

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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Trade Unions' Initiative To Create Alternative Political Force in Indonesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Five trade union confederations organised a conference in April 2018 that brought together like-minded progressive trade unions, non-government organisations, student activists and political groups, to push for an alternative political force which would be independent of the two major power blocs led by President Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto.
- This initiative was driven by union leaders who wanted to distance themselves from moves by the two largest [two of the largest] labour confederations to pledge their allegiance to either Widodo or Prabowo, who are the two leading contenders in the next round of national elections (KSPSI for Widodo and KSPI for Prabowo). The conference was also partly a response by progressive unionists to counter the perceived challenge posed by conservative Islamist groups which were making inroads among union members.
- The conference attracted over 40 organisations which jointly agreed on the need for an alternative political force and presented a list of demands for political, economic and social reforms.
- Subsequent differences over specific issues (e.g., gay rights and Papuan self-determination) stalled plans for decisive consolidation of this political movement on May Day. However, the emergence of two major coalitions expressing a shared desire for an alternative political force and their overlapping demands for reforms makes it unlikely that this nascent political movement will fizzle out completely.

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INTRODUCTION

KASBI, KPBI and Federasi Sedar are just a few examples of the many confederations, federations and individual unions that have and are still emerging in Indonesia since the end of the New Order and which have not aligned with any political bloc. There are many others. If the bigger union's alignments continue to hem in their room to manoeuvre and campaign, it will result in an increased space for other unions to grow. (Quoted from: "The Politics of Wages and Indonesia's Trade Unions", *ISEAS Perspective*, 18 January 2018.)

During the first months of 2018, the prospect of non-aligned unions using the space left open to them as the larger union confederations consolidated their alignments with the two major electoral blocs looked like it might come to realisation more quickly than expected. KASBI (Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia, Indonesian Trade Union Congress Alliance Confederation), KPBI (Konfederasi Persatuan Buruh Indonesia, Confederation of United Indonesian Workers), Federasi Sedar (Serikat Buruh Demokratik Kerakyatan, Populist Democratic Trade Union) and two other non-aligned federations agreed to host a joint political conference to which other non-aligned unions, as well as non-government organisations (NGOs) and political groups would be invited.¹ The conference took place in April 2018, shortly before the annual May Day trade union mobilisations.

Before analysing the conference and its immediate aftermath, including its apparent stall, it is useful to look at some of the immediate context beyond the trends discussed in a previous *Perspectives*.²

There appeared to be two trends developing into 2018 which helped push the union leaderships in this direction. Neither of these were new trends but they evolved to a higher level, impacting on the thinking of the unions.

First, the best resourced and organised and, until 2013, the most activist confederation, the KSPI (Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia, Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions), with the FSPMI (Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia, Indonesian Metal Trade Workers Federation) as its vanguard, further deepened its alignment with the 2019 presidential candidacy of Prabowo Subianto. KSPI/FSPMI had openly supported Prabowo in 2014 and had maintained the relationship since then, despite one of its leaders also standing as an independent candidate in a district election in 2017. In late 2017 and into early 2018, rumours began to spread that KSPI/FSPMI, still under the leadership of Chairperson Said Iqbal, would again announce its support for Prabowo at its rally on May Day. By March, there were news reports of Iqbal's still positive assessment of Prabowo.³

At the same time, rumours strengthened that the other major union confederation, the KSPSI (Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia, Confederation of the All-Indonesian Workers Union) under the leadership of Yorrys Raweyai would announce support for President Joko Widodo also on May 1, May Day.

It was being confirmed that the process of the two major confederations consolidating their alignment with either Widodo or Prabowo was going to be the reality for 2019. Indeed, both the confederations did make these announcements on May 1.⁴ Even as early as January, some of the leaders of the non-aligned unions had begun to think about how to respond.

