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Proposal to name Suharto “national hero” attracts protest from Indonesian rights activists

Tuesday 8 October 2024, by [AGNE Yolanda](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2024).

Yolanda Agne, Jakarta — A number of parties have protested the proposal to award the title of national hero on the second President of the Republic of Indonesia, Suharto, which was announced by People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) Speaker and Golkar Party politician Bambang Soesatyo at a gathering of MPR leaders and Suharto’s extended family.

“I feel it would not be excessive if perhaps former president Suharto was considered by the incoming government to receive the title of national hero”, said the man usually referred to as Bamsoet at the Delegation Room in the Nusantara IV building at the Senayan parliamentary complex in Central Jakarta on Saturday September 28.

Maria Catarina Sumarsih, one of the pioneers of Kamisan (Thursday) actions, is asking the government to cancel the idea. “The awarding of the title of national hero for Suharto must be rejected”, said Sumarsih

in a written statement received by Tempo via WhatsApp on Saturday. Sumarsih brought up the issue of the student’s struggle to overthrow Suharto in 1998 in order to achieve the ideals of reformasi — the political reform process that began in 1998. She recollected Suharto’s iron-fisted response when faced by demonstrators.

“Before Suharto stepped down from the presidency on May 21, 1998, there was the abduction of pro-democracy activists, the [fatal] shooting of Trisakti students and the political violence on May 13-15, 1998”, she said.

Sumarsih is one of the key figures in the Kamisan actions which are attended by victims of human rights violations and humanitarian activists opposite the Merdeka Palace every Thursday. Kamisan actions have been taking place since January 18, 2007.

Amnesty International Indonesia Executive Director Usman Hamid also criticised the discourse as an attempt to benefit certain groups. “The move is very political and opportunistic. It is only based on the interests of a certain group of people”, Hamid said in a written message sent to Tempo on Saturday.

Hamid believes that the title of national hero should only be given to people who were consistent in their idealism of struggle during their lifetime. “Not people who at the end of their lives were suspects of corruption and abuse of power”, he said.

Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) politician Guntur Romli also opposes pinning the title of national hero on Suharto. “Suharto cannot be promoted as a hero, not just because of the

issue of him being despicable, but the sins of humanitarian crimes”, said Romli Sunday September 29.

Romli revealed several reasons for rejecting the plan to pin the title on Suharto. According to Romli, the Suharto regime was involved in cases of violence and mass murder in 1966, 1974, and 1980 such as the mysterious shooting [of petty criminals] operation or Petrus as well as human rights crimes in several regions namely East Timor, Papua and Aceh.

Aside from the cases of physical violence, Romli also cited the gagging of democratic figures and movements that sought to fight Suharto’s New Order regime, especially the attack by Indonesian government troops on the Indonesian Democratic Party’s (PDI) headquarters on July 27, 1996.

Yolanda Agne

Editor - Nurhadi

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