

# Indonesia: Learning from the People's Democratic Party, building something new

Monday 21 August 2023, by [Arah Juang](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2023).

**On Wednesday August 9, Arah Juang organised an invitation only discussion on the theme "The Prabowo-Budiman Meeting and the Political Transformation of Ex-PRD Activists".**

The discussion was enlivened by contributions from Unfinished Nation author Max Lane, former People's Democratic Party (PRD) leader Vijay and Mahendra from the Socialist Union (PS). On Tuesday July 18, former PRD chairperson Budiman Sudjatmiko, who was imprisoned by the New Order military regime of former president Suharto, held a meeting with Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) chairperson and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto. Sudjatmiko's actions attracted condemnation from the former secretary general of the PRD, Petrus Hariyanto (who was also imprisoned along with Sudjatmiko) and more than 80 other people who held a press conference at the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) offices in Jakarta on July 27 to mark the anniversary of the July 27, 1996 attack on the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) offices in Jakarta, known as Kudatuli. Hariyanto said that Sudjatmiko had forgotten their history, specifically the abduction of PRD activists in 1997-98 on then Lieutenant General Subianto's orders. Lane and Vijay said they admired Hariyanto and that his condemnation of Sudjatmiko was an act of solidarity with former comrades who were killed, disappeared or tortured by the New Order regime. They said it takes courage to make a statement such as this and they are also convinced that it was not done in the interests of the Prabowo camp's political opponents, referring to earlier statements by Prabowo — who is expected to run as a presidential candidate in 2024 — that charges of human rights violations against him only come up every five years ahead of elections. Vijay said that the PRD's history is important and should be studied more by today's people's movements. "The PRD should be used as benchmark for left organisations in Indonesia, at least in the last 30 years. This is because the PRD and its affiliated organisations were the most phenomenal. Organisations that were very clear in their program, strategy and tactics", he said. Lane meanwhile said that, "The PRD was far more amazing than many people realise. From only 10 people it grew to hundreds, during the Suharto era which was highly repressive. In the midst of this they were also able to organise labour strikes involving tens of thousands of workers, this is more than has happened since Suharto was overthrown. The PRD at the time also had the capacity to hold simultaneous actions in different cities across Indonesia. These actions took up one issue, one slogan, one demand that was the same. During the 1997 elections they distributed tens of thousands of leaflets across poor kampungs (urban villages) in Jakarta. In order to do this the PRD leadership issued an instruction on the need for cadre, and many cadre from came from outside Jakarta. And while they carried out activities like this, they also published the newspaper, Pembebasan. This is despite being hunted by the military all over the country and many being imprisoned. During their trials, the PRD cadre made themselves loud and clear in court. [Indonesia's foremost author] Pramoedya Ananta Toer himself said that the PRD were amazing, the only ones in the world to have succeeded in overthrowing a military regime without arms". The PRD had a program to remove the capitalist-militaristic regime, the New Order dictatorship. Militaristic in terms of maintaining its power, capitalist in terms of the interests it defended. The New Order was also fortified by a packet of five political laws passed in 1985 and the

dual socio-political function of the military known as *dwi-fungsi ABRI* (now the TNI). In confronting this problem the PRD put forward a political program whose main aim was democratisation. Revoking the five political laws and *dwi-fungsi ABRI*. In addition to this the PRD taught that the highest form of struggle for the mass of ordinary people was being organised in a political party. In final years of the New Order, Prabowo was a senior TNI officer, ending his career as the commander of Army's Strategic Reserves Command (Kostrad). Prior to this he was the commander of the Army's Special Forces (Kopassus) where under his leadership the Rose Team (Tim Mawar) abducted, tortured and disappeared pro-democracy activists in 1997-98. So it is clear that Prabowo was part of the New Order. Now however, many former PRD figures have joined the political parties or the camp of the political elite. Sudjatmiko is a senior politician with the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Dita Sari and Faisol Reza have joined the National Awakening Party (PKB), Habiburohman is in Prabowo's Gerindra Party and Andi Arif is a senior member of the Democrat Party. Actually there are still others who have not joined elite political parties but support them, such as Rusly Moty who is part of a Prabowo volunteer support group. Aside from those who have joined the elite camp, there are also those who have joined non-government organisations (NGOs), become professionals and many also who have just become ordinary people. Lane also noted that not all former PRD members are like Sudjatmiko or those who have become politicians in the elite political parties. There are others who are still pursuing the PRD's ideals and endeavoring to establish and build political organisations. Lane said he knows several people who are still pursuing these ideals. One of them that Lane cited was today's speaker from the Socialist Union (Mahendra). Post reformasi — the political reform process that began in 1998 — the elite political parties also went through a series of splits. But there was no debate among them on a vision or mission for Indonesia's future. What occurred was just coalitions, coalitions and more coalitions. Most recently these coalitions produced the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, revision to the Criminal Code (KUHP), raised the price of fuel and so on, all of which benefited the elite themselves. That was the political elite that developed post reformasi. The majority of the former PRD members spread across the various elite political parties did not oppose the Omnibus Law, revisions to the KUHP, the law on social organisations or other repressive laws. Their previous support for workers, which represent the majority of the ordinary people, and safeguarding democracy is questionable. The political maneuvers that they pursue usually do not involve the masses. Yet in the past the PRD fought for democracy so that there would be active and mass participation in politics. Based on the two measures of political content and strategy, the politics of the former PRD members shifted from the left to the right. From fighting to replace the Suharto dictatorship and moving towards a democratic system, their politics now support the ruling class. Vijay noted that "currently they are spread across various parties but are no longer part of the people's movement, rather they are part of the political elite". This shows the degeneration of former PRD members. In an article on their *berdikari* website in 2013

