

What are Indonesia's PRD leftists doing in the Prabowo government?

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When Indonesia's new president Prabowo Subianto announced his cabinet on October 20, it was not surprising that politicians from the old and notoriously corrupt parties of the elite were included.

However, a number of former activists and leaders of the People's Democratic Party (PRD) — which led the mass movement that brought down the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 — were also chosen for Prabowo's 109-member cabinet, the largest since 1966.

These include former PRD chairperson and founding member Agus Jabo Priyono (Deputy Social Affairs Minister), Mugiyanto Sipin (Deputy Minister of Human Rights), Nezar Patria (Deputy Minister of Communications and Digital), Faisol Reza (Deputy Minister of Industry) and Budiman Sudjatmiko (Head of the Agency for the Acceleration of Poverty Alleviation).

Mugiyanto, Nezar and Faisol were among the scores of democracy activists who were kidnapped and tortured by the military between 1997–98, on the orders of then-General Prabowo. Some of these kidnapped were disappeared, including the poet Wiji Thukul.

Green Left's Peter Boyle spoke to **Rudi Hartono**, former editor of the PRD's publication *Berdikari*, about this development.

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How do these former PRD activists explain their participation in the latest government of entrenched elites?

After the fall of Suharto, the political space was actually quite open. However, PRD, as a key political force in Suharto's downfall, failed to seize this political momentum, primarily due to its ambiguous stance in responding to the golden opportunity presented by the 1999 elections [to field candidates].

Since then, within PRD's dynamics, there was an increasing awareness of the need to utilise political space, including elections, to win the party's political agenda. However, despite several attempts to participate in elections, starting from the 2004 elections, the path has not been easy. Apart from dealing with anti-communist sentiment, PRD also faced extremely stringent election requirements. The criteria for a party to participate in elections in Indonesia are among the toughest in the world.

Because of this, PRD's tactics became more flexible. Even though it failed to pass verification to become an official electoral party, PRD managed to have its cadres run in legislative elections under the banners of other parties. This was done from 2009–19.

For the 2024 elections, there was great hope that PRD, now using the name PRIMA (initially designed as a broad anti-oligarchy coalition), could qualify as an election participant. However,

PRIMA faced a highly restrictive election regime with burdensome costs. This situation was worsened by PRIMA's poor organisational and administrative management. As a result, PRIMA failed to pass the verification process.

Along with several other PRD cadres, I wanted to evaluate the reasons for this failure, hoping to improve the party's governance, member recruitment and cadre development. Unfortunately, until the time I became inactive, there was never any space for such an evaluation.

PRD then attempted various electoral lawsuits, which eventually resulted in them getting another chance for verification by the General Elections Commission. However, they failed once again. The narrative that developed among PRD's leadership was that this failure was due to being blocked by major parties (in this case, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P, led by Sukarno's daughter). In reality, organisational weaknesses were also at play, which needed to be addressed.

Following this failure, PRD manoeuvred to support the Prabowo-Gibran Rakabuming ticket. The argument was simple: enter the power structure to push for the party's progressive political agenda.

In theory, this isn't wrong.

However, there are some concerns regarding the Prabowo-Gibran coalition (Gibran being the son of President Jokowi). First, this coalition represents Jokowi's interest in continuing his unfinished agenda (the new capital city project, which has garnered much criticism; the *Job Creation Law*, which disadvantages workers, the public and the environment; and the regression of democracy).

Before the elections, PRIMA was highly critical of Jokowi. Under his administration, the oligarchy consolidated its power, economic inequality widened, the middle class shrank and foreign debt piled up. Since joining Prabowo-Gibran, PRIMA has abandoned its anti-oligarchy stance. There is no longer any talk of wealth taxes, agrarian reform or similar progressive policies. PRIMA members on social media have even switched to becoming Jokowi supporters.

Secondly, this coalition has been criticised for nepotism. Jokowi's son, Gibran was not even of legal age to run, but he qualified as vice president after the Constitutional Court, led by Jokowi's brother-in-law, changed the rules. Moreover, with Prabowo pairing up with Gibran, this duo gained the backing of the state apparatus and resources (courtesy of Jokowi). Ironically, PRIMA has remained silent (and even supportive) on the nepotism issue, whereas anti-corruption, [anti-]collusion and [anti-]nepotism were values PRD upheld since its inception.

Thus, the argument of entering power has come at the cost of eroding the party's values and political stance, making PRD/PRIMA no different from other conservative and opportunistic right-wing parties.

Is it simply that they think they can make some change by working within the system?

I think it's quite difficult. To turn the government into something progressive, we have to talk about the balance of political forces. The Prabowo-Gibran coalition represents a large coalition that includes almost all elite forces and big businesses in Indonesia. Meanwhile, PRD/PRIMA is a very small player within this coalition. PRIMA's local branches are thinly staffed, consisting mostly of core management without a large membership base.

On the other hand, PRIMA/PRD's relationship with social movements and civil society is distant. So, it's hard to expect PRIMA's political agenda within the government to gain support from social movements outside of power (labour unions, farmer movements, student movements, indigenous communities, etc).

In terms of issues and ideas, so far, PRIMA has not shown any discourse or ideas that differ from the main narrative carried by Prabowo-Gibran and other coalition parties. They have yet to address any issue on their own that has the potential to make a political impact, which would make their political position more significant.

Or have they given up all interest in progressive change?

It's hard to answer this. But, judging from the narrative of their members on social media, they still seem to dream of progressive change. The rhetoric sometimes still uses phrases like "the party of ordinary people".

What role did "Sukarnoism" play in this development? After all, Agus Jabo hailed Prabowo's presidency as a "victory for Pancasila"?

This kind of narrative isn't new. Back then, Jokowi also rose to power with the rhetoric of Sukarnoism, backed by PDI-P, the largest party, and many activists. However, the reality was that it was merely rhetoric. Jokowi's economic and political policies ended up being contrary to Sukarno's ideas.

In Prabowo's case, the PRD leadership tried to align Prabowo's rhetoric of national unity and a grand coalition without opposition with Sukarno's move towards Guided Democracy from 1959–66.

I think that narrative is inaccurate. Sukarno's national unity strategy was built on uniting progressive forces against colonialism and imperialism. Meanwhile, Prabowo's national unity is based on a broad coalition aimed at winning elections and securing his power from threats. Prabowo's national unity rhetoric is closer to that of his father-in-law: national development supported by political stability. Thus, his politics leaves little room for opposition or critical voices.

From the beginning, when we fought in PRD, the idea we believed in was that development must be participatory. Economic development must go hand in hand with democracy and clean governance. I think we are different from the 20th-century left, which was still obsessed with centralised and top-down power models. The 21st-century left prioritises decentralisation and participation.

Indeed, in his inaugural speech, Prabowo offered some positive messages, such as fighting corruption and ensuring that power is for the people, not for cronies, and committing to eradicating poverty.

However, this contradicts his first step of forming a super-sized cabinet (109 ministers, deputy ministers, and agency heads), which eats up a lot of the budget, leaving less for important projects (education, healthcare, poverty eradication, etc). The cabinet also includes some individuals with problematic backgrounds and corruption issues.

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