

# Indonesia: The 2009 general elections and illusions within the movement

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In the lead up to the 2009 general elections, the political map of the movements appears to be undergoing a large polarisation, particularly a polarisation between the political decision to take part in the elections as a contestant (by joining an existing political party) versus the political decision of refusing to become an electoral participant.

The decision to take part in the 2009 elections, which has been taken, by among others, by the People's Democratic Party (PRD) and its affiliated organisations [1], has been motivated by the following arguments:

1. That becoming an electoral participant will provide greater space for the movements to broaden campaigns on populist programs;
2. By broadening campaigns on populist programs, it is hoped that it will expand the people's support (in the form of extending the structure of the movement);
3. Thus the people's capacity and potential to struggle will grow even stronger;
4. If they make good in the elections, and in end succeed in obtaining seats in parliament, then the space for such campaigns will be even broader again.

Aside from the above, there are also additional arguments, such as:

1. That in the 2004 general elections, the political parties that participated in the election were a grouping of parties that were serving the old ways, that is neoliberalism, so the people had no other alternative. Because of this therefore, in order that the people have another alternative, the movements must take part in contesting the 2009 elections;
2. Between 2004 and now, there has been a change in political direction on the part of some political forces that were previously deemed to be fake reformist political forces, so that these fake reformist forces (which have now become "progressive" forces) can become allies in contesting the 2009 elections, and even that some elements of the military, can also now be deemed to have the potential to become allies, likewise also for businesspeople, providing that they have a platform of national self-sufficiency.

The more practical arguments to become participants in the 2009 elections are:

1. Real, concrete politics are parliamentary politics, not the politics of the streets;
2. There have been enough struggles in the streets, being poor, suffering, and now is the time to reap the results.

Meanwhile, those who have taken a position of not participating in the elections, such as the Indonesian Student Union (SMI) and the Indonesian Trade Union Congress Alliance (KASBI, which

in a press release declared they would 'golput' (white movement, to abstain from voting or not mark the ballot paper), base this on the following arguments [2]:

1. The 2009 elections are an instrument of the Indonesian bourgeoisie to consolidate their position, as a political force that will faithfully pursue a program of neoliberalism, so the 2009 elections are not a people's election (an election subjugated) in the interests of the majority of ordinary people;
2. That up until now, the program of neoliberalism has failed to bring prosperity to the people, and likewise the political forces that support neoliberalism have failed to become a political vehicle representing the interests of the people;
3. The progressive growth in the people's mistrust of the bourgeois political parties, the bourgeois political elite, and even their mistrust of the mechanism of bourgeois elections (at least from the high level of golput in several elections of regional heads, which indicates that politically the people are becoming increasingly fed up).

Given these two different positions, it is of course reasonable for it to become an open debate in order that it becomes clearer to the people, which path should be followed in order to release them from increasingly acute poverty.

Before entering into a polemic between the choice of becoming a participant in the elections or not, I think that it would be better to open first with a discussion about what the basic problems of the Indonesian people are at the moment, which are causing to Indonesian people to become progressively poorer and powerless. This discussion becomes relevant because an assessment of the basic problems facing the Indonesian people also influences the tactical choice in confronting the 2009 elections.

Prior to the fuel price hikes several months ago, at a glance there did not appear that there were any big differences (moreover it could be said that there were no differences except those between the People's Movement Alliance for Agrarian Reform (AGRA) and the National Students Front, FMN) between left movement groups about what had become the Indonesian people's basic problem.

Light discussions in informal forums and formal meetings with long debates, never departed from a similar view that the basic problem of the Indonesian people at the moment is neoliberalism as an economic and political system that is being pursued by the political forces that have been in power in Indonesia since the era of the New Order regime of former President Suharto. However the momentum created by the recent fuel price hikes (before the seeds of difference were visible, although they were not manifested in the form of an explicit polarisation) opened up sharp difference, which like or not had to be aired.

