

Indonesia: Fighting for land

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Rural social movements have a rich history in Indonesia, and they have recorded significant achievements in recent years.

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Jakarta, 1953: DN Aidit, one of the young and rising stars of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) launches his analysis of Indonesian agrarian society. He says agrarian revolution must be the essence of the people's 'democratic revolution' in Indonesia. At the fifth party congress a year later, the PKI adopts Aidit's analysis as the core of its new agrarian program. The program calls on the party to build mass power in rural areas, and to make the struggle for land reform central to its appeal, using the slogan 'land to the peasants'.

Twelve years later, Aidit is dead and the PKI is in tatters. A wave of killing has swept through rural parts of Indonesia, with the military and its allies targeting many of the cadres and activists who had been at the forefront of the PKI's struggle for land reform. The New Order regime which comes to power, with the military at its core, sets in train a series of policies that aim to depoliticise the countryside, permanently eliminate the left, and proscribe independent organisation of the peasantry.

Yet the repression of 1965-66, despite the intentions of Suharto and his comrades, did not negate the centrality of agrarian problems to Indonesian political life. Nor did it stamp out for all time rural social movements. The core problems that Aidit identified in his analysis in 1953 - such as landlessness and stark inequality in rural areas - have continued to characterise much of rural Indonesia to the present day. As the New Order regime consolidated, it added new problems by opening up land to commercial agriculture and other business interests, displacing entire rural communities. As the years and decades passed, and despite great repression, new movements of poor and dispossessed farmers erupted in many rural parts of Indonesia.

Rural mobilisation accelerated further after the collapse of the New Order in 1998. Around the country, peasants occupied land that had been taken from them - or from their parents - over the preceding thirty years. Peasant unions and other rural social movement organisations gained thousands of members. Even though they are now fragmented and localised in their orientation, these groups have succeeded in once more putting the idea of agrarian reform onto the national political agenda. Aidit's dream of agrarian revolution has not been realised, and perhaps it never will, but rural social movements are back as part of the Indonesian political landscape, and as part of the Indonesian left.

A tradition of rural radicalism

When the PKI made its shift toward the countryside in the mid-1950s, it faced an uphill struggle. In 1953, less than seven per cent of peasants were organised. The PKI and its affiliate, BTI (Indonesian Peasants Front), began their work with moderate actions to help peasants improve their livelihood and social and cultural life. Many poor farmers were attracted by these programs, and by the party's vision of social justice. Others were driven into the arms of the party by the severity of rural poverty and inequalities in land ownership and control. Both the PKI and BTI grew rapidly in rural areas. In 1955, BTI declared its membership had reached 3 million and the PKI was placed fourth in the 1955 general election, with much of its vote garnered in the countryside.

When a new share-tenancy law and the basic agrarian law were promulgated in 1960, the left gained another opportunity for rural mobilisation. These laws provided the PKI and BTI with a legal basis to escalate their demands for the destruction of feudalism. The BTI called for 'land to the tiller', and it campaigned for tenant farmers to receive a fairer share of the crops they produced (it wanted a 60:40 ratio in favour of tenants, or least 50:50, in contrast to the traditional 20:80 or 25:75 division in favour of landowners). By 1962 BTI had around 5 million members.

When landowners and their allies in local governments resisted both the new share tenancy regulations and the land reform program, rural radicalisation was the result. The PKI launched a campaign targeting the 'seven village devils' (such figures as 'wicked landlords' and 'blood-sucking money-lenders') and the BTI tried to lead a campaign of land occupations by poor farmers, the so-called 'unilateral actions' (aksi sepihak).

But many of their opponents in the countryside were affiliated to other big political parties, including the PNI (Indonesian National Party) and NU (Awakening of the Islamic Scholars, a traditionalist Islamic organisation). The rural campaign thus compromised the PKI's national-level 'political front' as part of its commitment to President Sukarno's 'Guided Democracy' regime, and the party called off its campaign.

This was the background to the anti-communist massacres of 1965-66. Rural radicalisation prompted the PKI's opponents to convert class-based conflict into religious-based confrontation: sympathisers of the left's agrarian revolution were condemned as 'atheist' - a deadly political stigmatisation. These rural anti-communists provided many of the shock troops who in 1965-66 carried out the killings of PKI and BTI supporters, in cooperation with the army. The New Order came to power. Mass-based rural mobilisation for radical social change suddenly ended.

