

Populism, Radical Democracy and the possible Relevance of Populism in the Process of Democratization in Indonesia

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Introduction

The appointment of Indonesian Ulema Council chief Ma'ruf Amin as the running mate of Joko "Jokowi" Widodo was surprising and went beyond all speculations. It is well known that as MUI leader Ma'ruf Amin played a significant role in campaign against Ahok by declaring Ahok as blasphemous in 2016, while Ahok was a close ally of Jokowi. However, it could not 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. It obviously illustrates the return of religion to Indonesian politics (Power 2018).

The return of identity politics is a global phenomenon that is exemplified through the global threat of populism. Populists have taken over political power not just in the fragile democracies of the global south. In the Indonesian context the issue of populism has become an important part of political discourse since the presidential election of 2014. According to Vedi. R. Hadiz and Richard Robison (2017), the emergence of populist leaders in Indonesia reflects the protest against systematic social injustice that has remained unaddressed over the past two decades. The gap between rich and poor has reached an alarming level. This social discrepancy could shake our unity as a nation if politics cannot find viable solutions to establish social justice and welfare for all. Otherwise, the social gap will keep strengthening identity politics and right-wing populism.

This research tries to pose a critique against the practices of liberal democracy when transformed into a consensus machine, and in this way ignore the dissensual or conflictual aspect of democracy. Dissensus democracy emphasizes the unlimited conflictual dimension of the democratic discourse. From the point of view of dissensual democracy, populism can appear as a social transformative force that returns democracy to its original meaning as an expression of the people's

sovereignty. However, this can only be realized in a pluralistic milieu where populism can be transformed into an antagonistic and radical democracy.

This research also explores the relevance of the theory of populism to the practices of populism in Indonesia. The question is, can the practices of populism in Indonesia become an alternative and antagonistic power to the practices of Indonesian democracy as co-opted by a predatory oligarchy? What should be done in order to transform populist ideas into the new democratic institutions independent from the domination of the oligarchic political parties inherited from Suharto's New Order regime?

What Is Populism?

To formulate a clear and comprehensive definition of populism provides some fundamental difficulties. Populism is a very broad concept and consequently can appear in the form of right-wing political movements and anti-migrant politics in some countries of Western Europe or emerge as ethnic-based political parties and hyper-nationalism in Eastern Europe. Besides exclusive traits, populism embodies inclusion as displayed by the left-wing populism in some countries of Latin America where populism is used as a tool to fight against social injustice and marginalization.

However, as Barbara Wejnert explains, populism generally expresses the conflict between the majority of the people who are "out of power" versus the small but powerful elites (2014: 146). Competition is a response to the perpetuating social divisiveness between the small elites and the marginalized majority.

Cas Mudde (2017) defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (2017: 3).

These definitions emphasize three keywords which express the essence of populism namely the *people*, the *elites* and the *general will*. The people are normally perceived as poor, marginalized, homogenous and authentic or pure. The people are regarded as the main concept of populism, as the other two terms are always defined in relationship, or in opposition, to the concept of the people.

In the populism theory, the elites are understood as the antithesis of the people. The difference between them is based on morality. Therefore, the elites on the one

hand represent the powerful social class registered as corrupt, evil and immoral, whereas, on the other hand, the people are regarded as moral, good, pure and authentic (Hawkins 2009).

The “general will” is closely linked to the concept of the people and articulated through the opinion and common sense of the people. Furthermore, it is generally assumed that the concept of general will is based on the conviction that there is a correspondence between the community-peoples’ common sense and government policy (Stockemer 2019). In this respect, the people as represented by the populists can do no wrong. Such an absolutism leads to an anti-pluralistic attitude characterizing populism.

The populist slogan such as “we are the only group capable of representing the true general will of the people” expresses the anti-pluralistic tendency of populism (Müller 2017: 9). Therefore, populism avoids establishing political discourses in order to discover alternative solutions to public problems. Furthermore, because the people are the expression of the general will, “any group of people is seen as either artificially created or irrelevant for politics” (Mudde 2017: 8). All kinds of internal critics or divisions are refused as irrelevant based on the assumption that the populists are the genuine voice of the people.

Left Populism as a Radical Response to the Crisis of Democracy

The Crisis of Representative Democracy

Populism emerges where representative democracy is not capable of articulating the demands of the citizens as the owner of sovereignty. There is a close relationship between populism and the problem of representation, as Ernesto Laclaus asserts: “The crisis of representation . . . is at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst” (Laclau 2005: 137). The populist leader succeeds in mobilizing the masses and in representing “the people” due to the inability of liberal democracy to accommodate the demands of the people.

The problem of representative democracy leads to the fact that the aspirations of the people cannot be met by the political institutions. It happens, for example, in an oligarchy in which a few powerful rich take advantage of political institutions and exploit them for their own interests. In such a condition, laws are not designed to establish public welfare but to strengthen the power of the oligarchs over state

institutions. This leads to the marginalization of the citizens from every social-political process and access to welfare.

