

Presenting a Left Alternative in Indonesian Elections: Obstacles, Potentialities, and the Dual-Party Tactics

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In revolutionary Marxist tradition, the bourgeois state and its various institutions, including the parliament, can not be used to radically transform capitalism into socialism [1]. However, participation in the bourgeois state remains important to strengthen the political position of the socialists and the working class.

By participating in the bourgeois state, the socialists could get broad political exposure. They could encourage reforms to improve the lives of the working people in order to broaden the support of the working people towards socialist politics. In times of crisis, participation in the bourgeois state could be used to amplify the pressure to implement a transitional program towards socialism, sharpening class contradictions, exposing the limitations of the bourgeois State, and encouraging political crisis to pave the way for revolutionary change.

In Indonesia, there are serious challenges in presenting a left alternative in electoral politics. It could be said that the electoral struggle of the Indonesian left is still in the phase of breaking down the obstacles to participate in elections. We have not reached the phase of how to win seats or strategic positions in the government. In Indonesia, there are two types of elections, the legislative and executive elections. This paper will focus on the experience of the Indonesian left in facing legislative elections.

The Biggest Obstacles: Undemocratic Electoral Regulations

The Indonesian left had virtually no experience of participation in election. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the only experience of the Indonesian left participating in election is the People’s Democratic Party (PRD) in the 1999 election. And the result was not satisfactory. From 48 parties participating in the election, PRD ranked 40th in terms of votes. PRD only got 78,730 votes and did not get any seat in the House of Representatives [2].

Afterward, the PRD tried to participate in the 2004 election by forming a coalition party with other

social movement organizations, namely the Party of the United Popular Opposition (Popor). But they did not qualify to participate in the 2004 election. Then, they tried again to participate in the 2009 election by forming another coalition party, the United Party for National Liberation (Papernas). However, they did not qualify again and got physical attacks from reactionary Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defender Front (FPI).

To be able to participate in the 2009 election and to protect themselves against the reactionary Islamic groups, Papernas formed a coalition with the Reform Star Party (PBR), a bourgeois party which came from the Islamic movement. This decision led to a split in the PRD. Those who did not agree left the PRD and formed the Poor People's Political Committee (KPRM)-PRD. Besides Papernas, another social movement group who tried to participate in the 2009 election was the United People's Party (PPR). However, they also did not qualify to participate in the 2009 election.

One of the main causes of the almost total absence of a left alternative—even a “progressive-reformist” alternative—in the post-Soeharto elections in Indonesia is the undemocratic electoral regulations. PRD could participate in the 1999 election because the requirements to establish a party and participate in election at that time was still mild.

In article 2 of Law No. 2 of 1999 on Political Party, the requirement to establish a political party and make it a legal entity was that the party was founded by at least 50 citizens who had aged 21 years [3]. In article 39 of Law No. 3 of 1999 on General Election, the requirements of a party to participate in election were that the party must have branches in more than half provinces in Indonesia and in more than half municipalities/regencies of those provinces [4].

However, the requirements to participate in elections were made harder over time. In article 3 of Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Party, the requirements of a party to become a legal entity are that the party must have branches in 100% provinces, 75% municipalities/regencies and 50% districts as well as having offices at the national, provincial and municipality/regency level [5]. In article 8 of Law No. 8 of 2012 on General Election, the requirements of a party to participate in election are that the party has become a legal entity and has a membership of at least 1000 people or 1/1000 of the total population at the municipality/regency level [6].

The interest behind these very restrictive electoral regulations is to limit the competitors of the dominant bourgeois parties. The fewer the number of their competitors—especially in the absence of the party that represents the interests of the working class—the easier for them to monopolize the political process in Indonesia.

The absence of the left or progressive alternative in elections is not the only outcome of these electoral regulations. These regulations also encourage opportunism because the left or other elements of social movements that want to participate in the elections were compelled to take tactical maneuvers to overcome the obstacles created by those regulations. Sometimes, those tactics were taken without strong considerations thus undermining the long-term interests of the working people.

This tendency is visible in the PRD. In the 2014 election, the PRD adopted the diaspora tactics. They sent their cadres to become legislative candidates in several bourgeois parties, such as the People's Conscience Party (Hanura), the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and the Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) [7]. Hanura and Gerindra are military-dominated parties. One of the leaders of Gerindra, Prabowo Subianto, is a former military leader who was involved in kidnapping PRD cadres during the New Order era.

