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Indonesia

The Indonesian Left Is Stuck in an Anti-Communist Hangover

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV555 - April 2021 -

Publication date: Monday 12 April 2021

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Little noticed in the West, the past two years have witnessed the largest protest wave in decades against Indonesia's increasingly authoritarian crony-capitalist government. But activists are still mentally stuck in the 1990s, deploying depoliticized concepts like "civil society" and "moral force," and resorting to ill-conceived methods of resistance that have left the movement in a rut and unable to realize its radical potential.

The main idea underlying Vincent Bevins's 2020 book *The Jakarta Method* is that the Cold War was not, as people commonly understand it, a two-way conflict between America and the Soviet Union to achieve global hegemony. Instead, it is more accurately described as a period where the United States frantically attempted to smooth out the flow of global capital by eliminating left resistance in newly independent third-world countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Iran. To do this, the numerous Washington-backed covert CIA operations would follow a common playbook: depose national leaders and governments that presented a hindrance to America's interests, then ensure that the newly appointed ones do not turn out to be another problem.

It was in Indonesia, however, that the CIA's anti-communist crusade finally arrived at its penultimate method. The issue with simply overthrowing progressive leaders is that there will always be a considerable portion of the populace that sees the coup as unjust, which eventually enables the Left to find their way back to power. What was designated the "Jakarta Method" was the complete annihilation of progressive forces in a targeted society through a reign of terror that involves mass murders, torture, and forced disappearances.

In 1965, the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) was the third-largest communist party in the world, boasting over three million card-carrying members with millions more affiliated through workers', farmers', women's, and cultural organizations. By the end of 1966, over half a million of them are estimated to have been murdered, while the survivors were detained to work in prison camps. Those who were released from imprisonment — or were lucky enough to not get caught in the first place — kept their mouths shut in fear of persecution.

If the ultimate aim of the 1965 Red Slaughter was to deny the possibility of communism in Indonesia, then it has been a massive success. To this day, since the Communist Party was banned in 1966, there has been no left representation in Indonesia's political system, while any act deemed an attempt to "promote Marxism-Leninism" faces up to twenty years in prison. Meanwhile, all political parties are mandated to espouse Pancasila — Indonesia's cryptic National Ideology — as their official ideological position. With the exception of a few that gravitate toward conservative Islam, all political parties in Indonesia are ideologically indistinguishable from one another, mostly serving as fronts for different conglomerates and their cronies to further their own business agendas.

Yet this is only one side of the story. Beyond the scope of electoral politics, throughout the years Indonesia has also seen waves of large-scale protests against anti-democracy and pro-market government policies, effectively embodying the left political position. The largest of these protests was the 1998 *Reformasi* (Reform) movement that led to the end of President Suharto's dictatorial regime, while the most recent took place in 2019 and 2020, when students, workers, and numerous left-leaning organizations flooded city streets throughout the archipelago opposing a series of laws that signaled the increasingly authoritarian turn of a nation already dominated by military officers and crony-capitalists.

While it might be true that every time a protest wave starts to unfurl, it is accompanied by a lingering hope — or dread, if you're in power — that the Left is having some sort of return, it is near impossible to predict if the current wave will ever take off, or what form of political action it will morph into. What the movement ultimately has to grapple

with, however, is the limited probability of change given the methods it currently employs. The specter of anti-communism clearly still haunts to this day, limiting what can be said in the first place — which in turn, may severely stunt the horizon and potential of any protest.

The Protest Kitsch

The first thing to clarify is that Indonesia's recent protests were far from espousing any sort of communist or socialist agenda; they presented themselves as a vaguely defined "pro-democracy movement" similar to the likes of Hong Kong and Thailand. Instead, what they were trying to invoke was Indonesia's spirit of *Reformasi*, when tens of thousands of students rallied to the streets demanding President Suharto's resignation after thirty-two years of his authoritarian rule.

More than two decades later, those who marched in 2019 and 2020 were galvanized under the banner of *Reformasi Dikorupsi* — "The Reform has been Corrupted." It implies that something has gone terribly wrong with the nation's effort to break with its authoritarian past, and that the protesters, much like their predecessors in 1998, are flooding the streets to save the country from its undoing.

The wave in 2019 was initiated when the People's Representative Council — Indonesia's national legislative body — was reported to be preparing a series of bills during the last week of its session, including a new criminal code that would, among other things, outlaw acts of defamation against the president and the government; criminalize premarital sex and abortion; and prohibit the "unauthorized promotion" of contraceptive devices.

Another bill was intended to weaken the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), stipulating that any act of reconnaissance, crackdown, or confiscation of goods from suspected corruptors required the approval of an independent supervisory board appointed by the People's Representative Council — the catch being that more than 3 percent of council members had themselves been arrested for corruption, which means they were basically framing the law that was meant to police their own behavior.

The second wave, which took place in 2020, came in response to the recently passed [Omnibus Law](#) — a labyrinthine, thousand-page bill that amends dozens of existing laws in one fell swoop with the goal of promoting foreign investment. The government itself branded the law as a "Jobs Creation Bill," arguing that cutting red tape would eventually create jobs for an [increasingly unemployed population](#).