Marginalisation is the result of the failure of liberal democracy to establish political and social justice. Hence, populism can be regarded as a critique of a representative democracy system that fails to create social justice and to be truly representative of the people.

As mentioned above, an anti-pluralistic attitude is one of the traits of populism that considers internal divisions or critics as irrelevant, as populists represent the authentic voice of the people and so can do no wrong. However, the refusal of political discourses to express pluralism can be also discovered in a liberal democracy dominated by technocracy. In this context, people talk about policy without politics. This means that public policy is simply based on expert considerations without including the people in a democratic process. The practices of liberal democracy based on technocracy is a phenomenon in the crisis of democracy, because the people as the original purpose of democracy are left behind.

Thus, there is a basic similarity between populism and technocracy. Both reject political discourse as method to discover alternative solutions to public problems. Both populism and technocracy regard their own position as absolute truth. In such an anti-political 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 correct them. The capability of learning from mistakes is the most important strength of democracy compared to a totalitarian system. Furthermore, democracy is not a dogma. As Claude Lefort (1988: 39) claimed, the legitimacy of democracy is based on a perpetuating discourse on what is legitimate and what is illegitimate in the political area.

Left Populism as a Radical Critique to the Representative Democracy

As explained, both populism and democracy as expressed in technocracy appear as fundamentalism in politics, neglecting pluralism as a basic trait of a democratic society. The question to be addressed is: Should populism in general be rejected in order to establish democracy, or does populism contain democratic elements useful in establishing a democratic society?

According to Chantal Mouffe (2015), the pathology of liberal democracy expressed in a rejection of critical discourse in searching 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, liberal democracy avoids political debate while trying to provide citizens with 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 dimensions of democracy, and the antagonism between right-wing and left-wing populism.

Some liberal political thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas (1992) and John Rawls (2003) contribute key thoughts that bury conflictual aspects of democracy by putting forward the concept of politics as a consensus machine (Mouffe 2008). Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau pose a critique of the practices of a liberal democracy transformed into a consensus machine, and in this way ignore the dissensual or conflictual aspect of democracy.

Dissensus democracy emphasizes the unlimited conflictual dimension of the democratic discourse. From the point of view of dissensual democracy, populism can appear as a social transformative force that returns democracy to its original meaning as an expression of the people’s sovereignty. However, this can only be realized in a pluralistic milieu where populism can be transformed into an antagonistic democracy.

Mouffe also criticizes the concept of deliberative democracy of Jürgen Habermas because Habermas, as also other liberal thinkers, failed to comprehend the *political* as an open battle arena (Mouffe 2005: 36). In an interview with **Dave Castle**, Mouffe accentuates: “... if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena” (Castle 1998: 2). Mouffe naturally does not grasp contestations and conflicts as debates among individuals rather than struggles within discursive realities. Therefore, Mouffe directs her attention and specific consideration to the discursive structured relations of power. Moreover, the critique of Mouffe on liberalism is based on the fact that liberalism disregards social relations and adversarial configuration in society.

Based on the antagonistic understanding of democracy, Mouffe started to design left-wing populism movements. Politics constituted on the basis of left-wing populism needs to be able to create noticeable fundamental antagonism and to open up new alternatives in society. This goal can only be reached if populists are able to establish inclusive politics, neglecting the racial, exclusive and anti-pluralism dimensions of populism. However, radical democracy can develop the populist dimension of democracy in order to mobilize the people and to design a collective awareness of a nation. This implies that the collective identity of the people never exists independently of the populist discourse on their representation, rather than being constructed by the discourse. As Laclau emphasizes, “the construction of a ‘people’ would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation” (Laclau 2005: 161).

The concept of antagonistic democracy, as Mouffe says, is developed in order to design left-wing populism movements. This kind of politics should be able to become an alternative and antagonistic force to consensus-based liberal democracy. In contrast to right-wing populism that establishes alliances against immigrants and minority groups, left-wing populism creates critical forces and alternatives for the people against political and economic neoliberalism. Moreover, the diverse demands of the people are articulated in Laclaus “chain of equivalence” based on the principle of avoiding reproducing exclusions and “practise a more inclusive politics” (McKean 2016: 1). Left-wing populism is constructed by formulating and expressing symbolic and provocative demands of the people that have not been met by technocracy and bureaucratic politics. As mentioned, these kinds of demands are clear about the antagonism within society, the antagonism between the people and the forces of neoliberalism.

The Dialectic Relationship between the Concept of Left Populism and the Indonesian Context of Democratization

The main question to be discussed is: Can the left populism contribute to enhance the quality of Indonesian democracy? Are there some constraints of the concept of left populism in explaining the practices of democracy in Indonesia? Before analysing these two questions, I would like firstly to describe some empirical phenomenon of populism in Indonesia and the fact of oligarchy that results in populist movements.