This meant that the PRD was no longer selective in collaborating with bourgeois parties. Although

they still use anti-imperialist rhetoric, they seem indifferent to the questions of democracy and human rights. In short, the PRD suffers from an ideological regression. How could they have a strong stance on the questions of democracy and human rights when they cooperate with military elements who were anti-democracy and human rights?

In the broader social movements, diaspora and opportunist tendencies are also strengthened. More and more social movement activists joined the bourgeois parties and state institutions. Their difference with the PRD is that they do not anchor themselves in any left political organization. Although their initial intention might be “to change from within,” over time they take part in weakening the struggle of the working people, because they also become channels of bourgeois influence on social movements.

Intensifying Contradictions and the Growth of Political Consciousness

Despite the very restrictive regulations, there is a growing political consciousness among the people which represent a potentiality to advance a left alternative in elections. In the post-Soeharto era, the State aggressively implement neoliberal policies. The essence of neoliberalism is the intensification of capital accumulation. To that end, the State encourages privatization, tax haven for capital, subsidy cuts, land grabbing, downward pressure on wages, the destruction of workers’ bargaining power through labor market flexibility policies, etc. The consequences of this aggressive neoliberalism are the intensification of class antagonisms.

During 2009-2014, the number of agrarian conflicts increased sharply. In 2009, there were about 89 agrarian conflicts. This number increased steadily each year up to 472 conflicts in 2014. The percentage of increase during 2009-2014 was 430% [8]. These agrarian conflicts were full of violence. In 2015, for example, there were 252 agrarian conflicts in which 5 people were killed, 39 were shot, 124 were persecuted or injured and 278 people were arrested or criminalized [9].

In the labor sector, during 2000-2012, despite the fluctuating amount of the participating masses, the frequency of labor demonstrations tended to increase. In 2000, there were 324 labor demonstrations. This number increased to 1050 labor demonstrations in 2012. The percentage of increase during 2000 to 2012 was 224% [10]. In addition, the workers have also launched several national strikes.

The intensification of this contradiction has been expanding people’s political consciousness. Having stuck with partial or economic struggle, a growing number of activists think that it is not enough to simply act as pressure groups. If you want to change the policies of the State, you shall participate in the State. This political consciousness is still reformist, not “socialist consciousness,” because it is still limited to policy improvement within the capitalist system. However, this reformist political consciousness is already a progress.

This growing political consciousness looks quite prominent in the reformist labor movement, especially the Indonesian Trade Union Confederation (KSPI) or Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union (FSPMI). Around the end of 2011, appeared the slogan “from factory to public” in the reformist labor movement. They were no longer taking care of only labor issues such as wages, contract labor, and outsourcing, but they also began taking care of general public issues such as social health insurance (BPJS), fuel subsidy and bill on mass organization that threatened freedom of association.

Furthermore, in part because of the encouragement of pro-democracy NGOs such as Demos, appeared the slogan “workers go politics” in the reformist labor movement. In the 2014 legislative

election, FSPMI employed the diaspora tactics. They sent some of their members to become legislative candidates in various bourgeois parties. Two members of FSPMI, Nyumarno and Nurdin, respectively candidates from the PDIP and the National Mandate Party (PAN), managed to win seats in the local parliament of the Bekasi Regency [11].

Outside of the labor movement, there was also expansion of political consciousness. In the peasant movement, for example, there was the PPR that tried to participate in the 2009 election, but they failed. In the environmental movement, there was the Indonesian Green Party (PHI) which was declared in Bandung on June 5, 2012 [12]. The growing number of activists who employ the diaspora tactics, on the one hand, was a sign of the widespread growth of political consciousness. Although on the other hand, it was also a sign of the strengthening of opportunism.

Dual-Party Tactics: Mass Party and Revolutionary Party

Thus, there is a growing number of people with reformist political consciousness that can be consolidated together with the socialists in a mass electoral party with a progressive-reformist tendency. With the existence of a progressive-reformist mass party, the socialists could strengthen the political position of the working people, sharpen class contradictions massively and expand socialist consciousness.