There was also a second trend that was challenging these non-aligned union leaders, many of whom had been part of the moderately left-oriented movement that was in opposition to the Suharto government before 1998. This was the challenge, probably best thought of as occurring at the ideological level, of the agitation aimed at the memberships from the increasingly activist conservative Islamist organisations. Union organisers report that such Islamist organisations were increasingly reaching out to union members. The strength of the trade unions is in the factory belts on the edge of Jakarta, in Tangerang, Bekasi and Karawang. This area of West Java like the province as a whole is an area where conservative Islam has always been strong. Ethnically Sundanese (and not Javanese), this area has seen Islamic culture evolve without the influence of syncretic Javanism. The political party, MASYUMI, and also the armed Islamist rebellion of Darul Islam had been both strong in this region since the 1950s. In the current period, it is also an area where organisations such as the FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Islamic Defenders Front), and other similar organisations are active. There have even been rallies in West Java in support of ISIS and against the arrests of ISIS supporters.

As has been noted in debates in the publication *New Mandala*, these organisations' entry point into the poorer kampong of outer Jakarta, where factory workers also live, was often over socio-economic grievances.⁵ Reflecting these trends, conservative Islamism, said some union organisers, was becoming an ideology competing with the progressive sentiments being cultivated within the unions. Conservative political Islamism offered what were presented as a holistic solution to the urban poor's plight, usually in the form of one variant or another of a more religiously organised polity. This ranged from a polity where Islamic law (Syariah) and Islamic leadership authority (kyai and ulama) would be given a more influential role through to the full Islamic caliphate advocated by the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). The HTI's policy on trade unions was that under such a Caliphate they should be abolished.

These Islamist forces were also either aligning with the Prabowo political bloc, manifested in the core alliance between Gerindra (Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raja, Great Indonesia Movement Party) and PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Justice and Prosperity Party), or at least making clear their hostility to the Widodo alliance.

Among union leaderships, there arose a discussion that the non-aligned progressive unions needed to respond to these political and ideological challenges. Five confederations or federations, after discussion, issued a joint invitation for other unions, non-government organisations and political groups to attend a Konperensi Gerakan Rakyat (KGR – Peoples Movement Congress) on April 19-20.⁶

PEOPLES MOVEMENT CONGRESS – KGR

The five unions issuing the invitation for the congress were the Indonesian Trade Union Congress Alliance (KASBI), the Confederation of United Indonesian Workers (KPBI), the Popular Democratic Trade Union (SEDAR), the KSN (Konfederasi Serikat Nasional – National Union Confederation), and the SGBN (Sentral Gerakan Buruh Nasional, National Labour Movement Centre). In the invitation, attending the congress was described as a chance to exchange ideas about the best ways to respond to contemporary developments. To help create a conducive attitude for such a gathering, a trial joint mobilisation was organised for International Women’s Day in March.⁷ The five unions also issued a joint statement with 14 demands. The statement not only included demands for an end to discrimination against women, menstrual leave and equal pay but also provided a general critique of what was described as neo-liberal social and economic policies and a series of demands for general social and economic reform.⁸ The mobilisation was a modest but symbolically significant action in the lead up to the KGR.

The conference was attended by at least 43 organisations, all of which signed a joint declaration.⁹ Some participants said that at various times during the conference there were up to 70 organisations represented.¹⁰ There were reported to be at least 600 people attending.¹¹ The 43 organisations were made up of: seven trade union groupings and a trade union support centre; seven university student organisations; three urban poor organisations: one Christian and two progressive Islamic organisations; two farmers organisations; a major environmental organisation; a Papuan students organisations, two women’s rights organisations; five human rights organisations; a cultural activist organisation and six left-wing political groups.¹²

The declared theme of the conference was: Freedom, Equality and Prosperity.

There were two major outcomes of the conference. The first was the confirmation that a broad sentiment exists for the formation of a political alternative to the existing political parties, although there were differences expressed on what the basis for forming such an alternative should be. The second outcome was a declaration agreed to by 43 of the organisations present. The declaration contains a statement of mandate and a list of policy demands¹³. The first read that the Mandate of the Indonesian People’s Movement Conference is:

- To recommend to the individual organisations involved in the conference to discuss building an alternative political force.
- To establish a team to discuss the formation of an alternative political force (an alternative political party or alternative political block).

To hold follow-up consolidations with the broader people’s movement to discuss building an alternative political force in July this year.