As Mietzner explains (2015), the reason for the rise of populism in Indonesia was dissatisfaction with the decade of Yudhoyono’s presidency in dealing with poverty,

social injustice and the marginalization of the people. Populism movements in Indonesia are, as elsewhere in the world, expressed through the protest of the pure people against the corrupt elites. There was a kind of economic alienation among the people where economic growth did not impact on increasing their welfare. This situation has been leading people to distrust public institutions. Consequently, the people trust religious leaders more than parliament, political parties, the police and the courts. This fact shows as well that Indonesians are still living in a traditional society. This condition provides fertile ground for populism (Muhtadi 2019:8).

As populism has been a part of the development of democracy in Indonesia, it is important to explore the impact of populism on human rights, democracy and inclusive development. In addition, democracy in Indonesia, as described by Robison and Hadiz (2004), is being co-opted by the predatory oligarchy. The question to be addressed is, therefore, **can the practices of populism in Indonesia become an alternative and antagonistic power to the practices of contemporary democracy?** What should be done in order to transform populist ideas into new democratic institutions independent from domination by oligarchic political power nurtured under Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime?

What is going on at the global level also applies to the Indonesian context where the oligarchy has created disparities between small rich elites and the poor majority. The threat of oligarchic power in Indonesia can be shown through terrible injustices and the gulf between the rich and the poor. This is supported by the 2018 Global Wealth Report issued by Credit Suisse. Accordingly, the assets of the ten percent richest in Indonesia dominate 75.3 % of national wealth. Compared to other countries in the world, Indonesia is located at the sixth worst position after Thailand, Turkey, USA, Russia and India. In other words, the one percent richest in Indonesia has 46.6% of the national wealth. It increased from 45.4 % in 2017 to 46.6 % in 2018 (Basri 2019). Furthermore, the way the conglomerates have become richer is less fair economic competitiveness than their close relationship to political power. This is based on the crony-capitalism index that obviously indicates that Indonesia ranks the 7th level. The April 2019 general election could not bring meaningful changes because 45% (262) of the 575 elected representatives for the period 2019-2024 are from the business world. This makes the control of power more difficult, even impossible due to the close relationship between legislative and economic power.

In the hands of politicians, political institutions are hijacked for the predatory goal of having more access to capital and resources. This is based on the fact that many politicians are involved in corruption. According to data of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), from 2004 to 2018 there were 101 regents or mayors who were arrested due to involvement in corruption cases (*Tajuk Kompas* 8 October 2019). Until July 2019 there were 255 members of the House of Representatives at the national and regional levels and seven political party leaders who were suspected of committing corruption (Theodora 2019). Consequently, disregarding the massive students protests, representatives decided at the end of September 2019 to revise the anti -corruption bill weakening the fight against corruption in Indonesia. Moreover, President Joko Widodo who promised to rescind the new KPK law by issuing a regulation in lieu of law (Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang – Perppu) has not done that, against his own political campaign to fight against corruption by strengthening the KPK (Bayuni 2019). KPK is one of the products of the 1998 Indonesian reformation (*Reformasi*) credibly working to meet the ideals of reformation in order to establish a good and clean government free from corruption, collusion and nepotism (KKN).

KPK is regarded as a threat and obstacle by the corrupt political parties co-opted by the oligarchy to satisfy their greediness by controlling political institutions in order to have predatory power over state capital and resources. The weakened KPK opens the way for the oligarchic political parties to accumulate power and resources. Therefore, democracy is becoming more and more procedural curbed by a small group of rich and powerful people. Laws can be designed and revised based on the interest of political parties ignoring the aspirations of the *demos* as source of political power. This is mirrored, for example, in the composition of speaker and deputy speakers of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) for the period 2019-2024 distributed to all political parties.

The data above shows how the oligarchic political parties and politicians are hijacking the state for their own interests. The freedom of expression and speech is constrained in order to protect the power of oligarchs. Democracy is at stake and the state becomes ever more repressive. Not surprisingly, in September 2019 the police violently and repressively faced students and activists demonstrating in many cities of Indonesia against the revision of the KPK Bill and the revised Criminal Code that potentially curbs freedom of expression. Besides, falsehood was spread that the student demonstrations were ridden by factions planning to thwart the presidential inauguration. Activists were arrested by being accused of having committed defamation. According to data of the Indonesian Legal Aid

Foundation (YLBHI – *Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia*), during 2019 there were 44 people killed and “disappeared” for expressing their opinion in public (Nurita 2019). This clearly shows a powerful oligarchy running an authoritarian and repressive state to protect their oligarchic interests.

