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Indonesia

Indonesia's Election and Polarization

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The Indonesian elections of April 2019 were a competition between a disappointment and a thug. Incumbent president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo defeated former army officer Prabowo Subianto, but there remains little of the enthusiasm of his 2014 victory. But compared to Prabowo, a political criminal campaigning on a combination of authoritarian leadership, chauvinism and political Islam, Jokowi appeared to many as the preferable option.

Even before the official results came in, it was clear that Jokowi had defeated Prabowo, and that Prabowo would not accept this. As he did five years ago, Prabowo blamed his defeat on fraud, but this time he chose to escalate the situation.

The Prabowo camp called for massive street rallies and defiance against the government, what it called “people power.” The protests escalated into riots that left at least six deaths and over 700 injured. Both sides, Prabowo’s supporters and Jokowi’s government, blame each other for the violence.

Prabowo remained silent when violence broke out and his supporters circulated rumors aimed at increasing sectarian and ethnic violence. One such message for example claimed that “China has sent security forces to Indonesia disguised as foreign workers.”

Andreas Harsono, Indonesian researcher for Human Rights Watch, stated: “These groups, including Prabowo and many of his advisers, have a dark reputation of using ethnic and religious sentiment, including anti-Chinese racism, in mobilizing people to get power,” adding that “they did it in Java in 1998 with the anti-Chinese riots and they are trying to do it again today.”

Prabowo, however, seems to have overplayed his hand as security forces took control. Several (retired) army officers linked to Prabowo are accused of organizing the violence and of planning killings to destabilize the government. Prabowo left the country in his private plane for “medical care.”

The elections were a huge undertaking; in more than 800,000 election locals some 193 million voters could vote for the presidency, as well as for national, provincial and local parliaments. In total, there were over 245,000 candidates.

But the political system in no way reflects the diversity and inequality of Indonesian society. Capitalist development across the 5000 kilometers of the archipelago has been extremely uneven; the GDP of the highest grossing district is over 400 times that of the lowest grossing district.

The so-called “miracle of Indonesian development” during the ’70s and ’80s relied on the exploitation of a workforce that was deprived of political rights and trade unions, and on the plunder of natural resources.

Indonesian “industrialization” mainly consists of mining (important resources are gold, coal and oil), and the manufacture of low-end products like textile, paper and simple, labor-intensive electronics in relatively small enterprises. But the Indonesian working class is without political representation. No labor-party or left-wing party was able to participate in the national elections.

Indonesian politics is a business for the rich. Many of the parties charge candidates a fee in return for a place on their

list. The higher on the list, the higher the fee. Candidates negotiate with “political financiers” to provide them with the cash to buy gifts for potential voters and communities. In return, if elected, the candidate will provide the financier with protection and government contracts.

Competition among these parties is competition for spoils. Actual political disagreements are secondary, if they exist at all. The main parties all support extractivist and export-oriented “development” policies that rely on the exploitation of the country’s cheap and young labor force, the unsustainable use of natural resources, and infrastructure projects that provide plenty of opportunities for kickbacks and lucrative government contracts.

Writing before the 2019 elections, leftist intellectual Martin Suryajaya declared that the Indonesian left lacked the potential to have significant impact on the elections, estimating that even if taken together the left would mobilize less than one per cent of the vote.

High demands are placed on parties before they can present themselves in the elections. For example, they are required to have a significant presence throughout the whole country before they can register for the elections. This makes it very difficult for newer parties without wealthy backers to participate.

But most of all, the Indonesian left remains crippled by the decades of violence and repression of Suharto’s dictatorship.

Legacy of Suharto’s New Order

From 1965 to 1998, Indonesia was ruled by general Suharto, whose “New Order” regime received considerable support from Western powers. The regime was the product of a coup against the country’s founding president Sukarno, who in the ’60s had increasingly leaned towards China and the Indonesian Communist Party.

