

Book Review

Dilemmas of Populist Transactionalism: What are the Prospects Now for Popular Politics in Indonesia?, by Luky Djani and Olle Törnquist. Yogyakarta: PolGov Publishing, 2017. Pp. 96. ISBN 9786026093301.

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It is sad, but true, that most Left groups are now left with only having to decide how to relate to populist leaders. They have lost the capacity to take initiatives and to negotiate successfully with populist leaders. This small but meaty book looks at the problems faced by Left groups in Indonesia. Its analysis of relations with progressive populist President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo provides a useful contrast to the Philippines’ rightist President Rodrigo Duterte.

Dilemmas of Populist Transactionalism tells two interrelated stories. One story follows “the development of an informal social contract between new populist leaders, urban poor, and civil society activists in the city of Solo, Central Java” (p. 5). It was this story that led to the election of Jokowi as Solo mayor, later, as Jakarta governor, and then president of the republic. The second story is about the “remarkably broad and successful KAJA (Komite Aksi Jaminan Sosial or Action Committee for Social Security), in which unions and civil society activists worked in tandem with progressive politicians to promote social policies and legislation for health protection” (p. 5).

The Solo experience successfully propelled Jokowi’s remarkable political career. However, KAJA’s initial success failed to assist Jokowi’s deputy governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama in overcoming right-wing Islamic activism to succeed Jokowi. But this book does not really focus on these two political careers. It focuses instead on the failure of initially successful alliances between progressive populists and civil society activists to sustain and scale up progressive gains.

It is clear where the two authors' sympathies lie: they are both progressive, activist scholars. Törnquist, a Swede working in Norway, is familiar with successful social democratic arrangements. Underlying their analysis is a tone of disappointment. The two successful cases of populist-social movement coalitions ended up with "populist transactionalism," exchanging struggles for progressive policies with particularistic favors to social movement leaders, and only in the best cases, to their organizations.

Jokowi's dependence on maneuvering between political party supporters and an unreliable bureaucracy to keep himself in power, combined with the weakness of social movements supporting him, created the conditions for populist transactionalism. Jokowi himself retains the support of many progressive social movement activists, but he has been unable to take on reforms that would significantly change the political system in a progressive direction.

Törnquist (2018, 2) explains the roots of populist-social movement alliances in another paper:

...by the mid-2000s, direct elections of political executives were introduced on all levels. To win elections, leaders must thus cast their nets wider than through conventional religious-cum-cultural identities and patronage. The supplementary method was populism (in terms of anti-elitism and supposedly direct relations between acclaimed leaders and a notoriously unspecified "people"). An associated strategy was to gain support from civil society groups with a presence in the public discourse on human rights and corruptions with some following among urban poor, trade unions, petty farmers' and fisher folks' organisations (including indigenous people). These otherwise scattered groups and their leaders could thus gain influence by negotiating agreements and rally behind the least worst politicians.

The prime argument is that such movements might pave the way for the re-sequencing of social democratic development, if they congregate behind reformist-cum-populist leaders who need wider backing to win elections. In the process, it might then be possible to build the broader alliances that are necessary to foster both the missing solid and democratic linkages between state and society (including interest representation) and social growth pacts.

But in Indonesia,

“...the student movement (which played a major role in bringing Suharto down) petered out and disintegrated.” Pro-democratic actors typically retreated to civil society demands for amendment of the 1945 constitution, free and fair election laws, and single-issue campaigns such as against “rotten politicians,” plus workplace activism. While their aim was “change from below and from within,” the prime result was what Törnquist, et al. (2003) dubbed as “floating democrats” who was neither firm in its organization nor in its social base.” (pp. 8-9).

The contrasts and similarities with the Philippines are instructive. Both countries have weak political parties, though Indonesian political parties are considerably stronger. Both countries have populist presidents, both of whom worked with progressive social movement groups. President Duterte even claims that he is a “socialist.” While Jokowi retains considerable support among progressive social movement groups, Duterte’s relations with progressives has deteriorated rapidly. Talks with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) have been put on hold, and former Cabinet Secretary Leoncio “Jun” Evasco Jr., the other progressive in Duterte’s ranks, was constantly outmaneuvered in government factional infighting.

Duterte started out with a de facto coalition government with the Communist Party of the Philippines. He appointed three CPP mass leaders to key positions in the cabinet, and several others to sub-cabinet positions. He also pushed peace talks with the CPP-NPA (Communist Part of the Philippines- New People’s Army), bending over backwards to take “confidence-building” steps. But today, peace talks are at a standstill, with Duterte and CPP leaders exchanging insults publicly. Most of CPP people have been eased out of government. Many anti-Duterte campaigns are led by the CPP.

Törnquist’s characterization of Indonesian civil society activists as “floating democrats” also applies to the Philippines. The international reputation of Philippine civil society is deserved only as far as advocacy is concerned. The non-governmental organization-people’s organization (NGO-PO) connection is central to civil society ethos, but NGOs have not been very successful in supporting people’s organizations. Civil society is present only in the cities and larger towns.

A program to support civil society organizing at the municipal level by the Benigno Aquino III administration, the Bottom-Up Budgeting Program, was dropped unceremoniously by the Duterte regime. An effort led by former Cabinet Secretary Jun Evasco to generate grassroots support through the Kilusang Pagbabago (Movement for Change) has not gained much traction. Except for some civil society organizations in Mindanao, much of civil society has moved to the opposition.

Discounting the specifics in the political situation of the two countries, the relationship between civil society and the populists in Indonesia and the Philippines is essentially the same. Populists may be elected president in popularity contests, but their limited room to maneuver in the legislature and bureaucracy also prevents them from taking experiments with civil society activists very far. For Indonesia, Djani and Törnquist advice that civil society activists “...combine interests and scale up local participation. The rights of independent citizens and, especially, democratic representation of different interests have been ignored. Both are fundamental in the history of social democratic development.”

Unfortunately, the book does not say much about the attempts to build progressive political parties in Indonesia. The authors do not arrive at the conclusion I draw, that in both countries, what is needed is for civil society activists to continue building political parties. In Indonesia, the cartelized political system includes entry provisions that make it extremely difficult for progressives to even take the first step in joining elections. Other legislated conditions but more importantly, ideological divisions in the Left, have meant only marginally more successful party-building in the Philippines.

Because Jokowi is a more progressive populist hemmed in by conservative political parties, the progressive task is to help him get re-elected. Until progressives succeed in building political parties, the populist and civil society coalition exemplified in the Solo and KAJIS experiments have to be continued and expanded. In the Philippines, the task is simpler: prevent Duterte and his cohorts from changing the constitution to enable them to continue in power despite mounting opposition. Thankfully, the organizational base for doing this in the Philippines is stronger than in Indonesia through a reformist political party, the Liberal Party, and a politically more articulated civil society.

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References

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