

The maestro of civil society work

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Yet another internationally respected Indonesian democrat is no more: Asmara Nababan. Asmara was not a theorist, an author of thick books or a rhetoric performer. More remarkably, he succeeded in making one the worlds' most undisciplined orchestras of divisive civil society activists play together, at times. In short, he was the maestro of joint civil society work.

With wisdom, modest authority and humanitarian and social democratic principles, he settled disputes, facilitated collective work, guaranteed trustworthy projects and gained the respect of so many national and international supporters.

Most of us know him as the leader of NGO forums, human rights organizations, and of course of the National Commission for Human Rights, continuously fostering probes into rights violations — from the mines in Papua and the killing fields in Timor Leste and Aceh to the repression of demonstrations in Jakarta. And who will forget his role in the fact finding team when Munir was murdered? Yet another achievement was perhaps even more remarkable.

Fifteen years or so after he convinced me of the chances that the alternative-development oriented groups, which he coordinated at the time, would realize that democracy was crucial for them too, Asmara took up the most challenging task of directing the implementation of two huge democracy surveys.

These would be based on the experiences of leading activists along major frontlines of reformation in all parts of the country. Thus one would get a grounded view of the problems and options, beyond the preoccupations of the powerful elite.

If this author could “only” take care of the framework and guide the analysis, he (with Munir, Stanley, Sumartana and a few other figures) would guide a team of young researchers in making the questions more concrete and in convincing two times some 900 very busy democracy activists around the country that they should spend a day or so to answer all we asked for, no matter how sensitive and time consuming, and then pay attention to the results too. And he did!

Of course everything was not perfect, and we had our disagreements, including on the feasibility of mass based education movements as in parts of India. But he never hesitated in supporting the decision to stop publication and to redo the first comprehensive report when it was not up to standards. And thus, we delivered.

Most importantly however, I do not think Indonesians are aware of how impressed academic colleagues and fellow activists around the world are of the fact that hardly anyone of the two times 900 activist-informants dropped out when Asmara suggested that they should not.

This if anything testified to the fabulous democratic commitment and potential in Indonesia — if there were more facilitation of joint work rather than private fortunes.

It is true that one of our private amusements was to watch the BBC series Grumpy Old Men. And even if it signaled some self ironic agreement on the state of affairs, the critical issue now that the pioneer is no more is whether or not younger coordinators and scholars can carry on by fostering and work within

better and more representative institutions.

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