

Workers in politics

Why is organised labour missing from the democracy movement?

Olle Törnquist

When business abandoned Suharto in 1997-98, and students and sections of the elite did away with him, labour was nowhere to be seen. Some workers took to the streets when Suharto was finally forced to resign, but *organised* labour was only minimally involved. There has been little political activism on the labour front since then. The many new trade unions lack political clout.

All has not been plain sailing for Indonesian democracy either. The activists who paved the way for democracy are marginalised. Self-interested power groups have taken over. Indonesian democratisation has been largely a matter of elite compromise and crafting of institutions. Apart from some basic freedoms and elections, most institutions are not performing well.

Is there a connection between labour's political inactivity and the poor quality of democracy? Comparing Indonesia to other countries suggests there might be. In many countries, organised labour, in the form of trade unions, labour parties and the like, played a crucial role in expanding representative government, challenging elitism, increasing government services to ordinary people and breaking down religious and regional enmities. Labour played this role, for instance, in Northern European countries like Britain, Holland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in South Korea, South Africa and Brazil more recently. Why hasn't organised labour in Indonesia been similarly influential?

In theory, it should have been possible. Capitalism has expanded and the number of workers has increased greatly in Indonesia in recent decades. But none of the methods by which labour promoted democracy elsewhere have evolved. There have been plenty of demands for better pay and working conditions, but they haven't been able to transform Indonesia's exploitative form of capitalism into one with entrenched social rights. Nor has labour been able to erode ethnic, religious and other divisions by bringing people together to defend their common interests as workers. What stands in the way?

Destructive politics

The problem lies in a gap between labour activists and the many pro-democracy groups. Labour activism is dominated by a "labour puritanism" which eschews political activity and focuses only on the issues of the workers themselves. Democracy activists, by contrast, practice a "post-industrial civic action" of a kind found in many advanced capitalist countries today, focusing on single issues and trying to influence public opinion. As a result, there are no real political alternatives based on the fundamental interests and ideas of ordinary people. Labour and the democracy activists have abandoned the political arena to the elite.

The origins of the problem lie in the Suharto period. During that time, government repression limited most labour activism to employment conditions in factories. Workers who tried to raise broader political issues could be arrested, or worse. They had few links with students and middle class activists. Those activists weren't much interested in labour either. Instead, they debated reform programmes or tried to find shortcuts to political change by promoting their views in the media, seeking out personal contacts in the regime, or attaching themselves to charismatic leaders like Megawati.

With the fall of Suharto, progressive labour leaders did not come together to transform the old unions and seize the political initiative. Instead, they typically opted to set up their own groups and tendencies, aiming always to build a 'true and pure' workers' movement. Some of them (including those in food, agriculture, hotels and restaurants) distrusted top-down initiatives and politics and

focused on work-place organising. Others, such as those led by Dita Sari, said this was too narrow and instead offered theoretically well-formulated political platforms. Yet others, typically those related to NGOs, tried to use community organising approaches in residential areas to reach out to all workers, not only those with regular employment.

Meanwhile, the more influential students and middle class activists became similarly fragmented. According to a large-scale survey by Demos (Indonesian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies) in 2003, there was no unifying project or forum for pro-democracy groups. Instead, there were 15 to 20 clusters of groups. Each cluster specialises on a different set of issues, everything from land reclamation and environmental destruction to gender issues, anti-corruption measures or religious and ethnic reconciliation.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with activists focusing on particular issues. The problem is the lack of political channels to integrate the different interests and ideas, combine actions and build broader representative movements.

Disunity is the problem

Some of the basics of this dynamic were revealed in another survey by Demos in 2005, in which 800 activists from most of the special issue areas were interviewed. Four trends were visible. First, most activists focus on self-management and community organising. This is different from traditional trade union and political work, which is rooted in conflicts and interests in working life and then relates to people's residential areas, schools or division of labour at home, thus allowing broader political agendas and programmes.

Second, most activists focus on single issues and special interests. This may bring together people to work on problems that arouse their passions, but it tends to distance them from those working on other issues. It stymies the broad collective action that strong middle class actors may be able to live without, but which workers need. There seems to be general agreement on broad values such as pluralism, human rights and democracy, but there is no over-arching ideology to combine the immediate issues and these values into concerted political action.

Third, most democracy activists use methods of organising that don't fit well with the needs of labour. Some try to bypass self-reliant organising by looking for popular but often free-wheeling figures. Others organise via "autonomous networking" that sounds free and ideal in theory, but in practice often involves personalised contacts with influential individuals. A lot of networking depends on who you know and how well connected you are as an individual activist. Formal, democratic organisations of the kind that organised labour needs to come together and discipline its leaders are almost unknown.

Finally, the pro-democrats' reading of available political opportunities is different from that of labour activists. Many point to better opportunities for lobbying or direct participation. As a result, they feel they don't need to build a mass base or engage in tiring disputes over representation and elections. The pro-democrats' sources of power tend to be good contacts, specialist knowledge and information. They use methods typical of activists in contemporary post-industrial societies: media work, publicity stunts, lobbying and changing opinion in the public sphere.

In contrast, labour's traditional sources of power are the abilities to block production, organise and mobilise on a mass base as well as to get elected via unions, other popular organisations and parties. Unity, numbers and representation with clearly defined mandates are workers' strengths, not eloquent lobbying. Moreover, organised labour has a basic democratic interest in strict and fair rules and regulations in order to handle conflicts and discipline the powerful, such as capitalists and the military. These fundamentals made labour a democratising force elsewhere.

Alternatives

In sum, the chief explanation for why workers have not much influenced democratisation is that they have been isolated from the democracy campaigners. Labour activism has become inward-looking while pro-democracy activists have not built links with workers. The result is that both groups have been marginalised, and Indonesian democracy has suffered as a consequence.

Are there no options for promoting political alliances? Indeed there are. There is an emerging awareness at both ends of the spectrum that activists must consider elections and the question of representation in order to break out of their isolation and make a difference. That is not to say that the necessary forums and organisations already exist. But once representative elections are accepted as a basic principle, the way forward is likely to be relatively straightforward. The civic groups will need to combine their self-management, single-issue and networking ethos with mass-oriented organisation, if for no other reason than to get the numbers. The ‘labour puritans’ must combine their demands with broader agendas and alliances. And very few will accept any elected leader who is not responsive and accountable.

This is a lesson we can draw from the experiences of other countries. Transforming democracy from an elitist game into a system that really benefits ordinary people requires the interests of the mass of the population, including workers, to be truly represented. Indonesian democracy will become meaningful when labour puritans and democracy activists bridge the divide that separates them.

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Demos (www.demos.or.id) has published many studies on the democracy movement in Indonesia. Information about Demos publications and the surveys mentioned in this article can be found on the website.

Pull quotes:

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