

The Rise and Crumbling of Reformist Populism in Indonesia

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Populism is often associated with nationalist mass mobilisation against liberal internationalism. However, while this may be one outcome of populism, it does not equal populism. There is increasing scholarly agreement with Cas Mudde that the essence of populism is a thin ideology of ‘*common people*’ and its ‘*general will*’, in contrast to established elites and their special interests. Populist politics, moreover, is rooted in (i) the idea that ‘*the people*’ is defined by common identity (often against an enemy) and (ii) the fancy for *direct popular participation* in public governance – i.e. non-mediated links between people and state, in contrast to residence-based citizenship and representative mediation between citizens and state by their own organizations. We may also specify the left-populist additions as Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic politics of posing ‘popular sovereignty’ against ‘ordo-cum-neo-liberalism’, plus fostering an ‘hegemonic general will’ by way of a common identity (‘chains of equivalents’) among emancipatory social movements (rather than ‘rigidly defined classes’) against a common enemy. Provisionally, rightist populism should thus be the opposite.

Consequently, we need to analyse the rise of different populisms and their outcomes, including the implications for human rights, democracy and inclusive development.

For two reasons Indonesia is a good case in point. The first reason is that for some time it was a case of ‘positive populism’, opening up for revitalisation of democracy and inclusive development.

For a background, Indonesia is the world’s third largest nominal democracy, and the largest, and the temporarily most successful of the ‘new democracies’. After Suharto, the old political, administrative, economic and religious elites were effectively accommodated. They adjusted to the new institutions by dominating, using and abusing them. Meanwhile, there were few chances for organised interests such as unions and other pro-democrats in civil society to sustain democratisation and efforts at good governance by nurturing active citizenship and membership and policy based organisations and parties. Pro-democrats who want to, for example, take part in elections with an alternative party (even if locally only), must first prove their party to be present with offices and members in all provinces, 75 % of their regencies, and 50% of their sub-districts – in a country as large as the European Union. Even pro-democrats who only lobby have very few anti-corrupt politicians to approach. In short, the most essential foundations for democratisation were neglected, and democracy is now backsliding. For many years, in spite of the challenges, pro-democrats tried numerous ways to get inside the elitist democratic system and reform it, but by 2009 the only remaining option seemed to be subjugation and horse trading with mainstream parties and politicians (‘diaspora politics’), which proved disastrous. Meanwhile, however, fortunately, a populist opening enabled progressives to make some headway.

The second reason for why Indonesia is a good case is that it also enables us to study (i) how rightist populism emerged and almost overturned reformist populism – plus (ii) how the reformists accommodated to the threat and managed to get re-elected (by contrast to, for example, in India, the Philippines and Brazil) – but in the process undermined liberties, equal citizenship and democracy.

There were four foundations for the populist opening. Firstly, that new direct elections of political executives (mayors/heads of districts, governors, presidents) called for wider support. These executives were formerly appointed by the parliaments; and in the elections by proportional representation to them, the parties tended to rely on clientelism and their particular socio-religious and ethnic followers. In the new direct elections, however, successful contenders must go beyond this pattern by popular appeals to gain more votes. Secondly, that increasing social mobility and urbanisation too made it difficult to win elections by patron-clientelism only. Thirdly, that politicians had to counter increasing critique of elitist politics and corrupt politicians with new attractive ideas and non-establishment candidates. Fourthly, that there were strong opinions for universal public welfare programmes, in addition to insufficient patronage and self-help, because of the Asian economic crisis and, thereafter, more ‘flexible’ employment conditions.

There were also four particularly promising openings. One is best illustrated by the local social contract of urban development in Solo, Central Java. In 2005 Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo – the then directly elected mayor with a background as a student of natural science, modest supplier of furniture and leader of a business association – was in need of extra-parliamentary support beyond the elitist parties in the city council. This increased the bargaining power of the civil society groups that facilitated organisations among informal labour. When Jokowi suggested business and middle-class driven modernisation of the city centre, they demanded fair compensation and alternatives for the poor. Jokowi talked directly with them (not to them), agreed on a deal and delivered. In 2010, he was re-elected with 90% of the votes. The achievements in Solo were the major source of inspiration when Jokowi subsequently was elected governor of Jakarta in 2012 and then, in 2014, president of the country – the first president with a non-elite background, promising inclusive liberal economic development based on investments in infrastructure, international cooperation and human rights.

The second opening was the successful broad alliance at the central level in the early 2010s between progressive parliamentarians (mainly from Megawati’s PDI-P party that supported Jokowi), trade unions, civil society and urban poor, in favour of a reform to provide universal public health coverage.

The third advancement was social movement unionism to negotiate political decisions on minimum wages and regulations against social dumping through subcontracting. The fourth potential was the attempt by just elected President Jokowi to cooperate with the anti-corruption agency and civil society activists to scrutinize potential cabinet members and senior bureaucrats.

In short, the populist openings were not bad but a positive way to enable more democratisation while also fostering human rights and liberal economic development. The ‘Economist’, for one, applauded.