(<https://www.berdikarionline.com/membangun-kembali-persatuan-nasional/>) titled "Rebuilding National Unity", the PRD wrote about national unity in the context of a divided movement and confronting neoliberalism. The program they offered as the goals for the country borrowed from the preamble to the 1945 Constituent such as enlightening the life of the nation and so forth. But in practice, during the 2014 presidential election the PRD supported Prabowo, even though this was not official. Leading PRD members joined Prabowo's election campaign team, survey teams and so forth. The PRD as an institution still exists but in terms of its character, program, strategy and tactics, it is very different from the former PRD. There was no explanation about how to achieve these aims. The goals set for the country are still abstract and the steps that would be pursued are not concretely explained. For example, proposing or replacing laws related to the general public interest. Or about the political steps required, whether they are through the parliament, are extra-parliamentary or a combination of both. Sudjatmiko is actually even more confusing. Unity has become an empty jargon because it is unclear what the unity being offered is aimed at. Or who will be invited to unite. And even if it is said that the nationalist groups want to be united, it is still unclear

who exactly they are. There is also no concrete agenda offered. This national unity sound good but is unclear. What then is the difference between Sudjatmiko and actor and presenter Vicky Prasetyo, who on TV talk shows events speaks bombastically but the meaning is unclear? According to Lane, we cannot just say that before it was good but now it is rotten. This will only create cynicism and then in the end pessimism. What the PRD achieved in the past was extraordinary. But if what they achieved was extraordinary, does this not give rise to the question of how to explain the degeneration that is occurring now. "If you look at the PRD's early documents, indeed, what was being fought for was for Indonesia to undergo a structural change so it would no longer be capitalist. But because it was under a military dictatorship, democracy must be won first so that the ordinary people could be free to speak", said Lane. In struggling to win these aims, the dictator Suharto was forced to step down and democratic space is now much more open. But since 1998 and 1998 it has begun to be apparent that the structural changes that were sought could not possibly occur in a short time. Actually, in 1998 immediately after Suharto was overthrown, the PRD raised the idea of establishing a people's council. But this idea was attacked by the reformist politician Amin Rais as a Soviet concept. Nevertheless, the objective situation was not mature enough for this. The massive mobilisations in 1997, both by the PRD and the PDI, led by Megawati Sukarnoputri, primarily mobilised the urban poor. Meanwhile the traditional Marxist concept was that the proletariat (working class) would defeat capitalism. But as explained by Indonesia's founding president Sukarno, Indonesia not only had a proletariat class but also Marhaen, his term for the semi-proletariat. In the 1990s many Marhaen actually migrated to the cities and became the urban poor. But they were not a proletariat that worked in factories. The semi-proletariat or urban poor were the backbone of these mobilisation, which frightened the political elite so they sacrificed Suharto. But their level of consciousness was not yet mature, they could not yet envisage seizing power, establishing their own state and defending themselves from counter-revolutionaries. Their consciousness was that the source of all their problems was Suharto. So with Suharto's departure, at a minimum things would be better. But on how they could be even better, this perhaps could not yet be imagined concretely. Everything changed after Suharto stepped down. The situation changed, including the factors that shaped the dynamics, formed the PRD's ideas throughout the 1990s, it all disappeared. Suddenly the PRD was forced to change course. The fact was that the PRD only had six years of experience and 99 percent of its cadre were only around 20 years old, with minimal political experience and even having no life experience before joining the movement. In 1998 around half of the PRD membership only had two years of political experience because many joined after 1996. This was the situation that faced the PRD in 1999-2002. So in what direction should be PRD change course? If its goal was structural change then there was only one force that could carry this out, namely the mass of ordinary people themselves, the millions of ordinary people. But without a movement of millions of conscious people with the ideal of wanting structural change, it was impossible for this to happen. So how to do this? This is the big question for all small leftist parties throughout the world in societies where the mass level of consciousness is not yet able to question the status quo in depth. The mass of ordinary people may be angry and loath the situation. But they are not yet capable of imagining change where they themselves take power. Even in their workplaces they don't hold the power, so how can they be able to imagine controlling the entire country. This is an extraordinary leap of consciousness to a revolutionary level. Lane continued saying that the difficulties in answering this question should not be underestimated, just saying it's easy without thinking. Many small leftist parties around the world when they have faced a totally changed situation have fallen apart. Socialist teachings emphasise that you cannot be haphazard about things. You have to study the objective situation, the history of your own country, the origins of the situation being faced, and the international situation. You have to read, find data and analyse it. Moreover the PRD cadre at that time were still very young. So it is not surprising that there were those who moved in different directions, some were confused, some were unable to understand the situation and became depressed by the conditions of life, others were tempted by this, or by that. And it was not just the PRD, but all of the groups suffered this. Political parties are made up of