The principle difference was not over the assessment of neoliberalism as the basic problem, but rather over the assessment of the political elite forces (bourgeois) within the country, where a section of the left movement (led by the PRD and the National Liberation Party of Unity or Papernas), gave a new definition to the political forces within the country. By viewing neoliberalism as a form of colonisation by foreign capital, which is being driven by foreign political forces, thus the political elite forces (bourgeois) within the country are not the basic problem. Rather, they have to be seen as potential allies, because the elite forces (bourgeois) within the country also have an interest in fighting this colonialism by foreign capital.

In any event, this argument is reflected in a piece written by I Gede Sandra [3], titled "Promote National Unity! Put aside Differences and Seek Commonality" [4], where Gede Sandra includes civilian politicians such as Rizal Ramli (a former economics minister during the Abdurrahman Wahid

administration), Amin Rais (former speaker of the of the People's Consultative Assembly) and Drajat Wibowo (House of Representatives Member) and military figures such as retired General A.M. Hendropriyono, former military commander in chief retired General Wiranto and former army special forces (Kopassus) chief retired General Prabowo Subianto as figures that are pro-national self-sufficiency, so according to Gede Sandra they are key allies that must be embraced in the fight against foreign colonialism.

Similar arguments were presented by then Papernas secretary general Haris Sitorus. In an interview in *Journal of Unity (Jurnal Bersatu)* published in May 2008 [5], Sitorus said that the principle enemy of the Indonesian people at the moment is foreign capital, so all forces with the potential to undertake a struggle against foreign capital must be united, and even that the struggle within the country can be disregarded for the moment.

Others meanwhile, at least those forces that became the motivating force behind the National Liberation Front (FPN, which KASBI and SMI are also involved in) believe that colonial domination is not simply because of foreign capital, but also because of domestic capital. The effectiveness of the capital domination that has been achieved up until now (in the form of the plundering of natural wealth and the country's vital assets, in the form of labour flexibility, in the form of trade liberalisation and free markets) is because none of the domestic elite political forces have carried out any kind of fight, and have instead competed with each other to become the allies of foreign capital [6]. So disregarding the domestic political elite forces as enemies of the people, is clearly a huge error.

The current phenomena of elite political figures making criticisms (but limited to criticisms, not building a movement) against capital domination (primarily foreign capital), is a result of several things:

1. The broadening of the people's movement (in the form of mobilisations) against domination by foreign capital;
2. The situation in the lead up to the 2009 elections, which has compelled these figures to present a new face to the people, who are increasingly mistrustful of the elite leadership.

And not because the political elite has taken a strong stand against foreign capital, such as economics minister Rizal Ramli for example (among the figures currently criticising the domination of foreign capital, Ramli has been far more forward by being involved in demonstrations against the recent fuel price hikes) who in an interview in *Forum Magazine* which was quoted by *Rakyat Merdeka Online* [7] told the managing director of the International Monetary Fund for the Asia-Pacific, Hubert Neiss, that he understood the fuel price increases, only it was just the timing that was incorrect. This statement was issued at a meeting in late April this year. Meaning that the demonstrations in which Ramli opposed the fuel price hikes were not because of foreign capital domination but rather because the timing of the increases was wrong, and if the increases had been carried out several months earlier, or a year later, perhaps Ramli would have supported them.

As I have portrayed above, it is this that then becomes grounds for adopting a different tactic (participating in the elections or not) in responding to the 2009 elections.

Personally, I am clearly opposing to becoming a participant in the 2009 elections, not because I disagree with the ideas expressed in the first four arguments above, but rather because the conditions for these four arguments to be practical do not exist:

1. It clearly cannot be denied that the elections, as a national political momentum, represent a

huge political platform, and are of interest (whether through coercion or “voluntarily”) to the majority of Indonesian people, although this huge platform does not automatically become an effective one for the movements in becoming participants in the elections. This ineffectiveness is because the political vehicle that is being used by the movements is not a political vehicle that the movement has built itself, with its own program, with its own methods of struggle, with its own organisational capital or its own leaders. Because the movement does not have its own political vehicle (although this has been strived for with all its excesses and limitations), the movement must join and become part of other political vehicles, and it is precisely this point that is crucial, among the existing political vehicles (that is the political parties that will take part in the 2009 elections) there is not one that resembles what has been fought for by the Indonesian movements up until now, so becoming part of these oppressive forces, will of course strengthen the political position of the oppressive class to gain legitimacy from the people — a legitimacy that is increasingly declining.

