

# The democratic struggle and the fight for socialism in Indonesia

Thursday 28 July 2011, by [ARIANE Zely](#) (Date first published: 20 May 2011).

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*“Thirteen years ago Suharto had to be overthrown. This decision was a brilliant move from a generation...”* — Nurul Khawari, one of those that took part in the overthrow of Suharto’s New Order regime in May 1998, *Solo Post*, May 5, 2011.

Democracy is the mother of prosperity, justice, equality, culture and all forms of creativity beneficial for the future of humanity. But it was not just for the sake of democracy that the Indonesian people overthrew Suharto in 1998, but also for justice and prosperity. It was not for reformasi (the political reform process that began in 1998) that students and the people occupied the House of Representatives (DPR), but for an Indonesia free from the threat of the gun and military spies, free from corruption and nepotism, for a prosperity where basic commodities would be affordable. Democracy was the tool; democracy was the means, to achieve the aim of human liberation from oppression by other humans. Without democracy, humanity becomes black and white, colourless, and prosperity becomes a commodity owned by those in power.

The student and people’s reform movement succeed in bringing down a dictator, broadening the people’s direct political participation through a multi-party system, press freedom, the freedom to organise and most importantly, succeed in restoring the most effecting political weapon of the people, mass action. The movement however was unable to bring down Suharto’s capitalist and militaristic regime and replace it with one that was more democratic and populist. The movement also failed to fully consolidate and push through a more progressive democracy. The movement failed in the two major battles: it failed in the fight against the military, militarism and Suharto’s ruling Golkar Party, and failed to fight the hegemony of the anti-democratic forces.

Democracy has now been restricted and channeled into institutions unilaterally declared as the representative will of the people, complicated by bureaucracy and the manipulation of money, locked into the interests of capital and the status quo, and controlled by the gun and threat of jail. Democracy has no longer the will of the people, but the will of a small elite in defending their interests and power.

When mass action changed the rules of the game, when democracy was in the hands of the ordinary people, when it was decided directly by the people, not one legal mechanism in capitalist society could say no. The evidence. Suharto was forced to resign.

Of all the universal elements of democracy, which were successfully won by reformasi, such as freedom of expression, assembly, the right to form political parties, the freedom of information,

direct elections that were honest and fair, the post principle and fundamental element was mass action. Spontaneous and organised mass actions were the key to political change in 1998. Indonesian observer Max Lane, who translated the *Buru Quartet* by the country's foremost author Pramoedya Ananta Toer, says in his book "Unfinished Nation", that politically, the Suharto dictatorship was overthrown from the moment that political mobilisations began; when the politics of mass action again began to be used as a weapon of struggle against the New Order's floating mass politics in the mid 1990s.

People have speculated that Suharto's downfall was the result of United State intervention, which no longer saw Suharto as an effective and efficient agent for international capitalism. While this conspiracy theory may be correct — and it is not impossible that the US would do such a thing — without the mass upheaval that began in the mid 1990s, Suharto would not have been considered inefficient or ineffective by the US. So mass action remains the principal factor of change — regardless of whom or what hitched a free ride on this change in the days that followed.

Historically, mass action has been critical to Indonesia politics because it played a key role in heralding Indonesian independence from the Dutch and became the hallmark of Indonesian politics up until Suharto and the military seized power in 1965. And it was this political character that was first and foremost destroyed, right down to its roots, by the New Order after 1965 through the arrest and murder of activists, and the black propaganda against any perspective that supported mass action. Mass action became the ghost haunting the New Order throughout its years in power, and was transformed into an angel during the initial period of reformasi.

New organisations also grew, while old organisations split and were forced to reorganise. The most striking result of this was the growth and splits that occurred in the trade unions and political parties. Numerous committees and student groups were established, and compared with the years before reformasi, grew rapidly. All of these new organisations took up the jargon of reformasi, with even the old status quo organisations being forced to bow down before the flag of reformasi.

But freedom of information, direct elections, the multi-party system, regional autonomy, all of which were the results of reformasi movement, are now being turned into a 'scapegoat' by the status quo forces, as if they are the source of the country's problems, its inefficiencies.