It lists the urgent demands of the people as follows:

- Develop a national industry under the control of the people.
- Nationalise strategic assets such as state-owned enterprises, mining and infrastructure.
- Genuine agrarian reform
- Increase subsidies for the people in education, healthcare, housing and transportation
- Revoke the laws on elections and political parties.
- Abolish the military's territorial command structure.
- Abolish anti-democratic legislation (the Perppu Ormas, UU MD3 and the UU ITE).
- Try and jail corruptors and seize their assets.
- Address the welfare and human rights violations in Papua and respect the Papuan people's right to struggle for self-determination.
- Protect women's rights (maternity leave, breast feeding and an end to sexual violence) and end discrimination based on sexual orientation, race or religion.
- Free, scientific and democratic education.
- A decent national minimum wage and the revocation of Government Regulation 78/2015 on Wages.
- Abolish contract labour systems and outsourcing and enact legislation on the protection of workers.
- Fully investigate and resolve past human rights violations.
- Universal social welfare, not social insurance.
- Protection for migrant workers prior to and after placement.
- An end to the exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of the environment.
- Stop the forced eviction of the poor from their land.

It is important to be able to read all these demands so that the nature of the conference is clear. First, we can note that the demands are not at all simply confined to demands normally

connected to wages and conditions issue of unions. Reflecting the sentiments in the mandate, these demands are more reflective of the range of policy demands a political movement or political party might make rather than a narrower spectrum of traditional trade union demands. Second, we can also note that the demands are formulated in general terms, without any specific detail. This underlined the fact that this was an initial, experimental conference which, in the eyes of key participants, was not yet a decision-making conference but a forum for the exchange of ideas.

DIFFICULTIES FOR UNIFICATION

The call for an “alternative political force” immediately raises the challenge of unification among these groups. An “alternative force” implies either an organised political movement or a party. Among the many union members, there were reported differences on whether moving in this direction should be done quickly or slowly¹⁴. There were also echoes of a long-standing difference among even the five union sponsors over the question of how to orientate towards the KSPI/FSPMI. One confederation, the KPBI, has been participating in various alliances, albeit loose ones, with the KSPI/FSPMI. The KPBI has also supported the formation of the Rumah Rakyat Indonesia (House of the Indonesian People¹⁵) as an attempt at a pre-party formation. Some participants reported that KPBI participants who spoke still held out this hope.¹⁶ Other unions, such as KASBI and SEDAR, did not agree with this position. An obvious issue was how to reconcile being “an alternative political force” with KSPI/FSPMI’s declaration of support for Prabowo – although the formal declaration by KSPI/FSPMI did not come until May 1, which was after the Conference. Some union leaderships, particularly that of SEDAR, had openly argued that campaigning to change the leadership and politics of the KSPI should be a priority political task. This was also the position of the political group, the PPR (Partai Pembebasan Rakyat, Peoples’ Liberation Party), as well as the newspaper *Arah Juang* formally published by the political group, the KPO-PRP (Kongres Politik Organisasi Perjuangan Rakyat Pekerja, Political Congress of the Working People’s Organisation of Struggle), both of which were also at the conference.

Further difficulties for unification were visible in the lead up to and on May Day. There was an expectation among some conference participants that the Joint Declaration from the KGR could be launched on May Day by a united front of the participating organisations. However, it appears that there was already a call for a united mobilisation of all unions already circulating prior to the conference by a coalition of unions called Gebrak (Gerakan Buruh Untuk Rakyat, Workers Movement for the People). On April 27, Gebrak, which included KASBI, KPBI and other KGR participants also held a press conference indicating Gebrak was calling for the broadest possible joint mobilisation. It is not totally clear to this author, but it appears that this coalition initiative did precede the KGR conference and key unions may not have wished to scuttle it for a new initiative that was only seven days old.

This development meant that there was not a united mobilisation of the forces involved in the KGR. Gebrak included at least one union federation that it couldn’t work with because of what

was perceived to be that union's disagreement with the KGR position on LGBT rights and on democratic rights in Papua.