Although currently (and also in the previous general elections or the regional elections that have followed it), some parties (perhaps even all of them) have declared that they are pro-people parties, a party that have taken up a mission of reform, a party that is anti-neoliberalism, a party that supports national independence, a party that is pro-working class, a party that is pro-farmer and a party that is good on all sorts of other issues, and it is easy to guess the actual aim of the hypocrisy of these parties, it is none other than and simply to garner as many votes as possible in the 2009 elections, so that these parties can win power, and as soon as power is in their grasp, their real character will become apparent.

This is the reason why we have never seen (and will not see in the future) genuine efforts by these parties to defend the people’s interests, except in their efforts to deceive and oppress the people. The parties that will take part in the 2009 elections are not parties that from their initial establishment were directed at defending the interests of the people, although in one or two sentences, they declare that they will do this, however from the process of their formation, their leaders, their methods of struggle and their consistency of struggle, there is not the slightest indication that they are a political party that sides with the interests of the people.

So when Papernas general chairperson Dita Indah Sari expresses the view that the PBR or Star Reform Party (perhaps there are also other activist who say similar things in order to defend their parties) is the party that is the best among the worst, it is simply rhetoric, and is exactly the same as the rhetoric that comes out of the rotten mouths of the bourgeois politicians.

Accordingly, the stated aim of broadening the campaign for populist programs will clearly not be achieved (after all, all of the other parties also tout populist programs in order to garner the most votes), unless the people are shown the differences between the populist programs being articulated by the movement and the populist program being thrown up by the bourgeois parties, and at the same time pointing out to the people the failures of these parties up until now and the potential failure of these parties in the future.

But if this is done by the movements (which have now joined these parties), then it is very possible that they will be expelled, crossed off legislative candidate lists or removed as party leaders, and unfortunately, so far there has been none who have issued a statement stating that they prepared to be dismissed from the party for the reasons above.

2. As is usual with populist programs, augmented with the use of political vehicles that are owned by the bourgeoisie, it is certain that the organisational structure that will be broadened is the organisational structure of the bourgeoisie. Sari, as a PBR legislative candidate for the Central Java V electoral district, will of course be building the PBR’s structure there (not the structures of the PRD, Papernas, their affiliated Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggle (FNPBI) or other movement organisations), because it is the PBR that is stepping forward in the elections, and this PBR structure

will then be turned into a structure of the PRD, Papernas or another organisation, and will of course require time (noting that Sari and company will for some time have to become part of the PBR structure, which means that they cannot challenge the PBR, for example on the PBR's position of supporting the disbanding of the Ahmadiyah religious sect, Sari as a movement activist cannot explicitly oppose the PBR's position on this).

This process will become even more drawn out because the political structure that is being established is an electoral political machine (a political machine to garner votes), not a political machine of the movement, because within the electoral mechanisms there are many obstacles for exiting political structures becoming a movement structure, such as obstacles to holding actions against anti-people policies in the Central Java Velectoral district in the name of the PBR (even if this were to be done, it would be done in the name of another organisation — who knows if it would be the PRD, Papernas or another organisation — which in terms of electoral tactics would not be effective in ensuring victory for the PBR as a party or Sari as a legislative candidate, because the people will see that it is not the PBR that is siding with the people, while the ones that are stepping forward in the elections are the PBR). This is already happening right now.

The Indonesian Poor People's Union (SRMI, which is a part of Papernas and also supports the PBR) recently held quite a large mass action in Jakarta, but the PBR as the party that is backed by SRMI (never mind that the PBR has also signed a political contract with the SRMI) made absolutely no appearance at the demonstration (as measured by mass media coverage, although perhaps in their speeches SRMI chairperson Marlo Sitompul and other SRMI leaders spoke about the PBR). The PBR's non-appearance is of course because the action was conducted in the name of the SRMI, not the PBR.