It is not the fault of reformasi if the current state of democracy is deteriorating. Nor does it mean that Suharto's New Order was better because the 'Reformasi Order' appears more vulgar, obscene. Reformasi changed the rules of the game, creating space for the preconditions for a more advanced and essential democracy. On the other hand, it also provided a foundation for fundamental changes to the principles of institutional state.

Nevertheless, this foundation has no meaning if there are no democratic or progressive political forces to utilise or cultivate it. It is like a runway that has no function except for aircraft to land on it. Reformasi also has limits in and of itself. Reformasi changed what was on the surface, not what was deep inside. It only replaced a leaky roof tile, not the roof frame. Reformasi has been unable to reform a system deeply rooted in the oppression of humans by other humans. Reformasi was unable to make capitalism and militarism serve humanity.

## Retreat

Bit by bit, many of the most important achievements arising out of the democratic struggle in 1998 are being taken out of the people's hands, even though many of its aims are far from being achieved. The people are still able to demonstrate in the streets, although the constraints on this are being

progressively tightened. Large protests are now only allowed opposite the State Palace, yet before this they could be held several metres from the Palace gates. New restrictions on establishing organisations and political parties and the muzzling of trade unions are some of the most painful examples.

Just recently, activists circles were shocked by an Indo Barometer survey that found 40.9 percent of respondents believed that conditions under Suharto's New Order regime were better than now. Leaving aside the methodology and credibility of the survey, the political discourse about reformasi is indeed being dominated by right-wing, status quo and conservative elements. They argue that the New Order period was better than now and that democracy has gone too far, is inefficient and wasteful. Progressive social movement groups meanwhile have concluded that not only has reformasi failed to deliver prosperity the ordinary people but that their lives are becoming steadily worse. But both these views contain one thing in common — although for different reasons — that reformasi has failed.

For the social progressive groups, or those that claim to be left revolutionaries, reformasi has failed in three principle ways. This also differentiates them from the way the status quo views reformasi. First, although the military has been banished from parliament, its territorial command structure — which mandates the deployment of military command posts and detachments at all levels of the civil administration — remains intact, and has even been extended. Second, reformasi failed to bring Suharto and the generals who committed gross human rights violations to justice. Third, reformasi failed to weaken the power of the political parties that were the principle crutch of New Order — the Golkar Party and Suharto's cronies. These three fundamental political elements are a key measure of the failures of the democratic struggle in Indonesia.

It is untrue that things were better under Suharto. The New Order, backed by Golkar and the military, were in fact the historical cause of the systematic poverty that Indonesia suffers now, by first and foremost carrying out the slaughter and imprisonment of millions of innocent people accused of being communists because they were an obstacle to the New Order's capitalist economic development. It was these same big Indonesian capitalists who then pawned off the Indonesian people and their natural wealth into the hand of international capital domination through the 1967 law on capital investment.

Since that time, Indonesia, which had earlier tried to regulate its own economy, politics and culture, free from imperialist domination, increasingly became fertile ground for foreign exploitation. Cheap labour, natural wealth sold off and the environment destroyed without thought of the future, the people entwined in foreign debt — so that from the moment of birth every child bears a state and private sector debt in the millions of rupiah — industries operating only to serve international markets and prevented from pursuing planned development to meet the needs of the ordinary people and domestic markets, cultural diversity castrated by the uniformity of a culture enforced at gun point. Indonesian's once dynamic culture became static, with diversity manifested only through traditional arts and regional dress, not through a diversity of thought, expression and political action. The people were no longer permitted to be involved in politics and simply laboured and worked in accordance of the government's dictates for the sake of development ala Suharto; for Suharto and his cronies under the barrel of the military's guns. It was because of this that Widji Tukul — a street poet and activist disappeared by the military in 1997 — depicted Indonesia as being blanketed in a false peace.