human beings, not robots. There are also some who are aware that they can no longer be involved in building the party, but can assist in other ways. But this however is not enough to answer where the struggle should go in the future. Lane in his book "Unfinished Nation" illustrates that after Suharto fell, the momentum for mass mobilisations began to recede. In concert with this, beginning in 2000 the PRD experienced a degeneration involving two main components. First, several of its key leaders left the party and focused on non-party democratic activism such as writing, becoming journalists or joining NGOs. Second, a distortion of what was referred to by the PRD as the "strategy from above". This ended in a split over the PRD's intervention in the 2009 elections. The Dita Sari and Agus "Jabo" camp renounced all of Papernas' (the National Liberation Party of Unity, a PRD electoral vehicle) principles in order to join the Islamist Star Reform Party (PBR), while the opposition minority group in the party were sidelined. The PRD-Papernas-PBR project failed and Sari left the PRD to support the Jusuf Kalla-Wiranto presidential ticket in the 2009 elections. The PRD's political line after this reflected its entrapment in the "strategy from above" and its alliances with the ruling class. PRD General Chairperson Agus "Jabo" even held a position on the Gerindra Party's Central Leadership Board. "When the problem is how to raise the consciousness of the masses, the millions of ordinary people, then you are talking about a lot of work. If you want to build a cooperative, organise the masses or a trade union, please go ahead. But do not sacrifice disseminating ideas that can become an inspiration for large numbers of ordinary people. You have to explain things. But at this point there is a problem that is a little different that faced during the Suharto era, and very different from the Sukarno era. Namely, the presence of a vanguard party", said Lane. There are many things that have to be explained to the ordinary people. Who can explain this? Those that understand the problems. Those who have studied the problems scientifically and the goal of change in a better direction. One person is not enough for this. Where do you get lots of people from? Sociologically in Indonesia they can only come from the youth whose minds are still fresh and are looking for answers. How do you find these young people? You have to start, and the first step is to build an organisation, but an organisation with what mandate? An organisation that seeks cadre so they can collectively study the situation, to educate and inspire each other, and who are able to convince the ordinary people about what the solution is. Starting with people who are already in motion. People must be found who are ready to listen to a more complete explanation. But that kind of explanation can only be conveyed by people with a commitment to the ordinary people, and who can collectively study the problems until they master the issue. As emphasised by Lane at the end of the discussion, "There isn't any magic formula to be able to jump from being a small organisation straight to being a big one. Pramoedya in his novel "This Earth of Mankind" said that there is nothing more difficult in this world than getting started. I salute all those who are starting something. Are determined to get started. From a small base focusing on understanding the problems to becoming an army spreading ideas. An army that disseminates ideas, including also explaining a genuine understanding of the PRD's history and the left movement before them". Lane also emphasised that, "Don't be like a small whining child, I'm willing to join if there's a big left party, if it isn't big I don't want to. You have to be mature, start from what there is, and build from there"

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