Resisting developmentalism

But the New Order did not permanently end rural upheaval. Its support for commercially-oriented 'development projects' caused massive land dispossessions across the archipelago. Thousands of rural people experienced brutal evictions from their land and sole source of livelihood. Often, they received terribly unfair compensation for their losses. Serious human rights abuses abounded.

The regime's repressive political control over rural life did not stop resistance by the victims of these policies. Beginning in the 1970s, land conflicts began to erupt, as local communities resisted dispossession. The conflict database compiled by the agrarian advocacy organisation KPA (Consortium for Agrarian Reform) recorded more than 1,750 such land conflicts during the New Order period. Komnas HAM (National Commission for Human Rights) has reported that since its establishment in 1993 land conflicts have constituted the single largest category of complaints it has

received.

Political repression in rural areas, and the absence of press freedom and of independent peasant organisations, stacked the cards against local protests against land evictions. Many of them would have flared and died without leaving a lasting legacy, were it not for the fact that, from the 1970s, critical urban-based middle class activists became anchors and organisers for rural protest movements. Such activists articulated local concerns about land expropriation and rural human rights violations to national audiences, and they linked land protests to wider political contention against the New Order regime.

Thus, in the mid to late 1970s university student councils spoke out against the brutality of forced land transfers. In the 1980s and 1990s, activists from NGOs and informal student groups organised themselves into action committees to campaign on numerous individual land conflicts around the country. Such groups in effect stood in for the absent peasant organisations and political parties that might otherwise have defended farmers' land rights.

Then, in the 1990s, some youth activists with a leftist political orientation – though without links to the old communist movement of the 1960s – tried to revive the left movement in rural areas. They tried to transform local instances of peasant resistance against land loss into autonomous local peasant organisations. These activists developed new programs of political education for rural activists, and tried to push the orientation of peasant struggles beyond immediate goals of reclaiming lost land or gaining fair compensation. Many young leftists tried to position the peasants and rural masses once more as the pillar (soko guru) of radical social change in Indonesia and they revived the idea of agrarian reform (pembaruan agrarian) as the central goal for rural social movements.

At the start of the 1990s, SPJB (The West Java Peasant's Union) was formed, the first autonomous peasant union in the post-1965 authoritarian era. It was a coalition of urban-based activists and local peasant leaders in land conflict cases. The goal was that it would be a step in building a national peasant union. Next, a network of student and NGO activists centered around a string of cities stretching from North Sumatra to Central Java (Asahan-Bandar Lampung-Bandung-Yogyakarta) formed several others local peasant unions. These included the Independent Peasant Union of Central Java (SPMJT), the Lampung Peasant Union (PITL), and the North Sumatra Peasant Union (SPSU).

This network, along with other student groups, NGOs and some leaders of local peasant groups committed to develop the embryo of independent peasants' organisation at the national level. In Lembang, West Java in 1993 they declared the foundation of the Indonesian Peasant Organisation. In the same year in Central Java, some other radical left activists formed STN (The National Peasants Union) as part of their attempt to form a broad radical movement centered around their left political party, the PRD (People's Democratic Party).

Scaling up

In short, despite sustained repression, violence and arrests, over the long term the New Order failed to prevent the re-emergence of movements that challenged its supremacy, including in rural areas. By the mid-1990s, not only were embryonic peasant unions emerging, but a new national coalition, the KPA (Consortium for Agrarian Reform) was formed (in 1994) with its central goal being the promotion of the long-neglected idea of agrarian reform.

When Suharto fell in 1998, formal restrictions on independent organisation ended and social

movements of all types expanded rapidly. Effort to build national peasant organisations accelerated. The key initiative was taken by SPSU activists from North Sumatra and, in mid-1998, just a few weeks after Suharto resigned, a Federation of Indonesian Peasant Unions (FSPI) was formed. Within the next few years several other peasant organisations – such as API (Indonesian Farmers Alliance), AGRA (Alliance of Movements for Agrarian Reform) and PETANI Mandiri (Self-Reliant Indonesian Peasant and Fisherfolks' Movement) – were formed, and claimed a national presence.