There is a common view that life under the New Order was more comfortable because the price of basic commodities seemed cheaper. This is because in relative terms the average wage received at that time was still enough to cover the cost of basic staples. But this was not because Suharto's New Order sided with or cared about the ordinary people, but rather, or at least one of the reasons, was

that the global capitalist economy still 'tolerated' the provision of government subsidies to the people, which they no longer consent to. Because of this therefore, real wages today are less and less able to cover the cost of basic staples because prices are increasing (due to inflation and subsidy cuts) faster than wages.

The other view expressed by status quo forces is that Indonesian democracy has gone too far. Former Vice President and business tycoon Jusuf Kalla has stated that democracy is too expensive because there are too many direct elections and too many political parties. And worse still is the view expressed by intelligence analyst Wawan Purwanto who said: "The slow pace of dealing with terrorism in Indonesia is mostly caused by the emergence of reformasi. It isn't as easy as earlier times when the New Order was still in power... Before we still had the anti-subversion law and it was easy to deal with things..." (Tribunnews.com -7/5/2011).

These kinds of views — which have many adherents, particularly within the bureaucracy — make no sense, are unnecessary and hostile to democracy. Kalla's statement is pragmatic and anti-democratic because it fails to see the importance of ordinary people's participation and the political dynamics of direct elections and the establishment of political parties. The 1955 elections under the leftist government of Indonesia's founding president Sukarno involved many parties. Political life was very dynamic and the people's participation and diverse political views existed openly and clearly, providing a positive correct political education to the people.

Hersri Setiawan, a poet and activist from the People's Cultural Institute (Lekra), a now banned organisation formerly affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), commented that reformasi 1998 was a massive wave that brought down the Suharto-military regime but did not follow through and failed to overthrow militarism, because "ism" is a cultural concept. Setiawan's statement is correct in the sense that militarism is still a bugbear for this country. The addition of new military territorial commands, the involvement of the military in land conflicts and the shooting of farmers, the involvement of high-ranking military officers in the formation of many political parties, the discourse about political leaders with a military background being better than civilians and the narrow discussion of nationalism in the debate about territorial borders, reflects this militaristic behavior and thinking.

Reformasi will indeed be unable to fully solve this without a progressive social movement that is alive and real, aimed at and continuing to force through their demands. Unfortunately, the progressive social movement has failed to present an alternative ideology against capitalism, against the ideology of bureaucratism and New Order militarism, against reactionary conservatism and fundamentalism that is finding a hearing in the midst of the lack of an alternative ideology. This is the principle failure of reformasi in Indonesia.

The movement was also unable to take advantage of the opportunities and potential to change the political rules of the game in the initial phases of reformasi. Perhaps this inability was because the movement was immature in terms of theories, strategies and the tactics of struggle and not yet rich enough in the face of the rapidly changing political situation.

Conversely, those in power, the bourgeoisie forces, were far quicker to consolidate post 1998. The impeachment of Indonesia's first elected president, Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid in 2001, was the first milestone in the alliance between the reformist bourgeoisie supporters of reformasi and the remnants of the New Order and military, in which the bogus character of the fake reformists groups became immediately clear. These fake reformists — the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and the National Mandate Party (PAN) were the most conspicuous — proved that they lacked any character or principles, that they were cowards, quick to betray reformasi and support the remnants of the New Order forces. It was also at this point that the bourgeoisie counter attack

against reformasi began in earnest.

Following the ouster of Gus Dur, a massive capitalist economic consolidation was undertaken during the administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri — the chairperson of the PDI-P. International capitalism post Suharto was pushing neoliberalism through the dismantling state protection of domestic markets. All of the people's basic needs such as food, housing, education and healthcare had to be commercialised.

It was the Megawati-PDI-P administration that played the biggest role in pushing Indonesia further into the precipice of dependency on imperialism through the privatisation key state companies, signing letters of agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which further ensnared Indonesia in the mechanisms of international finance capital. The administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) has pursued similar policies but with a slightly different emphasis, with Yudhoyono tending to rely more on foreign debt opening the tap of liberalism even faster. But their economic and political aims are the same: becoming the 'good child' of imperialism with no long-term vision to improve the welfare of the ordinary people.

