

Promising Potential, Badly Managed

Trade Union Movement and Democracy in Indonesia: 2010, 2014, and Beyond

A Case Study by Surya Tjandra

On International Labour Day in 2010, Jakarta witnessed a historic event. About 150,000 workers from all over the country held a protest demanding the implementation of a planned social security law.

The Action Committee for Social Security Reforms - an alliance of trade unions and civil society groups - had called for the demonstrations.

Bringing unionised workers to the street proved to be crucial for the success of the protests. Shortly after, the Indonesian government gave up its resistance against the planned National Social Security System and finally implemented the law.

Four years later, on July 22, 2014, tens of thousands workers again took to the streets. This time, the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union had called them to influence the outcome of the presidential elections in favour of one candidate, Prabowo Subianto.

Other workers' organisations were supporting Prabowo's rival, Joko Widodo. They accused the metal workers of threatening democracy in Indonesia by marching for Prabowo. Tensions ran high. The former unity amongst the workers seemed a distant memory.

In the end, Prabowo lost the election, but the real loser was the divided labour movement.

United in the Past

To understand how Indonesia's workers' organisations ended up so deeply fractured, one has to go back to the early 2000s, when Indonesia was governed by a reformist government that proposed a National Social Security System known as the SJSN Law.

For the first time, all Indonesian citizens would have access to healthcare, would be insured against occupational accidents and other risks, and enjoy a pension scheme.

Until then, only public servants, military and police officials had the benefits of a pension, and approximately 140 million of Indonesia's 230 million citizens had no health insurance.

While the SJSN Law was signed by then-President Megawati in 2004, subsequent governments did not favour the new law and postponed its implementation.

To push for its implementation, the Action Committee for Social Security Reforms (KAJS) was formed. At its core stood the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union (FSPMI) and other trade unions, NGOs, farmers, fishermen, student organisations and activists.

KAJS organised seminars, workshops, public meetings and mass demonstrations in support of the new law. In the end, the movement prevailed. After the mass demonstrations on International Labour Day 2010, the National Social Security System was implemented.

Victory Gone to the Head

In the absence of a political party supportive of a social agenda, the presence of KAJS and the unions proved vital. As a result, a self-confident FSPMI decided to enter the political arena.

The unions wanted to use their leverage to increase the bargaining position of workers, and demonstrate that workers were fighting on behalf of society as a whole.

Under the banner of “Labour Going Politics”, FSPMI made plans to support candidates from among its membership in the legislative elections, nationally as well as regionally, in 2014. But the project was marred by the FSPMI leadership selecting candidates in a covert, top-down way, making itself the target of strong criticism from fellow unionists.

Another problem was that the newly minted politicians cared mostly for traditional labour issues, considering topics like human rights violations and the development of democracy as secondary issues. Such attitudes unsettled former allies in the KAJS movement, and divided the union movement.

In the end, two FSPMI candidates muddled through and made it into the regional parliament of Bekasi Regency. Most candidates failed to win the trust of voters, showing that workers were not willing to back trade union candidates without good reason.

Losing Trust

The conflict between the trade union leadership, its membership base and civil society organisations culminated a few months later during the presidential election.

The top leadership of FSPMI supported Prabowo Subianto, a former general and businessman who was also a son-in-law of former authoritarian President Suharto.

Not only was Prabowo totally unacceptable to many trade union allies, he also troubled many within the labour movement itself. Many members criticised the decision-making inside the FSPMI for not being inclusive.

A group of critical activists and unionists from other unions went on to form the Workers Political Committee (KPBI) in support of Joko Widodo, who was seen as more modern and representing a younger generation.

FSPMI did not react kindly, with its leadership subduing opposition to Prabowo among its own members. Those opposed to Prabowo faced intimidation, and some were removed from their positions. In the end most preferred to keep silent and avoid further problems. In their quest for organisational efficiency, the leadership had sacrificed internal democracy.

In the end, the election was a failure both for the FSPMI and its candidate. Not only did Prabowo lose the election, but the FSPMI made another strategic mistake. When there were no clear results on election day, some FSPMI union leaders tried to force their candidate into

power by ordering their members to lay siege to the Indonesian Election Commission. Ever since, the workers movement of Indonesia has remained deeply divided.

A Way Forward?

After the election, the FSPMI declared its intention to establish an alternative political party whose power base would be the workers. Since the FSPMI is the most effective worker's organisation in Indonesia, observers assessed the chances of such party as good.

On the other hand, such a party could only stand a chance of becoming a real political alternative if it joined forces with other social movements. After the rift during the last presidential election, this will be a real challenge for the FSPMI leadership. Rebuilding trust and convincing other social forces of a new internal culture requires better democratic structures and methods. Building those is fundamental on a road (back) to success.

DRAFT