In reality, the Omnibus Law dismantles safeguards for worker welfare and environmental protection on a scale that has not even yet been properly mapped. Early analyses have already shown that its provisions are horrifying: the law's agrarian clauses, for example, allow the government "to build industrial estates, toll roads or dams seized from its individual owners, reimbursing the owner with less than the land's value or, in some cases, not reimbursing them at all."

Meanwhile, the clauses surrounding workforce and employment have eliminated the prohibition on employers paying less than minimum wage, while also allowing employers to dismiss workers without warning — including for reasons such as "minimizing losses" or "maximizing efficiency" — and eases regulations for employing outsourced workers, thus potentially throwing millions into precarious labor.

If the measure of success for the current protest wave is the overturning of draconian laws, it has largely ended in failure: both the Omnibus bill and the modifications to the jurisdiction of the Corruption Eradication Commission have

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been ratified, while there are signs that the new criminal code will soon be legislated anyway. And while saying there is no follow-up is largely unfair — NGOs have continued disseminating legal analyses of the bills and raising awareness of their [detrimental effects](#) — there has been very little talk on what to do, *as a movement*, after the government refused to meet their demands.

What the protesters failed to break with was the legacy of the “moral force” position — an idea that has undergirded Indonesia’s protest movement for decades. In a nutshell, the moral force thesis posits that students should engage in politics first and foremost, as students.

This, according to [Edward Aspinall](#), stems from the belief that students occupy a privileged position in society as intelligentsia: unlike other social groups that always seek to prioritize their own vested interests, students are posited as only driven by their primary function as arbiters of truth. They are unmotivated by personal gains, ambition, or wealth, and for this reason, are (supposedly) not interested in running for office or changing the personnel of a regime. Their only role was “to speak out fearlessly and state moral truths that the government should act upon.”

Although the recent protests did not only consist of students, the popular idea that protests are a meaningful way to conduct social change in Indonesia has always been uniquely tied to the spectacle of a massive student movement. The *Reformasi Dikorupsi* banner was indicative of this: after all, the mythologized “Spirit of 1998” was the revolutionary fervor of students standing up against a corrupt authoritarian regime.

Yet the problem today is not students being simply unwilling to take part in the movement with the rest of society; in fact, the latest protest wave is seeing students largely abandoning their exceptionalism and blending in with other progressive forces, such as the labor and environmental movements. Instead, the problem lies in the inability of a protest wave in Indonesia to exponentially snowball itself into a larger political project — and it is directly related to the annihilation of leftists in 1965.

Progenitors of the moral force thesis were activist brothers Soe Hok Gie and Soe Hok Djinn (the latter would change his name to Arief Budiman as the result of Indonesia’s forced assimilation of its ethnic Chinese populace) who formulated the term in 1967, just two years after the anti-communist massacre. The brothers were not communists; instead, they were spearheads of an anti-communist student movement that opposed President Sukarno’s anti-imperialist policies and subsequently supported the military’s rise to power under Suharto.

Their relation with the newfound regime, however, was highly ambiguous. On one hand, they realized that the student movement occupied a unique, progressive position within the new political landscape that could aid Suharto’s government to achieve its modernist ideals. On the other hand, they also noted that the student movement itself had started to lose momentum.

Some argued that what the student movement aspired to would only be possible after they “already have a relatively strong accumulation of forces,” while some student activists have also been recruited by political parties — no doubt with hopes to promote change from inside the system. What they designate as the moral force position was a direct response to these intrigues:

For instance, at the moment, we know that there are military leaders who are corrupt, that there are party leaders who are corrupt, that there are student leaders who are corrupt. What must we do? There are two responses. [First] let them be, don't tinker with them but meanwhile nurture our forces, gather our masses. Later, if we are strong, we will attack them. The other method is to say clearly that they are corrupt. Let whatever will happen to ourselves happen, what is clear is that we will have said what is right and what is not right. —Arief Budiman, 1967

In other words, the moral force thesis was a response to a political landscape where there are no progressive forces *but* students — and this was especially true after the purge and dismantling of left-leaning workers, women, and cultural organizations post-1965. As students, they had no other method of dissent but to protest — any consolidation with other forces is out of the question. And while the protesters of 2019/20 might not take the moral force position seriously anymore, they still largely employ the same form of speaking truth to power and expect it to have similar symbolic efficacy — even if the political landscape has largely changed over the years.

It's not that protests don't work. But protests, left to themselves, can only sustain revolutionary fervor for a limited period of time. The challenge currently plaguing Indonesia's left is how to provide platforms channeling the recent experiences of firsthand street warfare to other forms of dissent and resistance — or as Leo Panitch puts it, to facilitate the processes of Class Formation. It's a daunting, unenviable task, but also one that has yet to be taken seriously.

Civil Society and Its Discontents

One explanation of why it is so difficult to envision a class-rooted politics in Indonesia is that the concept of class itself has been severely censored by Suharto's regime. Once in power, the New Order created numerous euphemisms that neutralized any traces of the Left. "Workers" became "employees," while terms such as "the working class" were glossed over as economic rather than political categories, using phrases like "low-income groups." Meanwhile, the Left intelligentsia were either silenced, expunged from academic positions, marooned in other countries as they were studying abroad during the coup, or dead.