The repeated attacks against the people's economic, social and political rights had to be continued for the sake of the post-reformasi bourgeoisie's economic and political stability. This process began to find its form and direction after the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections that saw Yudhoyono win the presidency. Since then there has been almost no difference between the forces of pro-reformasi and the remnants of the New Order, particularly after student activist from the 1998 reform movement thronged to become supporters and candidates for the fake reformist and pro-New Order parties. The 2009 legislative and presidential elections saw a continuation of this consolidation and a truncation of bourgeoisie forces into just a few major political parties.

More recently, the bourgeoisie's political consolidation has been further ripened by the emergence of organisations and parties such as the National Democrats and the National Republican Party, both of which smack of attempts to return to or restore the New Order. The political forces behind these new parties are still the Golkar Party (or disaffected former members) and the military. The National Republic Party (Nasrep) is even led by Suharto's son Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra and argues openly for a return to the "good-old-days" under Suharto.

## **Democratic threat**

In the midst of these complex problems, we are faced with the huge threat to the future of the democratic struggle. The draft laws on intelligence and secrecy, state security and proposed revisions to the Criminal Code (KUHP) — which are expected to be ratified in July — are major projects being pursued by status quo forces to reassert the hallmarks of militarism and anti-democracy. Wawan Purwanto is of the view that what these forces are actually seeking to revive some kind of anti-subversion law — which was routinely used during the Suharto era arrest people suspected of being involved in "terrorism" and was revoked at the beginning of the reform era — in order to legitimise the arrest of those who oppose or criticise the government.

The phenomena of increasing terrorism and the Indonesia Islamic State (NII), regardless of its aims, interests and who is behind it, is also being used by these forces to create an atmosphere of fear while simultaneously increasing repression and the monitoring of the people's social and political activities. The draft intelligence and state security laws, along with revisions to KUHP will be used as a compliment and supplement for attacks against the people's democratic rights, which have increased under Yudhoyono's administration.

In a press release by the Draft Intelligence Law Advocacy Coalition the group said that the laws represents a concrete threat to freedom of expression and organisation, particularly in the articles related to intelligence information secrecy, arbitrary arrests in the name of secrecy and the complete lack of any control mechanisms in the name of state secrecy.

Meanwhile in one of the article of the draft revisions to the KUHAP, it explicitly states: "Whosoever acts against the law by spreading or developing Communist/Marxist-Leninist teachings in any and all forms, and its manifestations" and "anyone who establishes an organisation that is known or reasonably suspected of practicing Communism/Marxist-Leninism can be sentence to jail".

The other threat is the growth of anti-plural, conservative and fundamentalist-reactionary organisations and actions. While the underlying reasons for this phenomenon are beyond the scope of this article, as stated earlier, while reformasi provided opened up opportunities for democratic consolidation, in the contest to win the support of the ordinary people it has in fact been conservative ideas that have come to the fore, while progressive, socialist ideas have failed to gain a hearing.

### **For one step forward**

In the midst of this unfavorable situation, when not one elite force that has any real belief in democracy, the solution still lies on the shoulders of the progressive social movement groups that (should) have the strongest faith in democracy. There is no other choice for the progressive social groups other than to consolidate against these attacks on democracy while continuing the struggle for economic justice.

This does of course provided a valuable lesson: that reformasi itself is no longer enough. It is now becoming increasingly evident, that even to achieve the smallest gains in the struggle for reformasi it requires the mobilisation of the ordinary people, it requires revolutionary politics to organise a radical new system of power, economy and society.

The problem at the moment is that the consolidation of the progressive social movements and the left is making few advances. The movements for economic rights are often fragmented and difficult to unite under a political and democratic struggle. Yet economic rights cannot be fulfilled and prosperity cannot be achieved without democracy. The lack of an alternative political vehicle that is sufficiently dominant and can play a role in building an awareness of the roots of the ordinary people's problems also complicates this unity process.