Can populism be antagonistic forces to the Indonesian democracy that is being co-opted by the oligarchy?

One of the significant populist movements in Indonesia was the alliance between populism and identity politics during the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017, in which Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) was defeated by using right-wing populism issue. Ahok was accused of committing blasphemy. The blasphemous charge led to the mass demonstrations against Ahok on 4 November (411) and 2 December (212) 2016. The Islamic mass mobilization is well known as the “212 Movement” and regarded as a new rise of Islamic political forces against the established. In addition, Ahok, a Chinese Christian politician, is viewed as a represent of Chinese oligarchs who are co-opting the Indonesian political institutions.

However, the populist movement 212 failed to be antagonistic power to oligarchy characterizing Indonesian democracy. The reason is that such a populist mass mobilization has been organized for electoral political purposes by using money politics, violence and other right wing populism issues (Mudhoffir et al. 2017: 55). The long term political agenda for public welfare based on the grass root movement is ignored. Consequently, politicians are supported and elected not because of their capability, integrity and commitment against corruption, but due to identity politics based reasons.

Furthermore, Vedi R. Hadiz (2016: 187) asserts that compared to the Islamic populism in Turkey and Egypt that can gain domination over state and civil society, the Islamic populism in Indonesia fails to take power over state and civil society. Populism is in this respect understood as cross-class alliances, in which the respective groups are ready to suspend the differences and to establish what Laclau calls “chain of equivalence”. The reason for the failure according to Hadiz is the absence of the strong business class within the Islamic populism due to the economic system of the New Order (Order Baru) that has created concentration of economic capital in the hands of Soeharto’s clan and Chinese oligarchs (Hadiz 2016: 188).

How can we solve the problem?

Firstly, as explained above, Mouffe suggests left populism as an antagonistic force to the neoliberalism by establishing inclusive politics. The Islamic populism in Indonesia, understood as multiclass alliances, should be reinterpreted in the light of the Mouffe's concept of left populism by abandoning the exclusive elements of populism such as anti-pluralism, authoritarianism and racialism.

This can be realized by empowering and strengthening an inclusive interpretation of religious values compatible to democracy and human rights. Contemporary democracy in Indonesia is on the one hand weakened by right-wing populism expressed in the mainstreaming of religious moral conservatism and ultra-nationalism threatening the fundamental rights of minority groups and the criminalizing of social activists in the name of combating the ideology of communism (Hadiz 2017:274).

On the other hand, religion plays a significant role in the public sphere of Indonesian society. As Hadiz (2018:580) underlines, cultural resources including religion can also be deployed to fight for social justice and "more progressive political and economic agendas". At the global level, Jürgen Habermas is posing the thesis of post-secularism as an anti-thesis to the secularism relegating religion to irrational private sphere. Post-secularism emphasizes the rise of religions in public space in order to encounter the crisis of modernity (Habermas 2001). However, the public sphere is characterized by pluralism regarding the concept of the good life, religion, opinion and culture. Therefore, each religion should act publicly according to the principle of "public reason" (Habermas 2005), expressed in tolerance, freedom and equality.

Populism in Indonesia fails to oppose oligarchy due to the absence of liberalism (struggle for civil and political rights) and left-wing movements (struggle for social justice and fairness) in the Indonesian tradition of democracy (Hadiz and Robison 2017: 498). Furthermore, the populist leaders in Indonesia, including the Jokowi regime, fail to transform populist ideas into new democratic institutions independent from domination by the oligarchic political parties inherited from Suharto's New Order regime. In this situation, populism has become a war of identity politics steered by oligarchic power. Therefore, populism does not have an emancipatory force, but is instrumentalized to perpetuate oligarchic power.

Secondly, establishing democratic political institutions and the institutionalization of populist policies is very essential. As mentioned, Jokowi failed to institutionalize populist ideas in democratic institutions and regulations. When Jokowi left for Jakarta to become governor, the social pact in Solo for instance could not be sustained. It worked because of the figure of Jokowi without an institutional basis of democratic rules and regulations (Olle Törnquist: 2019). In addition, when Jokowi was elected president in 2014 and again in 2019, he did not rely on a pro-democracy movement to support his political power. In the contrary, he established an alliance with economic and political elites including political parties co-opted by oligarchies inherited from Suharto's New Order, ignoring the anti-corruption agency to avoid dirty politics (Mietzner 2018; Törnquist 2019).

But the question is: are bureaucracy and system not expressions of neoliberal consensus machine that left populism fight against? As Chantal Mouffe asserts (2010: 105) that dissensus democracy in a plural society needs a minimum consensus of equality, freedom and justice. These principles can be regarded as chain of equivalence. This minimal consensus is very important to avoid eternal conflicts that can threaten and destroy a democratic system. The populist agonistic contestation of ideas that refresh the process of democracy will happen on the basis of recognition of collective fundamental norms above.