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DEMOCRACY WITHOUT DEMOS:

Reflection of 100 Social Political Scientists on the Democratic Regression in Indonesia



Kamis
19 Agustus 2021
Pukul 12.30 - 17.30 WIB



Zoom Meeting
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Democracy without demos: reflection of 100 social and political scientists on the ongoing democratic regression in Indonesia, LP3ES-UNDIP, 19 Agustus 2021

Olle Törnquist: The absence of the Left and the crisis of Indonesian democracy

- Thanks for inviting me to this important seminar. Allow me to be a bit provocative.
- Liberal democracy is of course a fine idea, and some of its basics are certainly threatened in Indonesia and must be defended. But most of the focus is on the institutional decay – instead of analysing the more fundamental crisis of the strategy of elitist-pacts that the mainstream liberals themselves have hailed since the late-90s, and which actually caused much of the decay. Including by side-lining the forces of democratic advancements.
- So most liberal democrats, by burying their hands in the sand, have now little to say of who shall stand up for democratic liberties, and why and how. In fact, only 27 % of the respondents in a recent LSI survey said they were “very concerned about the state of democracy”.
- Confessedly, however, there is neither a firm answer from a more leftist point of view. Rather there seems to be a triangular quarrel.
- In one corner are those saying there must be total focus on defending civil liberties and on fighting the grand corruption among politicians and their cronies -- almost like when everyone had to fight European fascism. But is there fascism today? Isn't there still some space to also engage in democratic politics against the less conspicuous corruption of public services that make life miserable for ordinary people, plus address other matters that common people deem important, such as welfare, jobs and the environment? Like my Philippine friends say: you can't fight Duterte only with demands for human rights, because for most people livelihood is equally important.
- In the second corner in the triangular quarrel is therefore the issue- and interest groups, including unions, who focus on livelihood issues. But

unfortunately they are as fragmented as ever and neglect democratisation by giving priority to the best possible deals with whoever powerful politicians.

- And in the third corner are those who continue to suggest reforms and ‘change from within’ the Palace and other centres of power -- but are short of a popular base to back it up.
- So why is this there no convergence?
- One proposition from my retrospective book in comparative perspective, that will be out in October and entitled ‘*In Search of New Social Democracy*’, is that progressives often neglect history. While criticising the establishment for forgetting old massacres and repression, many leftists are also suffering from amnesia.
- Since long, the issue of democracy has actually been the leftists’ own Achilles heel.
 - (i) In the late 1950s, the reformist communists and left nationalists gave up liberal democracy in favour of Sukarno’s and the army’s populist ‘Guided Democracy’, with anti-imperialist campaigns that did not undermine the rising oligarchs, and a land reform that did not unify the rural poor.
 - (ii) To make things worse, liberals and middle class social democrats preferred instead US backed ‘politics of order’ and even General Suharto and the witch-hunt of leftists.
 - (iii) In the 70s, then, some of them changed their mind and turned critics. But they still said that democracy was premature. So first they tried riots in favour of middle class- rather than army driven ‘politics of order’. And then they turned 180 degrees, struggling in vain for socialism against international dependency along with NGOs and the ‘victims of the New Order’.
 - (iv) In the 90s it is true that the PRD-socialists focused less on civil society and more on politics to democratise the state, since it was propelling

authoritarian capitalism. But then they tried to serve as spearheads rather than build a broad democratic movement.

- (v) So short of a united front with a viable alternative to the economic crisis and liberal elitist strategy, the democracy movement lost out soon after Suharto lost out.
- (vi) And being confined, then, to civil society- and unionism, the pro-democrats who tried to ‘go politics’ did not reach much beyond lobbying, pressure politics and transactions.
- (vii) The only exception was those betting on broad alliances behind the public health reform, plus on urban poor- and citizen pacts with populist leaders like Jokowi. But then they failed to follow up with new reforms, democratic organisation and a framework for participatory governance.
- (vii) So, from 2014 there was no broad democratic alliance to resist the rise of right wing religious populism. And by implication, Jokowi & co turned to horse trading with the political and military elite. While progressives turned prisoners of the *ménage à trois* between liberals for freedoms and against corruption, social and union activists betting on transactional politics, and floating democrats trying reforms ‘from within’.
- It is of course immensely difficult to build a social democratic oriented alternative – with interest-based-movements, equal citizen-democracy, social rights based welfare and social growth pacts – in a very heterogeneous context where many oligarchs remain in extractive business, and uneven development generate a multitude of interests and loyalties.
- But if we take one more step back in history, we find that it was possible during the anti-colonial struggle and the first decade after independence. Aside from those who organised on the basis of ethnic and religious communes, left-nationalists and reformist communists fought for equal citizenship and direct links between citizens and state, mediated by citizens own parties and organisations. This was then the unifying framework for

adding social rights reforms for a common language, health and education, women's rights and land reforms. And *this* was how the progressives built the world's largest peaceful popular movement and made huge advances in the 1955 national and 1957 local elections.

- Unfortunately, it was then undermined by the decisions in favour of 'guided democracy', with left populism and central army control. But in other cases where the focus on civil and political rights and thus based social rights were sustained and expanded – such as in the Indian state of Kerala – social democratic development *did* evolve.
- It's true that even the Kerala priorities were not immune to clientelism and economic stagnation. But this was fought with democratic decentralisation and participatory planning -- which was not fully captured by the elite, as in so many other contexts, because of the land reform and active citizenship.
- So right now – when having to fight environmental degradation and Covid-19 – the Left Front has been able to do what reformist populists behind Jokowi failed to do in Indonesia: to sustain and use democracy in order to mobilise local governments and civil society to contain the pandemic along with welfare, job-programmes and a pioneering effort at knowledge based development, including for the huge numbers of returning migrant labourers.
- Thus, even well-educated middle classes who for many years had benefitted from neo-liberal development realised that they too, and not just the poor, needed public welfare and development initiatives. So the political result was massive victories in the 2020 local and 2021 state elections. The right wing Hindu-nationalists did not stand a chance in Kerala.
- In short, Indonesian leftists might wish to take one step back by revisiting historical insights in comparative perspective to move ahead. There are no fixed old models to bring alive. But as I conclude in Prisma-issue: "just as the Renaissance from the 14th to the 17th century overcame the dark Middle Ages by reappraising classical insights, critical history is now imperative".