The solution to this must be formulated jointly because the problem has to be overcome jointly. The view of Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci regarding the consolidation of unity is absolutely correct in providing an inspiration to current inertia of the movement: "We must build the unity, consciousness and maturity of the movement, make it into a force that is strong and cohesive, and then with patience, with through attention to the contextual conditions, await an opportune moment to use this force".

Likewise with regard to the movement's responsibility to position itself in the face of real practical political problems, Gramsci continued: If the forces that are in line with this want to have an important historical influence, they have to eternalise and organically/make themselves one in relating to the conditions on the ground, not just converging momentarily. In order to build the momentum of the masses, they must demonstrate, both in the imagination of the people as well as in action, that they are capable of winning power and implementing the tasks that they have set themselves".

## The importance of democracy

Now we have arrived at the question of why, we, the socialist movement, the social progressive movement, the democratic movement, are so very concerned with democracy. And why can we cannot hope or expect democratic reform from capitalism?

Democracy and capitalism can never run in parallel, because capitalism does not require the most basic ingredient of democracy: the direct participation of the majority of ordinary people. Capitalism has no objection to dictators and dictatorships as long as they correspond with their interests. In "The State and Revolution" Chapter 5, Lenin stated: "Within capitalist society we have a democracy that is emasculated, forlorn, false, a democracy for the rich, who are in the minority".

Democracy under capitalism is democracy for the capitalist whose economic position is free from people's control. It is sufficient that the people be given a representative assembly but without the right to recall the representatives that they themselves elected; it is sufficient that the people be given "democratic" institutions that provide a representative function without any direct involvement or understanding. All of this has one aim: distancing the people from politics, because the politics that they desire is the politics that serves the interests of the capitalist class, not the politics of the ordinary people. This kind of democracy inevitably makes society apathetic, decadent and passive, that has no political force of its own, and is mobilised only in the interests of the ruling class.

We can see the limits of democracy under capitalism very clearly when the capitalist state is confronted with radical demands for democracy and welfare. The capitalist state shows no reluctance in responding with acts of violence and repression, no longer concerning itself with the democratic principle that it claims to be its foundation. It is at moments like that that the real interests of democracy under capitalism are exposed.

Conversely, the struggle for socialism is a struggle to overturn all the logic of democracy limited by capitalism. Socialism calls for the broadest possible political involvement of the people, because it is the people who must in the end hold power themselves. To quote from Burmese democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi at the opening of the ASEAN People's Forum in Jakarta on May 3-5, capitalist democracy is appearance without substance, without its fundamental elements. Drawing from the French revolution, the most fundamental elements in the struggle for democracy (democratic revolution) cover the people's sovereignty, human rights, constitutional authority, citizenship, oversight by the people and so forth. While many of these ideals were born in the early stages of bourgeois-democratic revolutions, in the process of democratic development it came to threaten them, so it is the working people who have the greatest interest in defending and broadening democracy — that is the meaning of completing the democratic revolution.

The struggle for socialism requires an extension of democratic logic to broader political arenas such as fighting state bureaucracy. The struggle for socialism moreover politicises and democratises all areas of the people's lives including economic (through the class struggle) and household life (through the feminist struggle).

Socialism is closely linked with democracy, because socialism can only be realised with democracy. Socialism requires the direct contribution of ideas and action (participation) by the ordinary people as a whole in order to discuss and find solutions to problems in their lives. The more people are involved, the richer and more successful socialism will be. This is the reason why the struggle for socialism must continue to seriously intervene in the political struggle, because every step forward or political retreat will have an influence on the possibility of a socialist victory itself.

Politics is characterised by conflict, decisions, power and situations than cannot be predicted mathematically, all of which are the basis for the determination of the correct tactics in the struggle for socialism. Because of this therefore, socialist groups must play the fullest possible role in the democratic struggle. This is because the democratic struggle can only benefit us, not the status quo and pro-capitalist forces. The democratic struggle for socialism opens the way for reform of a system that is firmly and deeply rooted in the oppression of humanity by humanity.

**Zely Ariane**

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**P.S.**

\* Translated by James Balowski]

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