really change the international situation until it sunk deep roots in Asia...?

ZELY: It's a different situation from Latin America. They have a longer history of confronting neoliberalism. Most of Latin America was the first laboratory for this neo-liberal agenda, the Washington Concensus agenda as it's become known. For us it's a relatively new experience. Actually this is a hugely valuable opportunity for the movement in Indonesia, and in the rest of Asia, as people become more aware of the impact of neoliberalism, as they understand that privatisation is a threat to their jobs and their wages, that trade liberalisation is a threat to the peasants, and at the same time we see there are campaigns putting forward alternatives outside Asia, around 'another world is possible', and there's also the developments in Latin America.

So we have the momentum to start talking about alternatives. But the situation is not yet ripe because, we have only had six or seven years

to campaigning in focussed way on these issues of neoliberalism. So that's why we have to find the right strategy. And this initiative of PAPERNAS is our attempt to find the right strategy for confronting neoliberalism and developing a real alternative.

But still the situation in Asia is very different from that elsewhere, espeically in Latin America. Because I think at a certain level there has been a defeat of the democratic movements after the period of dictatorship. Most of the parties or main organisations who led the politcal campaigns under the dictatorship have suffered a big loss of cadre.

So there is a big gap between the era of dictatorship and the democratic period. That is true here in Indonesia and in the Philippines too. So it's a question of 're-forming' the left to face up to the neoliberal agenda. So that's the subjective situation... It's too bad for Asia!