In the context of the PBR (unlike the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, the Golkar Party, the Justice and Prosperity Party or the other big parties), building the PBR's structure simply as a vote gathering machine will be difficult, in a situation where the PBR is not a popular party, and not a party that has struggled for the interests of ordinary people. In a situation such as this, the building of the PBR's structure is only possible through two means (there should be a third means, if actions defending the people are carried out by the PRD, Papernas, SRMI, LMND, STN or other Papernas affiliated organisations using the PBR's name, however it can be seen that up until now, this does not appear to be the principle tactic, and it is very likely that this tactic will not be used).

The first means is through a conventional campaign emphasising that the PBR is a party that is worthy of the people's vote in the 2009 elections, and if there are people that know that the PBR has supported policies that harm the ordinary people, then like it or not the PBR's rotten track record will have to be covered up, once again through the same rhetoric as the other rotten politicians. Perhaps it will be said, "Yeah, well... we still don't have many representatives in the national or regional parliaments, so we couldn't do much", or perhaps they will say, "That was the actions of a particular individual, not party policy", or perhaps also they will say, "Last year policies such as this were not yet possible, but we will defiantly do it next year". The second means by which to build the vote gathering machine, is of course exactly the same as the other parties, by providing bribes in various forms, from the most minor expenses to the very large expenses (by way of example, Nurul Arifin said during a discussion on one of the private television stations that the minimal capital needed to win is around 1 billion rupiah, a huge figure, even though Arifin is one of the most popular legislative candidates being backed by the Golkar Party).

How much then will it cost a legislative candidate that is not as popular as Arifin from a party that is also unpopular or small? Even if the money is there (perhaps there is some political backer who is willing to defray the cost), building the structure by means of bribing the masses is clearly not the way to build the movement, which means that the expressed desire to broaden the structure of the

movement though the elections is utter nonsense.

3. Meaning that the chances of become a member of the House of Representatives (DPR) or the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) is very small, and even if they are successful (by the means described above), the possibility of becoming a member of the DPR who is radical, who is willing to struggle for the interests of the ordinary people, is also extremely small, because in the process of setting out to become a member of the DPR or DPRD they have already abandoned the principles of struggle, and I do not believe, though a process such as this, through some miracle, will there emerge the kind of DPR or DPRD members that the ordinary people are hoping for.

Meaning, this tactic by the movement of joining the political parties participating in the 2009 elections, it simply being undertaken for the pragmatic reasons I mentioned above.

*To be continued... [8]*

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## **P.S.**

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## **Footnotes**

[1] For the 2009 elections, the PRD and its affiliated organisation have chosen to join the Star Reform Party (PBR), which is a split off from the United Development Party (PPP). Currently, the PBR as one of the parties with an Islamic basis has 14 seats in the House of Representatives (DPR), has 62 provincial Regional House of Representative (DPRD) seats and 265 regency/municipal DPRD seats.

[2] The full KASBI statement is available at [www.kasbiindonesia.multiply.com](http://www.kasbiindonesia.multiply.com) and the SMI statement at [www.kppsmi.wordpress.com](http://www.kppsmi.wordpress.com)

[3] I Gede Sandra is the chief editor of *Berdikari Online* and *Bulletin Berdikari*, the official publication of the Papernas central leadership committee.

[4] See <http://papernas.org/berdikari/conten...>

[5] See [www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/foc...](http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/foc...)

[6] This can be seen from the National Liberation Front (FPN) statement in the lead up to the fuel price increases. It can also be seen in a press release by SMI and KASBI. The KPRM-PRD's publication *Pembebasan (Liberation)* and the LMND-PRM website also present a similar analysis. See [www.kppsmi.wordpress.com](http://www.kppsmi.wordpress.com), [www.arahgerak.blogspot.com](http://www.arahgerak.blogspot.com), [www.kprm-prd.blogspot.com](http://www.kprm-prd.blogspot.com) and [www.lmnd-prm.blogspot.com](http://www.lmnd-prm.blogspot.com)

[7] See <http://www.myrmnews.com/indexframe....>

[8] The next article will be on what direction for the organisation of a golput campaign.