The New Order, in which the army played an important role, established its power over the country by massacring over half a million leftists in late 1965 and early 1966.

In the ’70s and ’80s, the New Order regime was praised internationally for supposedly modernizing the Indonesian economy and bringing prosperity to broader layers of the population. “Development” was the watchword of the regime.

With Western aid, followed by the oil boom and the kind of “industrialization” described above, the New Order regime achieved relatively high growth rates “until the Asian economic crisis of the late ’90s.

The New Order’s statist development schemes lead to some modernization of the country, but despite its natural wealth, Indonesia in many ways remained behind its neighbors Malaysia and the Philippines.

In 2008, after the death of Suharto, Benedict Anderson pointed out that per capita GDP was about \$12,100 in Malaysia, \$5100 in the Philippines and \$3600 in Indonesia. And “given the enormous inequality prevailing especially in the Philippines and Indonesia, the real annual ‘product’ for the mass of people is substantially lower than these figures suggest.”

The corruption and plunder Suharto and his cronies engaged in is difficult to overestimate. Suharto himself is alleged to have embezzled between U.S. \$15 to \$25 billion.

After the Asian crisis and social unrest led to the fall of Suharto, Indonesia went through several rounds of “structural adjustment” programs. These led to increased inequality as well as renewed economic growth. Most of this growth benefited the better off.

According to World Bank figures, 15 years of sustained economic growth after the turn of the century “primarily benefited the richest 20% and left behind the remaining 80% of the population.” The richest 10% of Indonesians own over 75% of the country’s wealth. Half of the country’s assets are owned by a literal one percent.

Disappointment and Opportunism

Five years ago, Jokowi aroused hopes among many liberal and progressive Indonesians that he would tackle some of the worse inequalities and legacies of the New Order. Unlike his predecessor, Jokowi had no links with the dictatorship. Neither was he one of the oligarchs who dominate top-level politics.

He had been a modest businessman and mayor of a small city before becoming governor of the region of Jakarta, the country’s capital, with a population of over 10 million. He cultivated the image of an honest man of the people, a defender of the country’s pluralism against religious and ethnic bigotry, and promised to look into human rights violations committed by the dictatorship.

Once elected, Jokowi disappointed his idealistic supporters. Going against Indonesia’s culture of impunity for human rights violations, or consistently defending the country’s minorities, would require confronting established political forces and influential leftovers from the New Order regime. Jokowi did not come from the political elite, but his party does, and he has proven to be unable to go against his political protectors.

One of the first signs that Jokowi would be a disappointment was his pick for minister of defense: a former general who has been accused of human rights violations in West Papua. Jakarta continues to treat West Papua as essentially a colony.

Sectarian hostility increased with massive rallies against Jokowi’s successor as governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, in 2016. Ahok was (unjustly) accused of blasphemy, and the movement against him was fueled by bigoted hatred of his Christian beliefs and Chinese ethnicity. Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison.

Jokowi not only failed to oppose the sectarian and racist attacks against his former friend and ally — he further legitimized such views by picking Ma’ruf Amin as his running mate in 2019. Ma’ruf heads the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), a semi-official government body which issues fatwas, and supported the sentencing of Ahok.

Human Rights Watch describes him as “fueling worsening discrimination against the country’s religious and gender minorities.” HRW reports: “Over the past two decades at the MUI, Amin has helped draft and been a vocal supporter of fatwas, or religious edicts, against the rights of religious minorities, including the country’s Ahmadiyah and Shia communities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.”

Especially Ahmadiyahs, a minority current in Islam, have been attacked, murdered, and their houses destroyed by far-right groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Jokowi's main priority was always economic growth. In 2014, he set a goal of seven percent yearly growth. That goal was not met, but with around five percent economic growth was still considerable.

Infrastructure was improved and Jokowi's government implemented some social reforms: health care was extended, conditional cash subsidies to the poor established and subsidies on oil retained.

