

Where We Will Go From Here? - A Reflection on Recent United Front Work in Indonesia

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I prefer to consider this article as “a reflection on recent united front work” because it will probably not be able to go into as much detail or history as I would like. So let this primarily be a reflection on our united front organisational work in Indonesia to date. But first, I would like to frame this within the strategic aims of our struggle, as a dynamic effort to achieve short and long term goals.

Why do we undertake united front work? Because for us it is a principal tactic by which to bring broader layers of the toiling masses; the poor majority, into the movement challenging the power of the ruling class. It is a tool to bring together and mobilise different forces and build consciousness on a common platform of struggle to increase the power of resistance. At the same time, for revolutionary forces, it is also an arena to propagate the strategic aims of the movement: that is socialism through overthrowing pro-capitalist and imperialist governments and its state and to establish a government of the working class and the poor.

A Framework: Programs to be won

The majority of the Third World's working class poor have a simple dream: equality and prosperity. Although for many it is more than that, it is a matter of life and death. We must fight on a day to day basis for this. No one will give it to us for free, because that dream is a political one, so the struggle must also be political.

We believe that Socialism in the 21st century is in fitting with this dream. Genuine socialism that has learnt from the 20th century's mistakes; including the mistakes of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the genocide of the millions of the so called Indonesia communists in 1965. It will be a socialism that is democratic and participatory, ecological and feminist. Something, more or less, like Venezuela and Cuba, two countries from which we have gained so many living lessons, critical analysis and examples.

In order to fight for socialism in the 21st century in Indonesia, we need to defeat imperialism and bring down its source: capitalism. Because the suffering of all of the billions of poor the world is caused by capitalism through its small handful—but powerful—capitalist class and their supporters: from governments to political parties and ruling class ideology to family culture. In describing these as political forces in Indonesia, we have what we historically called the five political enemies of the

people. These are: imperialism and pro-imperialist puppet governments, the remnants of former dictator Suharto's New Order regime, the fake reformist political parties, the military and the reactionary militias.

To bring down capitalism and imperialism, the people themselves through their organisations have to mobilise to take over the state and place it into the hand of the poor majority. This will give a political foundation to have a government of the poor (as the instrument of people power); to build national industry by and for the people; to concentrate domestic funding; to fulfill the immediate demands of the people (as well as to build the national industry); and develop a progressive culture. We call these programs as the Five Solutions for Indonesian People.

What are the immediate demands of the peoples today? They are, and should be, many. Because today's poor—around 140 million people out of Indonesia's population of 250 million—children and the elderly, women and men, live on less than US\$2 a day, have absolutely no dream whatsoever of having a future equal the capitalist minority. This cannot be tolerated, so we prioritise campaigning for 10 immediate demands of the people. We call these the immediate not just because the democratic and economic content is a matter of life and death, but also because people are already mobilises and discussing around these demands—even though this is spontaneous and fragmented.

Those immediate demands are: (1) bring down the prices of basic commodities, (2) free healthcare and education, (3) a reasonable minimum wage and employment opportunities for all, (4) mass and affordable housing, clean water, energy and transportation, (5) democratic political and electoral laws, (6) the straightening out of Indonesia's written history, to bring back historical memory of the people, (7) the trial of human right's violators and dissolution of the Indonesian military's (TNI) territorial command structure, (8) the trial and seizure of Suharto, his cronies and the other big corruptors' assets, (9) a 50% quota for women in all public offices, (10) rehabilitate the environment. The recent attack on the freedom of religious expression, freedom of the press and women rights are also additional immediate demand that need to be campaigned for.

When we propagandise for people's power as one of the five principal solution for Indonesian people, it means people's independent organisations and a united people's movement; direct participation in democracy; a government of the poor, education that is scientific and equitable, technology and sustainable natural resources; healthy, productive, and free human beings in solidarity with each other and a mentality of resistance. Without these, socialism will not be possible in Indonesia.

So these are the programs that need to be won over the people, and in a basic sense, these are all rights the people themselves are entitled to, but capitalism has fooled them for hundreds of years so they become alienated from their own unalienable rights. This is also our platform for organising joint work in united fronts. So united front work can be based on one or more common programs or aims in the short- or long-term.