Much of this is well known. Yet in the early 1970s, a considerable portion of intellectuals and student activists that initially supported Suharto started to show signs of discontent. The New Order modernization project, it turned out, did not automatically yield a more modern and democratic Indonesian society as these people had hoped — if anything, the recently freed flow of capital and bustling international trade enabled the formation of a corrupt military oligarchy on home turf instead.

This conundrum, according to historian Hilmar Farid, forced them to explore new conceptual trajectories to counter the regime's authoritarian turn. They found what seemed to be the answer in the notion of "civil society" — a vague, poorly defined concept that blends together liberal notions of good governance and mutual understanding between the government and the people, along with hopes to create an all-encompassing citizen movement traversing class divisions (clearly informed by the emerging New Left in America and Europe).

What resulted from this ill-informed concoction is what one might call an impotent "Centrist Populism," whose main goal is simply to hold the government accountable to democratic ideals without tinkering too much with the system — yet which also depends on the formation of a broad democratic alliance as its ultimate wager.

The new trajectory, claims Farid,

...sees the importance to *forge new social contracts* with those in power to suppress, and not eliminate, inequalities, promoting a fair and respectable electoral politics, and reforming political institutions. Within this framework, perspectives that emphasize class divisions are not simply out of fashion, but also detrimental in achieving the unification [of civil society] that is needed to counter authoritarianism.

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The caveat of the civil society thesis lies in the fact that — quoting the words of a suspected Karl Rove — “that’s not the way the world really works anymore.” What is designated as a social contract with those in power implies democracy as a shared space where the government and the governed have equal footing and mutual grasp of what is happening.

The 2020 Omnibus Law protests showed this is not the case. Almost immediately after the rally, an onslaught of counterprotest propaganda began to spread on the internet. One prevalent argument claims that the people actually have no idea what they are protesting about: when protests culminated on October 8, there has yet to be a copy of the bill accessible for the public, enabling accusations that protesters had been and incited to fight for an factually unproven cause. Things then took a weird turn just two days later, when a council member from the Islamic-conservative Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) made a rare whistleblowing move by claiming that council members have not received and read a copy of the Omnibus Law. Just who, then, *actually* wrote the bill if not the council members themselves?

The legal saga did not end there. When the public finally did receive copies of the Omnibus Bill, President Joko Widodo’s administration immediately broke the laws of the policy-making universe and announced the revision of the bill *after* it was ratified — and they did so not only once, but twice. One can imagine that at the time, legal researchers in NGOs had been pulling all-nighters rummaging through the 812 pages of the initial draft, only to be informed the next day of the existence of an “updated” version — this time 905 pages — and then another one.

The entire ordeal, then, becomes a nightmare for people who seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the government is trying to screw its people. By the time President Joko Widodo signed the 1,187-page final draft one month later, any momentum that had been built up by the protest waves were long gone.

So old methods of dissent, unsurprisingly, are not working very well. Mass nationwide protests alone won’t cut it: no matter how exciting and brimming with hope, they have always been proven to be short-lived. Neither will the mere insistence that the government adhere to democratic norms — as President Joko Widodo himself has said, protesters should just submit an [Omnibus Law review](#) to the constitutional court if they see fit.

What he did not mention is that the supreme court judges were all handpicked by the government and People’s Representative Council, leaving a gigantic question mark on their independence. This gesture, if not gaslighting at its finest, is a blatant invitation to concede defeat.

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How, then, should the Indonesian left proceed in its pursuit of genuine, radical social change? There are obviously no easy answers to this question. As a rough sketch, however, there is a need to formulate novel strategies tailor-made for the present trajectory.

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Again, this predicament is by no means specific to Indonesia as global capital becomes ever more reliant on the reserve army of labor to not only cut costs, but also hinder the possibility to form and organize unions. [Leo Panitch](#)

offers invaluable insight regarding this double onslaught:

There is less and less value in drawing tight sociological nets to determine who is in the working class and who isn't.... Instead of limiting our strategic discussions to whether we should concentrate at any given time on organizing nurses or baristas, teachers or software developers, farmhands or truckers, salespeople or bank tellers, our main concern should be visualizing and developing new forms of broadly inclusive working-class organization and formation for the twenty-first century.

This is why no matter how kitschy Indonesia's recent protests were, they were nonetheless inclusive — and therefore contain the potential to generate a larger movement. What the protesters need to develop is a platform that allows them to promote specific political agendas rather than going on the defensive every time a draconian bill gets ratified.

There is no guarantee, however, that anyone will seize this opportunity — even though it clearly should be seized. As [David Graeber](#) once pointed out, anyone experiencing the act of resistance firsthand will be compelled to do so again: the 2019/20 protests saw a generation of young people in Indonesia — most of them not even born yet during the New Order's dismantling in 1998 — partaking in their very first protest, and it was a historical one. It surely won't be their last, either.

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