However, there were serious setbacks. The social pact in Solo declined when Jokowi left for Jakarta. The broad alliance for public welfare was also not sustained. In the 2014 presidential elections, the best organised trade union confederation even supported infamous former general and business oligarch Prabowo Subianto in return for favours.

Moreover, when Jokowi had won with a thin margin and formed his government, he did not mainly rely on the pro-democracy movement but the economic and political elite, including in ‘his’ PDI-P party; and he failed to use the anti-corruption agency to contain ‘dirty politics’. In face of the 2017 gubernatorial elections in Jakarta, Deputy Governor Basuki Tjahaja ‘Ahok’ Purnam, ethnic Chinese and Christian, prioritised Singaporean-style management, dishonoured the promises to the urban poor, and made ill-advised statements about his opponents’ abuse of a verse in Koran to get people to abandon him. Hence, the field was wide open for Ahok’s (and Jokowi’s) contenders to foster conservative populism, accusing Ahok for being against Islam in general and poor Muslims in

particular. Huge masses were mobilised in the streets. Established critics of Jokowi's regime nourished extreme Muslim groups. Ahok was sentenced for blasphemy and lost the election.

When the 2019 presidential elections were coming near, similar critique and increasingly strong Muslim groups began to be mobilised against Jokowi. To counter this, Jokowi did once again not mobilise the popular movements having fostered him but relied on illiberal measures, political accommodation of conservative Muslim ideas and groups (even appointing a major conservative Muslim Ulama his vice president candidate), related 'political triangulation' and the revival of Indonesia's socio-religious and ethnic politics.

Once re-elected, Jokowi has accommodated his major political opponents (even infamous former General Prabowo) as well as the parliamentarians (including from 'his' PDI-P party) that now weaken the anti-corruption agency and the regulations on mining and land acquisition, plus revise the criminal code to reduce critical freedoms. This is power-sharing, not democracy. Even though the students reclaim the streets to protest, Jokowi stated in his inaugural address that the main thing is not the process but the results in terms of international oriented economic development. This resembles European practices of defending liberal economic globalisation while conceding to chauvinist populist resistance against international engagement for democracy and human rights. Despite Jokowi's pro-business line, the 'Economist' is now worried.

Why were the positive populist openings closed by right wing populism and triangulation of international economic liberalism and chauvinist resistance against human rights based democracy? The research I am involved in draws special attention to the fact that the pro-democrats did not use the openings to contain the destructive aspects of populism. These aspects boil down to the fancy for direct democracy (unmediated relations between citizens and rulers) and the identity based politics to unify people against an enemy. In these respects, reformist populists are their own main enemies.

How did the setbacks relate to the unmediated direct relations between citizens and rulers? A major reason for why social pacts in Solo and Jakarta were not sustained was the lack of institutionalisation with rules and regulations for representation of the parties involved. Rather, the populist leader negotiated informally and individually with the various groups and leaders, agreeing on specific measures and deals. This caused divisions and the agreements rested with individuals. Further, a major reason for why the broad alliance between unions, civil society groups and politicians for the public health reform could not be sustained and followed up was the lack of a format to negotiate with local and central government how to combine welfare and social security measures towards best possible wage levels and employment and labour market reforms. These issues remained separated. Union leaders continued to strike specific deals with employers and politicians, while the latter used the same practices to promote their vested interests. Meanwhile informal labour were marginalised, again. Civil society organisations continued to lobby special access and favours for their organisations and the people they support. Hence, it was also difficult to use democratically institutionalised participation of civil society and interest based organisations in public governance to strengthen these actors. Actors who might in that case have been able to provide sufficient support for progressive leaders, so that they did not have had to concede to the political and economic elite, and religious mass organisations.

Secondly, how did the setbacks relate to the populist identity based politics? Pro-democrats certainly put forward a number of demands, but they were not aggregated under unifying umbrellas other than slogans such as anti-elitism or anti-neoliberalism. Even though there was a vision of less unfair urban development in the pacts between urban poor, middle classes and business, and even though the universal public health reform was a positive exception by serving as a unifying positive

platform, these were not followed up. There was no emphasis on developing a strategy for transformative reforms (in the sense of increasing people's capacity by one reform, so that they could fight for another) by relating social welfare reforms with labour rights and economic development. As for the unions and CSOs, moreover, the predominant strategy was to gain favours for their own organisations and followers – not to foster collective action behind comprehensive public reforms for all. Similarly, even though the progressives had access to public offices and even directed the president's staff for some time, they did not focus effectively enough on drafting and negotiating new comprehensive reforms, which various movements and groups could unite behind and gain strength, thus also backing up the government. Relatedly, the struggle for welfare reforms was not combined with efforts at better public services. The anti-corruption agency and groups focused on the important middle class preoccupation with impartial governance and large-scale corruption among the political elite, not also on the corruption of public welfare services that affect ordinary people and may generate broader counter movements.

In conclusion, in contrast to liberal assumptions, reformist populism may be an opening for democratic and inclusive development as well as international cooperation to that end. But the supposedly direct linkages between ruler and people, and identity politics against enemies are destructive. They must be replaced with democratic representation of popular rooted organisations for crucial issues and interests in public governance, and broad transformative reforms that democratic movements and groups can agree on and support.

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