The importance of August 7 Joint Protests

On August 7 in Jakarta, at least 40 grassroots and people's organisations [1] under the banner of the National Movement took to the street to oppose increases in the price of electricity rates and basic commodities. They came from radical and centre-left political parties and organisation, students, youths, workers and urban poor organisations. Hundreds of people participated. Similar mobilisations (with mostly similar organisations) took place in least in six large cities in Indonesia—from the dozens that were planned—with hundreds to thousand participating. To have this many people taking part was good given that the momentum for opposing the price hike had

passed—the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) announced the electricity hike on July 1 while the increases to basic commodities had been on-going for some time [2].

The initiative to bring these forces together came from earlier consolidations in July by the Indonesian Struggle Union (PPI), the Political Union of the Poor (PPRM) and Indonesian Transportation Trade Union of Struggle (SBTPI), all of which are radical left forces. The aim was to have a large mass intervention on the recent neoliberal attack against the people's rights by the Yudhoyono government, and the electricity and commodity price hikes were considered a broad and immediate demand of struggle that could unite broader movement' forces.

I would like provide a brief background to the initiative [3]. Entering its second term, for more than six years (2004-2009 and 2009-2014) the Yudhoyono government been the constant target of protests over the impact of anti-people economic policies to issues of corruption and democracy, even though the political situations is relatively more stable compared the two previous post-1998 reform governments of President Abdurrahman Wahid (2000-2001) and President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004).

In general, the spontaneous protest actions by the people were also widely dispersed, and we see them daily in the bourgeois media—which even they could not avoid covering—although the actual number of actions were probably many more. Meanwhile, the left, although it had experiences in organising political instruments to unite the people's movement, was not able to consistently present their political alternative on the broader national stage to challenge the bourgeoisie (or we call them the political elite) force's political hegemony. That is also why the many spontaneous and fragmented protests have gone nowhere and in many cases, were defeated or demoralised.

This was also reflected in the results of the 2009 legislative and presidential elections, with many peoples being fed up with the traditional elite and political parties [4] but had no alternative place to channel their discontent. Yudhoyono was able to win the people hearts as shown by the higher participation rate in the presidential election compared with the earlier legislative election, but participation rates are also now dropping [5]. So objectively the left has very good opportunity to present an alternative. But the problem mostly lies in subjective factors (I will return to this in the later part of this article).

Together with the subjective problem, the other significant challenge is how to formulate tactics in a way that can create and maintain a political atmosphere of resistance and at the same time find ways to speak to and reach out broadly to the masses (upper strategy). This is important since lefts unity and consolidation of other democratic forces remains limited and is mostly encouraged by the growing resistance of the people. The August 7 National Movement initiative was part of this process.

Prior to the August 7 movement, the main lefts and democratic forces consolidated in a fragmented way under different projects and vehicles that I will summarise briefly as follows.

The Workers Challenge Alliance (ABM). This alliance was established in 2006 as an alternative progressive confederation of Indonesian workers. The objective conditions for it to develop were the radicalisation of workers in 2004-2005 against an anti-labor joint ministerial decree and draft revisions to the labor law [6]. On every May Day since then, the ABM has played a leading role in articulating the demands of more radical worker in Indonesia and mobilised no less than 5000 workers in Jakarta and thousands across the country. The Indonesian Trade Union Congress Alliance (KASBI), the Indonesian National Front for Labor Struggle (FNPBI) [7] the Indonesian Transportation Union of Struggle (SBTPI), and the Greater Jakarta Workers Federation of Struggle (FPBJ) has been the main forces behind the ABM. Several months ago however, KASBI, the biggest

trade union in the ABM, decided to leave primarily because it was unwilling to wait any longer for ABM to become a confederation—ABM was considered to slow—and the KASBI's membership has been pushing for KASBI itself to become a confederation since 2009. The ABM also played a significant role in 2008 in facilitating the establishment of the National Liberation Front (FPN), another radical united front of the left movement [8]. But the FPN ceased to exist along with the dissipation of the anti-fuel price hike's campaign.

