

Jakarta 18/4/05; For Tempo. 4/2005

The Mulyana Soap Opera

The Mulyana case, people seem to agree, is about one of those bad, corrupt guys who should be locked up. By catching him, the anti-corruption campaign is making real progress.

The roadmap to success appears to be to hunt individuals and take them to court. Nothing wrong, of course, – but it is as if the electoral commission in one of the most corruption-ridden countries would have been able to successfully facilitate in the last minute the largest synchronised electoral exercise in the world without having to pay extra to well connected actors and companies with next to monopoly on delivering essential materials. It is as if some people in the commission would not under such conditions, almost by definition, have made some personal gains as well. It is as if there was no need to fight this system and the roots of it, only some of the individuals within it. It is as if it was not the responsibility of the state institutions and the head of them to keep track of the servants and officers but only the individuals themselves. And it is as if this individualisation of the anti-corruption campaign did not open up for the possibility of getting rid of political enemies, like Mulyana.

Many pro-democrats seem to be equally convinced. Some innocent voices of the NGO sector are strong: How could Mulyana do this? Clearly, he has passed the line.

This is not the first time, however, that a single leader is first celebrated as next to a saviour that will bring salvation – and then, when he quite expectedly cannot do so, when he makes a mistake by negotiating with the wrong tactical ally or approaching the wrong attractive woman, for instance, then he is dumped as if God was no longer on his side, wherefore we must all continue to search for The Good Leader. So how democratic is that?

Of course, Mulyana must be taken to court. I do not want to defend what he has been involved in. I know of his poor accountability and management, including from personal experience. And feminists, among others, may have a few other complaints to add. But his commitment to human rights is also well known. And actually: the basic problem is not that he has proven not to be The Good Leader, but that the democracy movement has still not built strong and ethically sound organisations to select their own leaders and keep them accountable.

In short, don't shot at the piano player! The dilemma is the lack of a robust, transparent and accountable state apparatus, the fact that many of its leaders as well as of private business gains from that weakness, and the lack of strong democratic organisations to fight this nexus. Discussions of individual weaknesses and mistakes make life a bit easier and more thrilling, however. And those who want to hunt down individuals while sustaining the system gain from it. So the soap opera is likely to continue.

Olle Törnquist

Professor of Political Science and Development Research; University of Oslo, Norway.