However, because the prevailing electoral regulations have been inhibiting the growth of such a mass party, groups or political activists who already have reformist political consciousness did not find any medium to consolidate politically. As a result, some of them dispersed to various bourgeois parties and state institutions, leaving them vulnerable to opportunism and cooptation by the bourgeoisie class. Some of them who did not disperse to bourgeois parties were affected by defeatism.

In addition, there is a strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism and national chauvinism—anti-foreign and anti-Chinese—in Indonesia. The strengthening of these two tendencies can not be separated from the inter-bourgeois rivalries that use both tendencies to garner mass support. The strengthening of both tendencies could drag some reformist activists and degrade their political consciousness.

The vulnerability of reformist political consciousness to become opportunism, Islamic fundamentalism or national chauvinism can be seen from several events. In the 2014 Presidential Election, for example, the KSPI supported Prabowo as President. After failing to participate in 2009 election, some PPR activists dispersed to bourgeois parties [13]. In PHI, there is an activist who initially helped build the PHI but now has crossed over to PDIP, a bourgeoisie party that uses nationalist imagery and becomes the ruling party in Jokowi's regime.

To deal with this situation, several socialist organizations, including the PRP, employ dual-party tactics. The material conditions today do not allow for a mass revolutionary party because there are still very few people who take scientific socialism as their political position. There are various barriers to the dissemination of scientific socialism or Marxism. Among them are the MPRS Decree No. XXV of 1966 that prohibits the spread of Communism/Marxism-Leninism and the reproduction of historical lies on the "events of '65" in which the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) has been slandered as launching a coup and cruel. Therefore, the socialists need to cooperate with the politically conscious reformists to build a mass party with a platform of wealth redistribution and democracy. Thus, this party will be a progressive-reformist mass party.

The main task of the socialists who work in the mass party is to push forward reformist consciousness into socialist consciousness and sharpen the contradictions with bourgeois politics. In

doing so, it's almost certain that the socialists will come into confrontation with reformism, opportunism, Islamic fundamentalism and national chauvinism. If the socialists do not have their own organization where they can discuss their measures, they will have difficulty in carrying out their mission. They can even dissolve and be hegemonized by another tendency. The organization for the socialists is the revolutionary party.

This is the dual-party tactic: building a progressive-reformist party to participate in election with a revolutionary party that operates inside the mass party. Currently, there are three reformist formations which have a mass party building agenda. *First*, the Confederation of Indonesian People's Movement (KPRI) which is dominated by the agrarian movement, including the elements that previously built the PPR.

Second, the formation that is building the Labour Party. They consist of four major organizations, namely the Indonesian People's House (RRI), the Indonesian People's Organization (ORI), the Indonesian Peasant Union (SPI) and the old Labour Party which was formed by the famous labor activist Muchtar Pakpahan. This formation is dominated by the labor movement and its driving element is the RRI in which there is the KSPI. *Third*, the PHI whose main element consists of environmental activists.

There are three socialist political organizations that intervene these three reformist formations. The PRP intervenes KPRI and PHI, while the United Indonesian Struggle (PPI) and the People's Politics (PR) intervene RRI and the broader formation that is building the Labour Party. Besides these three socialist political organizations, there are also unaffiliated left mass organizations that intervene those reformist formations, namely the Indonesian People's Struggle Union (SPRI) which intervenes KPRI and the Indonesia Port Transportation Workers' Federation (FBTPI) that intervenes RRI. The biggest problem faced by the dual-party tactic is fragmentation, both in the reformist and socialist camps. Among the three reformist formations above, none could qualify by themselves to participate in the general election. None of them have become a legally recognized party, whereas their time is short if they want to participate in the 2019 election—registration of election participants will be opened next year. Not mentioning if the electoral tactic is combined with mass radicalization, they will not be capable of doing so if they are alone.

The socialists that intervene the reformist formations also do not have enough power to fight against other tendencies in the reformist formations. When some elements of KSPI attended the demonstration against blasphemy on November 4, 2016, the socialists that intervene RRI can not block them. When there are elements of KPRI and PHI who participated in bourgeois parties or aligned with one of the bourgeois candidates in the Jakarta executive election without any organizational mandate, the socialists that intervene KPRI and PHI can not block them [14]. They were forced to compromise with various negative tendencies that could liquidate the reformist-progressive formations that are being built.