A Product of the New Order

Just as five years ago, Jokowi faced off against Prabowo Subianto. Prabowo is Suharto's former son-in-law; his father was minister during the dictatorship.

Prabowo joined Kopassus, the country's elite forces, shortly after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. This was the beginning of a quarter century of brutal occupation that led to around 200,000 Timorese dead. Prabowo took part in campaigns against the East Timorese resistance, and received "anti-terrorist" training in Germany and the USA, rising to the rank of Lieutenant General.

In 1998, as the New Order regime crumbled, Prabowo was involved in a secretive group of army officers, businessmen and Muslim leaders that tried to preserve the army's political power and fend off the democratic movement.

In Jakarta they incited pogroms against the Chinese-Indonesian minority, killing hundreds. Dozens of Chinese-Indonesian women were the victims of rapes. Stoking sectarian and ethnic violence in Jakarta and elsewhere was an attempt to divert discontent, and create renewed support for an authoritarian regime.

Prabowo was also involved in the abduction, torture and murder of pro-democracy activists, including members of the radical left Partai Rakyat Demokrat (PRD, People's Democratic Party).

After the end of the dictatorship, Prabowo for a few years went into voluntary exile in Jordan. After returning to Indonesia, he went into business, joining his brother who had become rich as a Suharto crony. Prabowo's properties include oil, gas and coal companies as well as palm oil plantations.

Since 2004 he has been trying to make it to the country's top position. To support his ambitions, he built a coalition of some of the most reactionary forces in Indonesian society, leftovers of the New Order regime, those nostalgic for the "peace and order" of dictatorship, and increasingly forces of political Islam.

While the Jokowi camp basically argued for politics as usual, Prabowo in classic far-right fashion used social demagoguery, and railed against foreigners exploiting the country "while hiding his own links with Indonesian oligarchs.

Inviting the obvious comparison, Prabowo in one speech asked; "Why are the Indonesian people afraid to say Indonesia first, make Indonesia great again? Why are there no Indonesian leaders daring to say the important thing is jobs for Indonesian people?"

During the campaign, Indonesian social media were inundated with assertions that Jokowi was secretly Christian, Chinese, even an undercover Communist.

Rise of the Religious Right

The 2016 protests against Ahok, as well as Prabowo's campaign, attracted international attention to the growing influence of fundamentalist Islamist forces in Indonesia.

Almost 90% of Indonesia's population of over 260 million identify as Muslim. In addition, the government officially recognizes five other religions: Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian. Atheism is not legally banned but is taboo, and people who declared atheist views have been prosecuted under blasphemy laws.

Support for political Islam in the widest sense, meaning a political current that wants to make Islam the foundational principle of politics and the state, is not a new development in Indonesia. From the late '50s to 1965, president Sukarno was not only opposed by army leadership but also by the leaders of political Islam. Many of them were landowners and merchants who saw that the left threatened their privileges.

But what today exists as political Islam is a product of the authoritarian capitalist development and class differentiation under the New Order regime. The regime initially made use of Islamist forces to destroy the Indonesian Communist party and the left more generally, but political Islam was marginalized by the dictator.

Only in the later years of his regime did Suharto reach out to Islamist hard-liners, partly as a counterweight to rivals in the Indonesian army, partly to integrate potential opposition forces into the patronage networks of the regime.

Throughout the New Order regime and beyond, parts of the Indonesian security apparatus cultivated links with radical Islamic groups. They did this to flush out Islamic radicals, but also saw such groups as potential tools against the left and social movements.

The FPI for example, which supported Prabowo, has its roots in such maneuvers. It was established in 1998 with support of then military commander-in-chief Wiranto. Wiranto was also responsible for organizing militias that attacked anti-Suharto protestors and is implicated in massacres during the New Order regime. Jokowi made him a minister.

