

Emerging Political Parties in Indonesia: Raising the Water Level of Policy Debate?

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For years, Indonesia's political landscape had little room for vigorous debate on policy issues, given the focus on individual personalities and even populism. This is beginning to change.

There are increasing signs that 20 years of policy-free rhetorical contestation between Indonesia's political parties may soon be challenged. Policy debate has come from a social opposition, based in civil society, but without any voice in the party system. This may mark the beginning of a break in the hegemony of parties originating from the New Order.

In the immediate years after Suharto, it was relatively easy for new political forces to offer new candidates. Without resources or access to the media, however, no new forces succeeded in winning a seat. Later electoral rules have made it even harder for small new parties to register to participate in elections. As a result, rigorous debate about policies languished. The registered parties had the same origins in the same New Order political elite; as a result, they shared the same political outlooks.

In 2021, two of these smaller parties, the Workers Party (PB) and the People's Democratic Party (PRD), started to relaunch themselves - the PRD by creating and registering a new party under the name Just and Prosperous People's Party ([PRIMA](#)). If they can firm up their policy positions, they may evolve to become a challenge to a political mode dominated by rhetorical contestation without policy debate. It is still early days as yet, but if the PB and PRD are any indications, they look likely to offer some debates on policies such as Indonesia's labour laws, the rule of the country's oligarchs and the environment.

The Workers Party (PB) was formed in 2003 by Muchtar Pakpahan, who had earlier founded a union, the Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia (SBSI), which is still active. The PB has retained its legal status as a party organisation. Before his death in March 2021, Pakpahan reached an agreement that the PB should become a vehicle open to using by existing labour movement forces. This agreement involved figures from the two largest union confederations, the Confederation of All Indonesia Trade Unions (KSPSI) and the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI).

Both KSPSI and KSPI leaders had already been in discussions regarding [forming a labour party](#), but this faded away when the two unions went separate ways: KSPSI supported Joko Widodo, and KSPI supported Prabowo Subianto for the presidency in 2019. Pakpahan's offer revived the labour party process, although a revived PB will still need to go through the second process of proving a minimum membership and national geographical coverage. A national founding congress for the new PB is currently scheduled for 27 and 28 October.

The PB has something going for it: [eleven organisations](#) have stated a commitment to the party. These include the SBSI, the KPBI — a union confederation, some of whose activists originate from

the 1990s anti-dictatorship movement, and groups connected to the KSPI and KSPSI and other smaller unions. It is the larger union confederations that would provide the core national network needed to gain electoral registration. One union, the [KPBI](#), has established a Political Committee which is reaching out to other groups to recruit broader support. Of course, it also includes the leaders and members of Pakpahan's original PB who are still active.

It will not be clear until after the October congress what the exact political character, programme and campaigning style of this new party might be. Some union officials have already stood for some of the existing parties. [One former official of the KSPI](#) is now in the parliament elected under the banner of Gerindra, Prabowo's party. Other unions advocated a no-vote policy in previous elections and have been aligned with the social-democratic wing of activist civil society.

At the same time, all these forces have been critical of the Widodo government's [Job Creation Law](#), although divided on whether using militant campaigning or moderate lobbying methods. From this angle, any unity achieved through the PB would be one based on a shared policy stance, not consensus around a political figure or a faction of the old elite. It is this aspect that points to the possibility of a politics of policy contestation. The first congress will reveal the full spectrum of policy agreements, which may be based around the "welfare state" idea.

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Besides the PB, the PRD's new formation, PRIMA, has already [obtained legal status](#) but has yet to gain registration to participate in elections. The PRD was at the forefront of the protest movement against Suharto in the 1990s. It has not been a part of most of the civil society campaign alliances over the last twenty years. Its public statements project PRIMA as '[anti-oligarchy](#)' and pro-human rights. Its leadership is made up of activists from the 1990s, although a new figure has emerged [to head its Deliberative Assembly](#) (MPR), a former Army officer with a career in Intelligence.

A third party connected to the social opposition that is now preparing to apply for legal recognition is the [Indonesian Green Party](#) (PHI). The PHI presents itself as a social-democratic and environmentally oriented organisation. This party is also being formed on the basis of an agreement with a policy programme, including demand for action around climate change and opposition to palm oil expansion. This party is recruiting members as individual activists, primarily from the numerous small campaign organisations throughout the country, all of whom are built around policy demands. Its website states it has 1,600 members and is active in 34 provinces.

Among the informal discussion within civil society, many activists have yet to make up their minds whether the new initiatives discussed above are serious attempts to build civil society-based parties or motivated, at least in part, as manoeuvres to improve the bargaining power of some figures vis-à-vis the elite, making use of the electoral context. Will these new parties emerge as a new idealism or just a new version of opportunism?

No one really knows, but as these parties evolve in terms of achieving registration for the 2024 elections, their emergence is a sign that the 20 years of rhetorical contestation without policy debate will be coming under challenge in the next few years. They may serve to elevate policy issues to a higher profile in the process of seeking electoral registration.

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