

Why populism serves oligarchs

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That the appointment of Indonesian Ulema Council chief Ma'ruf Amin as the running mate of Joko "Jokowi" Widodo cannot be separated from the incumbent President's strategy to protect himself from the Islamic card being played against him by his opponent Prabowo Subianto's camp obviously illustrates the return of religion to Indonesian politics.

The return of identity politics is a global phenomenon and is exemplified through the global threat of populism. Some populist politicians have already taken over power, with Donald Trump's election as the United States president celebrated as the win of populism at the global level.

In the Indonesian context the issue of populism has become an important part of political discourses since the last presidential election in 2014. According to Vedi. R. Hadiz and Richard Robinson in 2017, the emergence of populist leaders in Indonesia reflects the protest against the systematic social injustice that has remained unaddressed in the past two decades. The gap between rich and poor has reached an alarming level.

Populism generally expresses the conflict between the majority of the people who are "out of power" and the small but powerful elites. Hence, populism can be described as a social and political protest of the citizens against the failures of elitist and pro-establishment representative democracy.

Populism represents the voice of the marginalized people against the small powerful, corrupt and immoral elites. On the other hand, the people are generally described as a monolithic, homogenous, victimized and marginalized group. Hence, populism can be regarded as a critique to the representative democratic system that fails to generate social justice and true representatives for the people.

Besides being anti-elitism, populism is also characterized by its antipluralistic attitude. The populist slogans such as "We are the only group capable of representing the true will of the people" expresses the antipluralistic tendency of populism. Furthermore, populism avoids establishing political discourses to find alternative solutions to the public problems.

Such a refusal also typifies liberal democracy dominated by technocracy. In this context, people talk about policy without politics, which means public policy is created based on considerations of expertise without involving people in a democratic process. The practices of liberal democracy based on technocracy is a phenomenon of a crisis facing democracy because the people as the original purpose of democracy are left behind.

While rejecting political discourse, both populism and technocracy regard their own positions as absolute truths. In such an antipolitical attitude, populism and technocracy come to light as fundamentalism and radicalism in politics.

This kind of fundamentalism opposes the logic of democracy that works according to the principle of trial and error. In the democratic system one has the possibility and freedom to make mistakes and to improve. The ability to learn from mistakes is the most important strength of democracy compared to totalitarian systems.

According to Chantal Mouffe in 2015, the pathology of liberal democracy expressed in a rejection of critical discourse to search for alternative solutions in politics is a model of neoliberal democracy as a consensual machine that stimulates the birth of populism. Instead of understanding democracy as conflict, the neoliberal democracy avoids political debate and tries to provide the citizens a rational policy or political consensus that must be accepted by the people. Through the idea of “the third way” or the formation of social democratic parties, Mouffe argues, liberal democracy succeeds in domesticating the conflictual dimension of democracy and the antagonism between right-wing populism and left-wing populism. The dissensual democracy emphasizes the unlimited conflictual dimension of the democratic discourse. From the point of view of the dissensual democracy, populism can appear as a social transformative force that brings democracy back to its original meaning as an expression of the people’s sovereignty. However, this can only be realized in a pluralistic milieu and populism can be transformed into an antagonistic democracy.

The practices of populism in Indonesia fail to be an alternative and antagonistic power to the practices of Indonesian democracy that have been coopted by a predatory oligarchy. The reason is that the populist leaders, including Jokowi, fail to transform the populist ideas into new democratic institutions independent of the dominating oligarchic political parties inherited from the New Order regime.

The threat of oligarchic power in Indonesia can be shown through the terrible injustices and the gulf between rich and power. The assets of the 40 richest in Indonesia are valued 580,000 times the per capita income of the country, according to Arif Budimanta in 2018.

This social discrepancy can shake our unity as a nation if politics cannot find the best solution to establish social justice and welfare for all. Otherwise, the social gap keeps strengthening identity politics and right-wing populism.

Unlike in Latin America, where populism emerged as an antagonistic power to the oligarchy, populism in Indonesia cannot fight oligarchy because of the absence of either liberalism (a struggle for civil and political rights) or a leftist movement (a struggle for social justice and fairness) in its democratic traditions.

In this situation, populism creates a war of identity politics steered by the oligarchs. Therefore, populism does not have an emancipatory force, but is instrumentalized to perpetuate oligarchic power.

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