The Indonesian People's Opposition Front (FORI). The idea to establish FORI was led by the Working People Association (PRP) and KASBI in Jakarta, and gained support from some other left forces including ourselves in early 2010, as a response to Yudhoyono's first 100 days in office. In its call for an action on January 28, 2010 (made on January 22), there were 17 signatures of grassroots organisations in Jakarta. At first, there were two different processes of consolidation (in term of platform [9] and organisational participation [10]) at the 'national' and 'Jakarta' level—the so called 'national' level was established first—but then managed to unite just before the January 28 action into one alliance comprising 47 organisations—many of them NGOs. These also happened in several other large cities, with the more or less similar groups participating [11], but some of with different name for the alliances.

The idea to established FORI as an alternative vehicle for the people's opposition was a good one, but for us the problem lay in the fact that you cannot push for unity from above, especially under the same name. It should be a democratic process support by different initiatives for unity in different regions. Of course it would be good, especially for political campaigning, to have the same united front name throughout Indonesia, but we cannot force all the groups to adopt the same name. This was one of the differences in the tactical approach to united front work between us and the PRP.

The SBTPI appears to have a similar position with regard to this approach to FORI when its leader, Ilhamsyah said early on June 2010: "we were involved in the 28 January 2010 protest action and considered FORI as an action committee to respond to first 100 days of the SBY government. We understand the need for left unity in Indonesia but this has to be organised democratically and equally among the different groups that established it, meaning not to judge different organisations based on their size. We consider there was an undemocratically organised process in the formation of the National-FORI and Greater Jakarta-FORI, including in deciding on a FORI spokesperson. As a smaller organisation we think that we were not involved in this."

These differences also resulted in different mobilisations on May Day this year with the ABM and FORI establishing a new action committee and mobilised separately. This was also part of reasons and the source of the tensions that caused KASBI to leave the ABM in mid June. So in practical terms, on May Day the main radical left consolidation was "split" into two poles: The ABM and FORI, along with other left groups that rarely participated in any united front initiatives (I would call the main forces here Maoist influenced organisations [12]).

Although the August 7 national movement was closer to action committee rather than a form of strategic or long-term unity, this does not matter, because it represented a stage in the process, and what we need to think about is a formulation to maintain the common project together with propaganda for a more strategic consolidation.

With this aim in mind, three meetings were held in August to discuss the future of Indonesia and a common response to the first year of the second term of the Yudhoyono administration, which falls on October 20 (and six years since Yudhoyono first became president). The idea to have a series of regular discussion was a good one, and the debate that developed during the course of the three discussions was also useful. The different groups that participated—unfortunately that PRP did not—could see and learn from the difference approaches to strategy and tactic between for example,

us and the PRD.

For me, the main differences between the two have now become very obvious. The PRD advocates for what they call “progressive nationalism” under the banner of “Sukarnoism”—referring to the ideology of Indonesia founding president Sukarno—and see the Yudhoyono government as the main enemy of the people. They propagandise for broad anti-neoliberal unity against the government. In doing this, they can easily switch between prioritising left movement intervention and the parliamentary opportunism of an ‘anti-SBY government’. For them, it is a matter of balancing forces between the parliamentary and the left, the latter being less important.

In the meantime however, we can still work with the PRD, as long as it is not in contradiction with building the movement. For us, it will be contradictory and obstruct the development of the people’s movement if the PRD seeks to subjugate it to or create the illusion—as they did in 2009—that the political parties in the parliament are tactical allies.

Subjective factors on the left

The urgent task for Indonesian left and people’s movement today is having a larger intervention in national politics to compete the elite bourgeoisie’s political hegemony—something like the Gramscian concept of a war on position. Based on past experience, the left has the capacity for a bigger and wider political influence in the country. The National Liberation Front (FPN) in 2008 is one of the best examples of this.

While we should not repeat history, we can learn from it. The FPN experience—and also People’s Struggle Front (FPR) in 2008—show that if the left and people’s movement unite they can play a leading role in national political arena, and at the same time can provide an alternative leadership for the spontaneous and fragmented protests that are taking place all across the country [13].

But this will not automatically lead to the advancement of the left opposition itself. Some efforts have been made through publishing four editions of the *Journal of Unity* [14], but the project was unable to be maintained for a variety of reasons—technical as well as ‘political mood’. Other efforts were also undertaken, mostly by the PPI, the PPRM and the PRP, through series of discussion in 2009 to continue the collaboration through the Left League. But this process has also stalled.