To overcome the aforementioned dual-disadvantage, PRP is trying to encourage unity in two fronts. **First**, unity of the reformist formations that already have a mass party building agenda—so far, they are KPRI, PHI and the formation that is building the Labour Party—into one progressive-reformist mass party. *Second*, unity of the left—not only with socialist organizations that have intervened the reformist formations but also with socialist organizations that do not yet have a mass party agenda—to create a better revolutionary party than ever before.

Working for this dual-unity is not easy. There are various challenges such as lack of resources, the problem of subjectivism which is partly due to bad experiences in past cooperation, etc. However, if this dual-unity can be successfully realized, there is hope that in the 2019 General Election, we can present a progressive-reformist mass party with a revolutionary party working within it. A mass party that hopefully not only able to participate in election but can also strengthen the political

position of the working people, radicalize the masses, sharpen class contradictions and expand socialist consciousness. This is the path that we take to present a left alternative in Indonesian elections.

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Footnotes

[1] The original version of this paper was presented at the second session of the Socialism International 2016 forum titled "The Left Alternative in Elections" in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, November 26, 2016.

[2] The results of the 1999 election can be seen in the General Election Commission website, <http://www.kpu.go.id/index.php/pages/detail/2008/11/Pemilu-1999>.

[3] Law No. 2 of 1999 on Political Party can be downloaded at http://www.setneg.go.id/components/com_perundangan/docviewer.php?id=2&filename=UU_no_2_th_1999.pdf.

[4] Law No. 3 of 1999 on General Election can be downloaded at http://www.setneg.go.id/components/com_perundangan/docviewer.php?id=3&filename=UU_no_3_th_1999.pdf.

[5] Law No. 2 of 2011 on Political Party can be downloaded at http://www.setneg.go.id/components/com_perundangan/docviewer.php?id=2635&filename=UU%202%20Tahun%202011.pdf.

[6] Law No. 8 of 2012 on General Election can be downloaded at http://www.setneg.go.id/components/com_perundangan/docviewer.php?id=3683&filename=UU%20Nomor%208%20Tahun%202012.pdf.

[7] Mohamad Arief Hidayat et al., "20 Tahun (R)evolusi PRD," Viva.co.id, July 16, 2016, <http://sorot.news.viva.co.id/news/read/796841-20-tahun-r-evolusi-prd>.

[8] Research Centre for Crisis and Alternative Development Strategy (Inkrispena), "Brief Facts on Agrarian Conflicts in Indonesia," Factsheet, downloaded from <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BxYuo7hbmCYcRUFyWl9vNmJQbFE>.

[9] Agrarian Reform Consortium, Catatan Akhir Tahun 2015 Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria: Reforma Agraria dan Penyelesaian Konflik Agraria Disandera Birokrasi, Jakarta: Agrarian Reform Consortium, 2016, <http://www.kpa.or.id>.

[10] Abu Mufakhir, "Back to the Street: Indonesia Labour Resistance in Post-Authoritarian (1998-2012)," downloaded from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BxYuo7hbmCYcS3BiX2U0akM5WG8/view>.

[11] “Dua perwakilan buruh Bekasi dilantik jadi anggota DPRD,” Antaranews.com, August 5, 2014, <http://www.antaranews.com/berita/447217/dua-perwakilan-buruh-bekasi-dilantik-jadi-anggota-dprd>.

[12] A brief history of PHI can be seen in “Tentang Partai Hijau Indonesia,” PHI’s website, May 10, 2016, <http://www.hijau.org/tentang-partai-hijau-indonesia/>.

[13] See Muhammad Ridha’s interview with Dedi Yanto, ‘Dedi Yanto: “Perlu Konsolidasi Kekuatan Rakyat yang Termanifes dalam Bentuk Gerakan Partai Politik”,’ Indoproggress, September 21, 2016, <http://indoproggress.com/2016/09/dedi-yanto-perlu-konsolidasi-kekuatan-rakyat-yang-termanifes-dalam-bentuk-gerakan-partai-politik/>

[14] See “Tuntut Jokowi Tegakkan Keadilan, Buruh Mendukung Aksi 4 November,” the website of the Indonesian Trade Union Association (Aspek), <http://aspekindonesia.org/tuntut-jokowi-tegakkan-keadilan-buruh-mendukung-aksi-4-november/>.