

Will the Students Succeed?

Almost every day, I am asked two questions. The first is terribly hard to answer in a manner both brief and academically considered: what's happening to democratisation in Indonesia? Suharto's authoritarian state development project is disintegrating. It is difficult to make prognoses about the future on the basis of the situation that prevailed before the crisis began. Moreover, we can no longer content ourselves with analysing the struggle within the elite at the central level. And having said that, we know too little about the elements which are now becoming most important: developments on the local level, both in the Jakarta area and out in the provinces; the dynamic in the new mass-based forms of politics; and the various actors' politics of democratisation. We will have to return to these matters at a later time.

The second question is tricky as well, but more restricted. And since I wasn't able to take on the first, I'll try my hand at supplying a quick answer to the second: will the students succeed?

The answer depends, of course, on what it is they really want. Many claim that they don't know themselves. Yet the students have three fundamental demands. First, they want to put Suharto and his henchmen on trial, and to hold them politically, economically and morally responsible. Second, they want to put an end to the military's "dwi fungsi" – its right to political and economic (as well as military) power – and to hold it accountable for the assaults, tortures and murders committed by its members (among whose victims students also figured). Third, the students are

calling for truly free and fair elections, as well as the democratisation of a great many state institutions. On these questions they have met with considerable success, not least in their criticism of the military. But they have only made it halfway. For this reason, in the view of most of the students, achieving real results on all of these fronts requires that the present regime – consisting as it does for the most part of Suharto's old associates – be replaced by a transitional government. Otherwise, the entire process of "reformasi" will be botched.

So will they succeed in this? Hardly. During the great demonstrations of November, some students actually made it all the way to the parliament building, and they could have gone inside. But they lacked broad support – including from the moderate opposition leaders, one of whom was not to be disturbed while taking rest. So the students went home instead. Putting the point simply, they are confronted with three great obstacles, and I believe they will only be able to surmount one of them.

The first challenge is presented by the campaign against them which portrays them as immature muddleheads who mainly cause traffic problems with all their demonstrations, and who want to bring down the old order but have no program for what to put in its place. There is, to be sure, something to this. In Jakarta I am often reminded of the student movement of 30 years ago in Europe. The latter too was not just pronouncedly political; it was cultural and anti-authoritarian as well. Yet that was nothing to despise; indeed, it was probably that which had the greatest significance over the long run. In addition, there is among today's Indonesian students a still

greater and more hopeful and dynamic power which issues from the fact that they are not just breaking with authoritarian structures: they are also rediscovering history (which was forbidden) and opening up their society (which was closed). The students are the weeds that break suddenly through the asphalt and burst into full bloom: beautiful but disordered. And they are not, most assuredly, naive or muddleheaded. Great numbers of them read, discuss, analyse, and come to democratic decisions. Never, I dare say, have I encountered students with such questioning minds and such a thirst for knowledge as those who, December last, took me off in an old borrowed taxi to meet with a larger group of young leaders from various campuses, and who then insisted on a six-hour marathon lecture on the political situation and the historical background. The hour grew late, yet it seemed to me that that gathering burned like a beacon in the Jakarta night. In the long run, the students have history on their side.

When the dawn broke, however, it was still over the Jakarta of today, and that makes things harder. The second problem faced by the students is the fact that as good as all established forces are trying to tame and use them. For one thing, Habibie, Wiranto and their cohorts in the regime are doing their best to keep control and to acquire new legitimacy by directing the reform process from above, and by marginalising radicals like the students. In addition, the leaders of the moderate opposition (such as Abdurrachman Wahid, Megawati, Amien Rais and the Sultan of Yogyakarta) are taking advantage of the fact that the students are putting pressure on the regime. This enables the moderate leaders to compromise with the weakened establishment, and to

carry out cautious changes at a tranquil pace. The moderates are also trying to tame the students, so as to be able to contest the upcoming elections with a minimum of disturbance. The students are at a loss as to how to deal with this. They tried to build a broad and radical movement behind the moderate leaders, just as the students of the 1940s prevailed upon nationalist leaders like Sukarno to proclaim the country's independence, and to refuse any compromise with the colonial overlords. This time, however, their overtures were rebuffed.

The students are now faced, consequently, with a third problem: that of formulating a political program of their own, and building an independent political base. This is the hardest challenge of all. Today the students function as a substitute for the broad organisations among the middle and lower classes which are missing. They lack a politics of their own, however, for linking their demonstrations both with the concerns of ordinary people and with the established political institutions, where negotiations are conducted and decisions made.

Changing this will be difficult, for the weakness of the students is also their strength. Their strength lies in independence, integrity, and a lack of self-interest at a time when most everything is dominated by new and old bosses within politics, the economy, and the armed forces. Largely gone now is the approach of the earlier students, which was to ally themselves with critics in the military, the political system, and the intellectual world. Even the pro-democratic elite of yesterday now complains that the students don't listen to them and don't follow their advice. Yet if

this is a strength it is also a weakness, for what will serve as the base for the students' demands? What are the social moorings for their politics? In order to protect their independence, as well as to avoid provocateurs and undisciplined masses of people, they even hesitate to allow "ordinary people" to take part in the demonstrations and to demand their rights and defend their interests.

In the same way, it is both a strength and a weakness that the students lack a cohesive organisation with a distinct and encompassing leadership structure. It is networks that rule the roost here. This means there is no top figure to seize or co-opt. It also means it is possible to adjust to local conditions and to make use of the new vitality. At the same time, however, this loose organisational pattern makes it hard for the students to reach out beyond their own group, to mobilise people on a broad basis, or to reach common decisions over long-term questions. At present, the students are only able to unite behind resounding demands which are simple enough to be proclaimed on the streets and in the squares. One result of this is that the actual negotiations and decisions are anyway left to the elite and its allies. Another is that the questions and demands raised by the students are not always so relevant for ordinary people, whose first concern is whether or not democracy will lead to more jobs and food. Not even those questions on which the students are most knowledgeable, and which others find difficult to master – complicated things such as the election laws and their implementation – make it on to the agenda. These are not suitable for the parliament of the street either.

Worst of all, the students do not know to relate to the coming elections. If we form a party, they say, we will be divided, and our independence and moral force will be lost. And if we concentrate our resources on political education and electoral oversight, many add, we will risk legitimising not just a few good new forces, but also all those old villains who will assuredly be elected too. So even if the students have nothing against elections, their efforts are likely to prove irrelevant when election fever spreads, and people realise that "villains or not – the only ones we have to vote for are the politicians of today and their parties."

So if the regime succeeds in keeping control over the reform process, and the moderate politicians place their bets on a compromise with the establishment – which is the most likely outcome, notwithstanding all the turbulence – the students will be thrown upon their own resources. And these resources are, to be sure, substantial and promising in many ways. But the students' strength is also their weakness, as seen in the lack of a connection between the concerns of ordinary people, the actions of the students, and the established political institutions. The admonitory conclusion here is therefore this: if the student movement does not succeed in creating such a connection, in the form of a second liberation movement rooted in the interests of ordinary people, and devoted to the achievement of successive and deepened democratisation both before and after the elections, it will most likely end up as a collection of fragmented pressure groups. While elected bosses attend to the making of policy and the exercise of power. This, of course, is much better than yesterday's

authoritarian exploitation and the present unrest on the verge of breakdown, but it's hardly the best breeding ground for stable and deepened democracy.

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