But the fall of the dictatorship and democratization did not only make visible already existing support for political Islam. The country's Muslim majority is not a homogeneous category, and deep disagreements exist about what it means to be a believer. But for the past two decades a turn has been taking place towards more restrictive and more literal interpretations of religious doctrine, away from the syncretism (religious admixture) that was considered typical of Islam in Indonesia.

This turn is partly responsible for the growth in support for political Islam. Since the late '90s, it has grown in influence on politics and won increased popular support. It is a varied movement, encompassing those who want to make Indonesia an Islamic state; those who want to apply Shariah legal law either for all Indonesians or for Muslims; and supporters of terrorist violence as well as of electoral politics.

Indonesian Islam can not be divided into a "good," traditional and syncretic Islam and a "bad," non-traditional purist political Islam. Parts of NU, the largest movement of traditional Muslims, are known for their sectarian hostility toward non-Muslims as well as against minority groups in Islam, such as the Ahmadiyah and Shia.

All the mainstream Muslim organizations were part of the architecture of the New Order regime. On the other hand, most of the supporters of the Indonesian left were and are Muslims, although today there are only lingering

influences of left-wing Islam in Indonesia.

The growth of political Islam results from the urbanization and modernization of Indonesian society. The cadres who build the organizations of political Islam and the intellectuals who interpret it for Indonesian society often come from the urban middle classes. They find support in regions that are known to be religious and conservative, but in the rapidly growing cities a new potential for Islamist mass politics has grown.

As society modernized, tradition lost power as the criterion for right and wrong. Parts of the new urban population found answers in international strands of political Islam, breaking with inherited interpretations of Islam. The well-educated cadres of the movement view the syncretism of traditional Indonesian Islam as the result of the mixing of so-called "real Islam" with local superstition.

The appeal to international sources as the genuine authorities on Islam becomes a way for people from the new middle classes to emancipate themselves from traditional authority figures. Their education and international links enable them to present themselves as the experts in, and carriers of "genuine Islam," thereby claiming positions of power and influence.

In a way, such activists are following in the footsteps of the landowners and merchants who led political Islam over half a century ago. But after the destruction of the left, in place of a progressive alternative, political Islam became a major articulator of social grievances during and after the New Order regime. Political Islam thus acquired much more a mass character than previously.

Out of strategic considerations and shared hostility to emancipatory movements, parts of the movement have allied with Prabowo, who is not particularly religious himself. In fact, Prabowo's campaign became so closely associated with radical Islamists that some of his supporters began worrying that it was scaring off potential voters.

Jokowi's record is tattered, but it was enough for him to win a victory of around 55% over his rival. It is clear many voted for Jokowi as a form of self-defense against the sectarian forces supporting Prabowo. In addition, for people on the edge of absolute poverty, Jokowi's social measures can make a crucial difference.

Rebuilding the Left

Despite the crisis of 2008, and the slowing down of economic growth, the numbers of the industrial working class have grown considerably in the last decade. Industrial workers have shown a large potential for mobilization, facilitated by their concentration in special economic zones.

After 2011, the country saw large labor mobilizations with millions of workers on strike. This movement succeeded in forcing significant concessions from bosses and the state. Several times, minimum wages were increased by over a quarter and healthcare coverage was increased.

Spread throughout the country, there are many other social movements, sometimes very combative. Environmental activists and peasants fight the destruction and pollution of the countryside, and human rights activists defend civil rights, challenge the culture of impunity and oppose the army's renewed attempts to claw back political influence it lost after 1998.

Indonesia's Election and Polarization

In Jakarta, hundreds of thousands rallied against gender-based violence and child marriage. Despite a wave of anti-LGBT rhetoric, often from government figures and heterosexual violence, LGBT activists continue to organize.

The capitalist class, however, retaliated. New legal limits were put on the right to strike and on the minimum wage. Social movements were further weakened by an ideological offensive against progressive and leftist ideas, and by a right-wing shift in the leadership of the important Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI).