Problems and challenges

All left forces in the country are calling for and pressing for unity—because of course they understand that this is necessary as they are still very small. But this unity has failed to really develop and grow due to the strategic differences among each other [15]. So the main problem is probably lies in understanding (and consciousness) about the politics of united front work itself, since it is also quite a new tactical approach for the Indonesian left after Soeharto. The efforts since 2008 until now were best experienced in testing this approach.

A good general line for left movement unity in the future would be: for the left to develop the capacity to publish its own progressive journal; working in unity they can have a greater political influence and bigger mobilisations—and also can present their own political leadership; organising joint Marxist and political education—as ABM has done recently; develop as a pole of attraction for the spontaneous movement scattered across Indonesia.

The other problem or challenge is the dynamic between each organisations existence and the

activities and united front work: how to combine the two. This is important so we do not fall into one of the two extreme views of being 'inward looking'—waiting until an organisation is ready or big enough' or using united front simply as a "stepping stone" for their own organisations'. Both approaches are wrong. United front work and organisational development is dialectical, the bigger the movement brought together by united front work the bigger chance is for each organisation to develop—or even unite together—and at the same time the bigger the chance for the people to win over the state.

Another problem is the notion of who the "main enemy" is. The very dangerous aspect of this notion is seeing one faction of the bourgeoisie as more evil rather than others. All the political elite in the government and legislator are equally dangerous. All of them support the capitalist neoliberal agendas, although of course some of plays the role of fake opposition on certain government policies, but the ordinary people understand these kinds of political games are fed up with them. This is the kind of politics still being played by the PRD because their political and ideological stance of so called 'progressive or Sukarnoist nationalism'. Unfortunately, there is not enough space here to analyse this in more detail.

For us, there is no section of the Indonesian bourgeoisie that has the will or interest in breaking with imperialism. All elements of the bourgeoisie are dependent upon the foreign capital of the developed capitalist nations; and they all compete to be the best ally or agent of imperialism. In social and historical terms also, it is impossible for them to create a truly sovereign nation-state. The capitalist elite do not have the capacity to overcome the country's problems - even through social democracy (reformasi). The elite are totally corrupt, whether it is in terms of money, culture or politics. That is why there's no "national" bourgeoisie that can play a dominant role in the political area. And none of the elite politicians have any popular legitimacy.

From this point of view what we want to campaign for is the unity of people's movement against imperialism and the pro-imperialist government and the need to establish the peoples movement's own political vehicle—whatever the form. In the initial stage, from the subjective potential that exists in the movement today, a form of unity and consolidation based on anti-neoliberalism, anti-capitalism/imperialism or even simply anti-poverty and other democratic issues would be benefit the upper strategy [16], of the left. At the same time a consolidation among the more or less similar platform on the left (the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist left) needs to be strengthen through ongoing discussions, joint protests, Marxist political education, left publications and sectoral collaboration.

And then we will see where we will go from there.

Zely Ariane

P.S.

* From Kprm-Prd (English blog):

<http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2010/09/where-we-will-go-from-here.html>

* Zely Ariane is National Spokesperson for the Political Committee of the Poor - People's Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD), a member of National Executive Board of Union for the Politic of the Poor (PPRM), a member of Free Women organization.

Footnotes

[1] Worker's Challenge Alliance-ABM (SBTPI, FPBJ, PPBI, SBIJ, SPOI, FSPM, SBSI 92, GESBURI, SPKAJ, SPTBG), KOJA Trade Union, State-Owned Electricity Company Trade Union, Indonesian Student Union-SMI, Student Struggle Centre for National Liberation-PEMBEBASAN, National Student League for Democracy-LMND, Muhammadiyah Student Association-IMM, Indonesian Association of Catholic Students-PMKRI, Muslim Students Association for Reform-HMI MPO, Indonesian Buddhist Students Association-HIKMAH BUDHI, Indonesian Islamic Students Movement -PMII, Youth Organisations Union of Struggle-KPOP, BANG JAYA, Indonesian Poor People's Union-SRMI, The Greater Jakarta Student Front-FPJ, Volunteers for Democracy-REPDEM, Free Women-Perempuan Mahardhika, the Union for the Politics of the Poor-PPRM, Indonesian Struggle Union-PPI, The Political Committee of the Poor-Peoples Democratic Party-KPRM-PRD, Peoples Democratic Party-PRD, Working People's Association-PRP Jakarta, Anti-Debt Coalition-KAU, Papuan Democratic Peoples' Movement-GARDA PAPUA, Papua Student Alliance-AMP, Indonesian Islamic Students Association-PN PII, the Indonesian Cultural Society Union-SeBUMI, People's Health Council-DKR, Petition 28-PETISI 28, People's Cultural Network-JAKER, Petition 50-PETISI 50, Indonesian People's Opposition Front-FORI, Indonesian Trade Union Congress Alliance-KASBI Jakarta, Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union-FSPMI, Balai Kebangsaan.