As a consequence, there were two coalition mobilisations on May Day by the progressive non-aligned unions, one by Gebrak and one by another quickly formed coalition KOMITMEN (May 1 Committee for Freedom, Equality and Prosperity, Komite Mei 1 Untuk Kemerdekaan, Kestaraan dan Kesejahteraan). KOMITMEN adopted terminology from the conference. The lead unions in Gebrak¹⁷ were KASBI and KPBI, the lead union in KOMITMEN was SEDAR.¹⁸ 22 organisations signed the Gebrak statement, including KASBI, KPBI and KSN. 17 organisation signed the KOMITMEN statement, with the main union involved being SEDAR.

There were differences in the nuances of the two statements; however both asserted the necessity for the formation of an alternative political force. There was also a significant overlap in the political demands of the two statements, although they were articulated in different styles. They were mostly consistent with the character of the demands raised at the KGR. Whether these two statements reflect political differences that make unification impossible is yet unclear. This will only become clear as new attempts are made to restart a process for the formation of an "alternative political force". Most participants report an overall decline in the size of the mobilisations.

On August 1, the committee tasked to organise a follow-up meeting sent an invitation to all 42 signatories to meet again as soon as possible. Despite the divisions that emerged at May Day, it appears that the dynamic pressing for a regroupment of this kind will continue. Being still at an early stage of its development, it is unlikely to impact on the 2019 elections in a significant way. Reflecting as it does an alienation from all of the existing electoral alternatives and therefore logically demanding efforts to establish a "third force", it must be seen as a trend relevant to medium term rather than immediate political activity.

¹ KASBI is the largest of these unions with probably 30,000-40,000 members. The other unions would be considerably smaller.

² "The Politics of Wages and Indonesia's Trade Unions", *ISEAS Perspective*, 18 January 2018.

³ <https://news.detik.com/berita/3946548/umumkan-capres-saat-may-day-serikat-buruh-minta-jatah-menteri>;

<http://www.netralnews.com/news/nasional/read/136417/said.iqbal.beri.sinyal.buruh.dukung.prab>

⁴ <https://beritalima.com/may-day-serikat-buruh-pecah-kspsi-yorris-dukung-jokowi-kspi-said-iqbal-ke-prabowo/>

⁵ See in particular Ian Wilson, "Jakarta: inequality and the poverty of elite pluralism", in *New Mandala*, 19 April, 2017;

⁶ <http://buruh.co/deklarasi-bersama-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat-indonesia/>; <http://ksn.or.id/deklarasi-bersama-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat-indonesia/>; <https://fpbiindonesia.wordpress.com/2018/04/19/jelang-mayday-2018-organisasi-buruh-menginisiasi-lakukan-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat/>; <https://fbtpi.org/siaran-pers/saatnya-kaum-buruh-memimpin-gerakan-rakyat-dengan-kekuatan-politiknya-sendiri/>

⁷ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/gaya-hidup/20180303100532-277-280137/womens-march-di-jakarta-suarakan-8-tuntutan>.

⁸ For the full statement in Indonesian, see <https://fsedar.org/posisi/iwd-2018-pernyataan-bersama/>. For an English translation see http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/statements/2018/jointstat_womenworkersandthepeoplef_080318.htm

⁹ <http://www.arahjuang.com/2018/04/29/deklarasi-bersama-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat-indonesia/>

¹⁰ Personal communications.

¹¹ See <http://www.arahjuang.com/2018/05/04/selayang-pandang-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat/>

¹² The signatories of this declaration can be found here:

<http://www.arahjuang.com/2018/04/29/deklarasi-bersama-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat-indonesia/>

¹³ See <http://www.arahjuang.com/2018/04/29/deklarasi-bersama-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat-indonesia/>;

for a published English translation see http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/southeastasia/indonesia/statements/2018/aj_jointdeclarationoftheindo_290418.htm

¹⁴ See the article by union member participants in <http://www.arahjuang.com/2018/05/04/selayang-pandang-konferensi-gerakan-rakyat/>

¹⁵ <https://www.koranperdjoeangan.com/apa-kabar-rumah-rakyat-indonesia/>

¹⁶ Personal communications from participants.

¹⁷ The signatories to the GEBRAK can be found here <http://ksn.or.id/seruan-may-day-gerakan-buruh-untuk-rakyat-gebrak/>

¹⁸ The signatories of the KOMITMEN May Day Statement can be found here: <https://fsedar.org/posisi/pernyataan-sikap-komitmenmay-day-2018/>

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