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Overtaking right-wing populism in Indonesia?

With the vote for Trump and Brexit, it is common knowledge that increasingly large numbers of people affected by the ills of unregulated globalisation are drawn to populist right wing nationalism rather than mainstream liberalism and social democracy. This challenge applies to the Global South too. In India, for example, the Hindu fundamentalists' identity politics is thriving along with their own private provisioning of social services and neo-liberal oriented economic policies, thus nurturing a local version of the American dream. In the Philippines, a murderous president was elected by promising jobs for the poor and deals with the Maoists. In Brazil, the combination of neo-liberalism and welfare programmes lost popular trust in face of shrinking commodity prices, poor governance and inability to scale up local democratic participation.

Indonesia is no exception. In 2014, Prabowo Subianto was almost 'making a Trump' in the presidential elections. Recently, rivals of President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo and his allied Jakarta Governor Basuki. T. Purnama, 'Ahok', managed to get huge numbers of people out in the streets and to undermine Ahok's support in the gubernatorial elections. The populist method was to combine antagonistic Muslim identity politics and urban poor people's resentment against evictions. By April, right wing populism may well be victorious in the run-off election.

In such situations, is there an alternative? According to a recent international study about the challenges of reinventing social democratic development (directed by Törnquist and Harriss; published by NIAS-Press), the democratic movements that stood tall against European Nazis and fascists in the 1930s are now hampered by the globalisation of uneven development. This undermines regulations, increases inequalities, informalises labour relations and weakens democratic organisation and representation. Worst, many people at the downside of uneven development find no alternative but to reject the establishment. Yet, the study concludes, there are also positive signs of new counter movements of labour and disenchanted middle classes, for decent jobs and uncorrupted welfare states. Such alliances stand a chance of affecting public policies when elitist democracy is backsliding and leaders must gather wider popular support to win elections.

Actually, Indonesia seemed to be a good example. Jokowi's road to power began by his ability to gather massive support in Solo (Central Java) for inclusive urban development. This was much thanks to negotiations with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and popular organisations among the poor. In Jakarta, moreover, progressive politicians could enact the universal public health scheme thanks to inputs and backing from a broad alliance of unions, popular groups and CSOs. Meanwhile, Jokowi and Ahok were elected governors, not least with the support of popular groups and CSOs. Once in office, minimum wages were increased, public services and welfare were improved; and there were invitations to unions, among others, to negotiate further advances. But why were not these advances followed up?

According to a new study by the present authors (<http://www.polgov.id/en/book/dilemmas-of-populist-transactionalism-1>.) there have been five major problems. One, the co-operation with popular groups presupposed that the politicians realised the necessity of fostering sustainable and inclusive development to win elections. In Solo Jokowi understood, but later on in Jakarta Ahok thought perhaps that it was enough to please the middle classes. This paved the way for the right wing populists to supplement aggressive religious identity politics by general promises to urban poor to avoid evictions. Two, it was difficult to scale-up Jokowi's inclusive Solo-model to Jakarta where the popular organisations were fragmented and dominant social blocks are entrenched. Popular organisations could have been fostered, but time was short; and after the Presidential election, Jokowi was preoccupied with other problems. Three, there were few attempts to continue the successful struggle for the national health scheme with campaigns for much needed additional welfare reforms,

so the broad alliance lost steam. Four, there were also no demands from below, or an enlightened plan from above, to institutionalise democratic participation in planning of welfare and development by crucial interest organisations, including among unions, domestic workers, urban poor and employers. Hence, the governors' proposals to discuss other issues but wages become unviable. The movements turned to different patrons in the Presidential election in 2014. Popular groups and politicians reversed to transactional populism of individual horse-trading. Fifth, as this did not provide sufficient backing for progressive policies, the new President and Governor retreated and resorted to negotiations with the dominant block of political and economic elites.

All this was about political priorities. It was not bound to happen. Hence it can be altered. Enlightened Indonesian reformists may just as several liberal and social democrats elsewhere realise that they cannot ignore those who do not benefit from the uneven development without losing out to leaders like Trump. If so, there must be progressive alternatives to right-wing populism. Moreover, such inclusive alternatives call for more solid ground than what can be offered by supposedly unmediated linkages between charismatic leaders and the 'floating mass'. This is because comprehensive policies towards an inclusive development strategy based on productive welfare programmes require facilitation of negotiations between democratic citizen groups and interest organisations among labour, middle classes and employers. This is hard. But by thus transforming the playing field, enlightened leaders, CSOs and popular groups may overtake right wing populism. Time is short, but signals can be sent, steps can be taken and policies can be initiated.

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