[2] The report can be read on ESSF [Electricity rate hikes unite Indonesian opposition](#)

[3] For a deeper background see:

<http://zelyarlane.blogspot.com/search/label/English%20-%20General%20Politic>

[4] See the analysis:

<http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2009/11/house-represents-less-than-50-percent.html>

[5] See: <http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2010/09/sbys-popularity-dips-further-poll.html>

[6] See on ESSF [Call for a nation wide general strike on May Day](#)

[7] Regarding the position in the lead up to the election strategy in 2009, in 2008 this union split in two: The FNPBI and FNPBI Politic of the Poor. The latter recently established new independent union called the Indonesian Labor Movement Union (PPBI), see: [PPBI: A New Indonesian Left Trade Union Federation](#). Since then the FNPBI has stopped participating in the ABM.

[8] For background reading see: [Left collaboration growing in Indonesia](#)

[9] The National-FORI national platform is: National Industrialization, True Agrarian Reform, Ecological Justice, Economic Democratization, Respect and Fulfillment of Human Rights; while for the Jakarta-FORI it was put in more concrete and radical such as National industrialization under the people's control, meeting the immediate demands of the people, the widest possible democracy to bring to trial all human rights violators; the rewriting of the history of the Indonesian people; and equality for women in all public spheres.

[10] Except for the PRP, the KASBI, the Green Indonesian Union (SHI) and the Friends of the Earth Indonesia (WALHI), 'National' FORI was dominated by NGOs, while the Jakarta-FORI was more leftist and grassroots based.

[11] Some photographs at:

<http://maxlaneonline.com/2010/01/29/indonesia-photosreports-for-indonesia-january-28-protest-actions/>

[12] For the forces that mostly consolidated under the People's Struggle Front (FPR) see: [Global financial crisis grabs wages, jobs and land!](#)]).

Recently, these two forces appear to be facing more problems. There is little or no news about FORI consolidation or actions anymore, especially in the regions. And the ABM is also having problems convincing people of and maintaining its project to organise national conference. The urgency and need seems to have lost its momentum. But they are still trying to find a better approach to build the planned conference.

Although these are not the best examples, since the platforms of the two groups are more or less the same, especially in their position towards the need for an independent movement to challenge and replace the political elite and pro-capitalist government, and present an alternative of the anti-imperialist movement. But again, this is still in a process of finding a better approach in order to build a larger radical movement with influence in national politics.

This is why the August 7 national movement was a step forward, because it united both main forces, as well as the People's Democratic Party (PRD). It was a bit 'historical' because it was the first time that the PRD and the KPRM-PRD had worked together in a united front since they split in 2007, and was in fact a kind of 'reunion' for PRD, which had been absent from and not prioritised left unity for some time since their 2009 election intervention—which we saw as being an opportunist parliamentary line [[See:

<http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2008/03/indonesia-struggle-for-political.html>

[13] See: http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/maxlaneintl/asia/2008/07/perspectives_on_progressive_po.html

[14] Further reading materials:

<http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2008/05/new-left-activist-alliance-formed-in.html>;

<http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2008/05/aksi-heading-towards-may-21.html>;

http://asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/statements/2008/fpn_endviolenceagainstpeacefulprotests_230508.htm;

http://asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/statements/2008/fpn_resist&defeatthefuelpriceincreases_170508.htm;

http://asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/statements/2008/fpn_besiege&occupythepalaceonmay21_130508.htm;

http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/indoleft/hold/detik-tempo_compilationofmay21demos_210508.htm

[15] For further study see:

http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/focus/jurnalbersatu_10yearsafterthefallofsuharto_may2008.htm (articles also available on ESSF)

[16] The strategy that can effectively help the left to talk and reach broader layer of the masses.