KSPI includes the Metalworkers Trade Unions Federation (FSPMI) which was at the heart of many of the mobilizations. Its uniformed stewards, the Garda Metal, were literally in the front line of many mobilizations, together with supporters of much smaller but radical "red unions."

Realizing that the increased militancy was opening up space for left-wing ideas among workers, the conservative KSPI leadership dialed back its support for mobilizations. They instead turned towards making deals with right-wing and Islamist forces.

This year, instead of joining other movements rallying in Jakarta for the commemoration of May Day, KSPI organized its own meeting, and called on its members to support Prabowo.

The New Order did not only destroy the Indonesian left in 1965, but until 1998 systematic propaganda attacked all progressive ideas. To prevent a potential rebirth of the left and social contestation, the regime pursued a policy of dismantling any kind of popular organization and turning the popular classes into what it called a "floating mass" to be excluded from politics.

Even the parties that were controlled by the regime were not allowed to operate on the village level. The most important trade union organization, the PKI-aligned union central SOBSI, was destroyed. The remaining trade unions were forcibly merged into a single trade union central that was incorporated into the New Order's structure.

When after more than three decades the New Order fell in 1998, its combination of repression and social engineering left deep marks on society. For radicals, there is no center-left current to relate to, nor is there a trade-union movement or other social movement that could provide a home and field of activity for activists. The left had to be rebuilt from scratch.

Central to the rebirth of socialist activism in Indonesia was the PRD. Originally established in 1994 by left-wing student activists, the party adopted a socialist platform. It was quickly repressed by the New Order, but re-emerged after 1998.

PRD activists played an important role in establishing a left-wing of the new trade-union movement that took shape after 1998. The PRD, however, did not succeed in establishing itself as a national force. Its attempts to organize united fronts and participate in national elections failed, and in the first decade of the new century the party entered a process of fracturing and splits.

Many of the different socialist groups in Indonesia trace their existence to the PRD. Some of the PRD's activists had received training from the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). But the PRD did not adopt a Maoist-guerrilla strategy, instead focusing on the organization of the urban working class.

In terms of organizational practice however, the CPP model had a more significant impact. Like the CPP, the PRD went on to establish its own social organizations, the leadership of which was the party, and which were expected to

become the party's base.

This organizing model was retained by different groups coming out of the PRD. Even very small groups attempt to set up their own "mass organizations," including their own trade unions. Such "red unions" are quite militant, boosting protests, but have difficulty uniting. The red unions also remain much smaller than the main trade union centers that rely on clientelism and deals with politicians.

Among leftists, but also among disappointed former supporters of Jokowi, there was a call to boycott this year's elections as a first step to building an independent alternative. But the road to this goal is still long.

At the height of the workers' protests, there was renewed discussion among activists on establishing a new party based on the labor movement, but with little concrete results so far. The counter-offensive by the bosses and the state, and the divisions inside the trade-union movement, make the need to organize a political answer only more urgent.

To provide a center of gravity for the various existing movements, a new political left needs to have sufficient social weight. It seems that only the trade-union movement can provide this.

After the Elections

Some relief that we don't have to add Prabowo's name to the authoritarian rulers' list of Duterte, Trump, Bolsonaro etc. is understandable, but Jokowi's reelection solves nothing. The unsustainable development model, the mass poverty and inequality, the anger this generates and its uses by reactionary forces and political manipulators who learned their tricks during the New Order, religious and ethnic bigotry and hate "none of this will go away.

With the recent violence by Prabowo supporters on one side, and on the other side security forces commanded by his former colleague Wiranto, it could not be clearer that Indonesia is still not free from the legacy of the New Order. Jokowi's government only offers more of the same "which brought the country to this condition in the first place.

Parts of society are polarizing around sectarian and regional lines, while a real social alternative is lacking. A left with some social weight could channel part of the anger and provide a counter-weight to regressive tendencies. Every day it becomes only more needed.

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