However, these efforts did not consolidate a movement at the national level because the dynamics of peasant mobilisation were instead leading toward localisation. Moreover, these 'national' organisations competed with each other to claim the title of 'representative of the Indonesian peasants'. Many local unions did not affiliate to just one national organisation. Instead, double or triple memberships were common, as a kind of strategy for local unions to multiply their links with national dynamics.

Democratisation and localisation

Over the long term, one of the most important developments in peasant movements has been the reappearance of a strategy of occupation of contested land. Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating dramatically after 1998, throughout Indonesia numerous peasant groups have simply taken over and started to cultivate land they claim as their own. This strategy of direct action has similarities to that of the radical peasant movements of the 1960s. Unlike in the 1960s, however, peasants rarely target land owned by landowners who are themselves part of local rural communities. Instead, they occupy vacant state land – including state-forest lands – or land that is being used by plantation companies or other commercial operators. Most of them are reclaiming land they have previously been pushed out of, but some simply take over land they claim they need as part of their economic and social rights for a decent livelihood.

Land occupations flourished above all in the context of weakening state and security force power after the fall of Suharto. Many groups of farmers reclaimed land that had been denied them by the New Order. Through this strategy, many local peasant organisations became stronger. They now provided their members with control over the land they had long craved, and hence with a concrete material resource to defend. For instance, local peasant unions SPP (Pasundan Peasant Union) in West Java and STaB (Bengkulu Peasant Union) in Sumatra were each able to consolidate memberships of about 25 thousand peasant households and controlled around 20 to 30 thousand hectares of land that was legally part of large plantation estates or state forest.

Their successful land occupations made these local organisations more independent than previously. They now had greater bargaining power in national coalitions and networks. National leaders began to experience difficulties in controlling them. A sense of a unified national agrarian movement began to break down. Meanwhile, the implementation of decentralisation politics and the blossoming of local democracy drew these unions into local politics. Their mass memberships made them a valuable resource for mobilisation in local elections and they began to be courted by local elites.

For the ordinary peasants who are part of such unions, participation in elections is above all a way to secure their control over land. They hope to back winners who will in turn recognise their claims to occupied land, even if securing formal title can be a lengthy, onerous and uncertain process. For some union organisers and leaders, local elections are a bridge for them personally to enter formal politics as candidates. Others try to become brokers in the 'market of democracy', selling their capacity mobilise voters to local politicians. Sometimes this engagement in local politics has led to positive consequences in terms of the security of occupied land, and access to the local budget and

policy-making if the candidate wins. But in many cases it has also led to the destruction of local unions because of contention among union activists and members.

A long and winding road

While there has been some dramatic rural mobilisation at the local level, left-wing political parties have struggled to establish themselves at the centre or to link themselves to the new peasant unions and other rural activism. As a result, peasant movements have evolved in ways that are not connected to wider political struggles or to the contest for state power. They have developed in ways that make them localised and fragmented.

Meanwhile, while local struggles to reclaim land lost in the New Order period have recorded considerable achievements, the ironic result of such successes is that many of the participants have lost their enthusiasm for yet more struggle. Many farmers simply want to be secure as they return to the agricultural production that has always been their goal, and they want to enjoy normal social life rather than engaging in perpetual political mobilisation. As a result, a gradual de-escalation of peasant movements has been occurring.

Yet it has not all gone the peasants' way in the post-1998 period. State policies have facilitated large-scale investment in land by corporations, and hence concentration of corporate control over large tracts of land. Land grabbing and dispossession is once again on the increase. Many autonomous local governments do little to help, and are often effectively bought off by the corporate interests. Using the power of their money, plantation owners, miners and other business interests are able to pay police and civilian militias to evict local people. Patterns of massive land conflicts involving violence and human rights violations very reminiscent of those witnessed under the New Order are occurring once more.

These conditions pose a challenge for the left. Indonesia has a rich tradition of peasant mobilisation in defence of the interests of landless and marginalised rural people. It is time for yet another revival of that tradition.

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P.S.

* Inside Indonesia 107: Jan-Mar 2012:

<http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles/fighting-for-land>

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