



SERANG - JAKARTA ROUND TRIP

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This fieldwork is part of my ongoing dissertation research on the politics of elite-peasant relations in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

It was Tuesday, January 12, 2016. After a quick breakfast with a fist of *kampung*-style fried rice and a cup of tea, I was ready to go. I soon found myself standing on the side of the highway, waiting for the Jakarta-bound bus to come. “Jakarta-Kebon Jeruk-Kampung Rambutan!” yelled the bus conductor, calling the passengers to board the bus.

It was just like my regular Serang-Jakarta trips, except the purpose of my visit to Jakarta this time was a bit special: to attend and observe the fourth national congress of the Confederation of Indonesian People’s Movements or KPRI for short – a national confederation of various social movements and unions across different sectors, representing workers, peasants, fishermen, women, and indigenous peoples. A friend of mine kindly invited me to the congress. “You should come,” she said.

So there I was, sitting in the congress hall, paying attention to what KPRI’s leaders, organizers, and invited speakers said about the confederation: its origins, goals, and policy proposals. Apparently, this was one of the latest attempts by Indonesian leftists and activists to make a breakthrough into oligarchy-dominated mainstream politics, in which big capital and remnants of the authoritarian elites continue to be important actors in politics. As a former student activist, I found this development interesting. Yet, as a scholar in training, I have many questions as to how this confederation will develop down the road. For instance, how will KPRI broaden its support base given the fragmented nature of lower-class unions and movements in Indonesia?

Furthermore, what are its strategies in facing upcoming elections? Of course, in trying to be a bit moderate, I also maintain a cautious optimism.

Fortunately I was not the only one who was pondering those questions. Other activist friends whom I met in the congress shared similar sentiments. This inevitably led to a series of lively discussions among us, but when the congress meetings started, we stopped. Some of us – including myself – even volunteered as note-takers for some of the sessions.

At the local level, the task of community organizing, let alone movement building, can be even more challenging since the local political condition and civil society landscape might not be as conducive as the national one for social movement activities. This is what I have observed in Serang in the last five months or so. Serang is one of the districts in the Banten Province – a province notorious for its corrupt oligarchic dynasty, the Rau Dynasty. The dynasty’s matriarch, Ratu Atut, who is also a former governor of Banten, is now in jail for corruption. However, the dynasty still prevails in Bantenese politics – it will not collapse in anytime soon. The result of the latest Serang District Head election is proof of the continuing dynastic rule: Ratu Tatu, Ratu Atut’s younger sister, won the election and soon will be appointed as the District Head of Serang.

Furthermore, the current state of civil society forces in Serang is quite weak. In several communities that I have observed since September 2015, non-state civil society

activities, such as NGO activities and programs, are something rather unheard of based on the accounts of both ordinary community members and village officials. Buzzwords such as “development” and “community participation” are almost inevitably linked to phrases like “the role of local government.” Moreover, patronage politics and clientelistic practices remain rampant. In the village I lived in, I witnessed a local MP (member of parliament) for the Serang District Parliament from the Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrat*) giving away 20,000-50,000 rupiahs (around USD 1.5-4) to community members who attended his talk in his visit during parliamentary recess. In another village, I heard stories of how the local MP, a Gerindra Party cadre who represented the village, always made sure to distribute enough coffee and cigarettes in every gathering for Koran recitation or *pengajian* that he organized regularly. Hearing and observing all of this makes me wonder: is this the legacy of the New Order Era?

This does not mean that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are entirely absent in Serang. In fact, some of them are active. One NGO is Rekonvasi Bhumi, an environmental preservation NGO whose main beneficiaries are peasant communities in the western part of Serang. One of Rekonvasi Bhumi’s main programs is the promotion of Payment for Environmental Service (PES) and community-based watershed management. They do this through the Cidanau Watershed Communication Forum or FKDC, a tripartite entity brokered by Rekonvasi Bhumi which connects communities, the Banten Provincial Government, and several

corporations whose water supplies come from Cidanau Watershed. The idea behind PES is to ask the private sector compensation for ecological commodities – in this case the watershed – which communities provide.

This means that the peasant communities received additional incomes from their farming and environmental conservation activities. The end goal of this scheme, according to the Executive Director of Rekonvasi Bhumi, is to create “a prosperous and productive community of small and household farmers.” This may sound like a good idea, but not everyone agrees with this proposal. “That NGO has so many ties with big corporations!” said a colleague of mine, a militant local activist, with disdain. For him, NGOs and social movements should limit their ties with corporations in order to maintain their independence and truly represent community voices. He might be right.

Researching and observing all of this has kept my mind busy for the last couple of months. Sometimes I think a lot about this while I am on the road, on my trip to Serang City, the villages, or Jakarta. I often ask myself: is it possible to organize collective action from below effectively? How? To date I still have not found the best possible answer to this question. This inquiry can be a little bit frustrating. Fortunately I have found consolation through sleepless nights of endless chitchats with my neighbors and friends in the villages, accompanied by coffee, snacks, and cigarettes. Hearing their stories of daily struggle with the hardships of life, often filled with jokes, and their relaxed attitude to the

challenges they face daily inspires me to do the same: to be resilient in my struggle in the quest of knowledge.