



Interview

Still No Alternative Opposition in Indonesian Politics

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For author and lecturer Max Lane, there are no significant ideological differences between the political elites and parties participating in the election. “Whoever wins, there will be no major change in policy direction,” Max replied in his interview to Watch Indonesia on October 30, 2023. He also emphasized the need for an alternative opposition in Indonesia. “Opposition is not banned in Indonesia, but currently, there is none.”

Currently, democracy in Indonesia is widely considered to be experiencing regression and a decline in quality. How do you foresee these trends continuing in relation to the 2024 Election?

I do not agree that democracy is experiencing regression in Indonesia. This idea was popularised mostly by “liberal” academics who campaigned for Joko Widodo as president in 2013 and 2014 after that. Since he didn’t live up to their propaganda as a beacon of hope for deeper democratisation, they now argue that democracy has regressed in Indonesia. Accepting this idea is basically gullibly believing an incorrect excuse for the failure of civil society to give content to the considerable democratic space won by hard struggle during the 1990s.

Democracy has not regressed compared to either the New Order period or the brief presidency of Megawati Sukarnoputri. During the Megawati presidency scores of activists were arrested, tried, and spent up to 2.5 years in jail on charges of “insulting the head of state”. That did not happen during the Yudhoyono or Widodo presidencies. Today, except in West Papua, there are no political prisoners. No newspapers or magazines have been banned despite outright opposition to and savage satire of the President. Marxist and other dissident books are freely available and widely advertised on bookshop websites. Yes, activists are still harassed and sometimes detained. But this is not a state-planned systematic repression. Instead, it is local ad hoc or privately initiated harassment, just as happens in all so-called “liberal democracies”.

The decline of democracy in Indonesia and the trend of right-wing populist conservatism are phenomena not limited to Indonesia but also observed in many countries, including Western countries. How do you view these two phenomena? Are they related in your view? What parallels do you see?

I don't see these questions as relevant. There are no real parallels between the Indonesian situation and the situation in imperialist countries.

The fundamentals of the situation in Indonesia can start to be understood if we ask the question: Why, even after a quarter of a century since 1998, is there no serious political alternative emerging as an opposition? Opposition is not banned in Indonesia, but currently, there is none. The absence of opposition cannot be blamed on increased repressive activity by the government—in fact, there is nothing really to repress. Harassment here and there is prosecuted easily enough.

Why no opposition?

This is a result of the 32 years of New Order suppression of any ideological life based on genuine contestation, as separate from enforced rote-learned „ideology“. Indonesian society has now had half a century where the mass of the population has had no real political experience, no mass organisation experience, and no actual ideological life (contestation). During the New Order, the repressed “floating masses” robbed generations of that experience. Since 1998, a monopoly over electoral politics by all the factions of the New Order elite has sustained that policy which is disguised now by the electoral theatre of rivalries between parties that all vote the same way in parliament.



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The lack of a real and growing opposition is a political legacy of the New Order, not any government-initiated democratic regression.

What Can Change This?

While there is no emerging political opposition, there has been a persistent but powerless social opposition—campaigns criticizing government policy and demanding reform but not presenting themselves as political opposition or an alternative government. This is the „civil society“ movement of NGOs, campaign committees, student activist groups, and small left-wing political groups. The ideas and values of these groups, especially the most activist among them, voice values of social justice and democratic rights, either in a moderate or sometimes more radical way. At the moment, these appear to be the most likely source of an actual political opposition, offering itself as an alternative to the current parties.



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There have been signs of developments moving in that direction. There have been big assemblies of over 40 such groups trying to seek a basis of unity, but so far without success. At the moment, there is an initiative to form a Labour Party (Partai Buruh). This initiative has three wings to it: a trade union bureaucratic wing mostly oriented to alliances with existing ruling class factions; a moderate but independently minded trade union leadership not so connected

to current elites, and finally, different NGOs and activist groups that hope that the Partai Buruh will give them a platform. It is unlikely that this alliance is sufficiently compatible and stable enough to become a major factor in advancing a progressive political alternative or opposition.

How do you see the configuration of political parties and the elite influencing the 2024 election and Indonesian democracy more generally?

Currently, the most ridiculous electoral theatre regarding the 2024 elections is unfolding as parties representing different cliques and factions align, then realign, switching parties and alliances and exposing the reality that there are no ideological or programmatic differences among them. Indeed, all nine parties in the parliament have voted the same way now for almost ten years. Out of this circus, the incumbent President has been able to position his son as a viable Vice-Presidential candidate, the consolation prize for not being able to manage a third term for himself.

Whoever wins, there will be no major change in any policy direction. Indeed, both the Prabowo-Gibran alliance and the PDIP have promised to continue Widodo's policies. The Anies Baswedan campaign does not seem to have determined its own direction yet. However, if the militarist-dynastic feudalist alliance of Prabowo and Gibran wins the Presidency, there will likely be a potential threat to the existing democratic space.

However, there is a significant chance of a change in political culture or a deepening of the present ideologically dead political culture. If the Prabowo-Gibran alliance gains a big vote, it will be a popular endorsement of royal dynastic-style politics. Those within civil



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society who do want to build a serious political alternative will be confronted with a big challenge that must necessarily be met. It is unlikely that politically liberal forces will want to meet this challenge. They will blame “democratic regression” for there being no opposition, not their own outlooks. This task will most likely fall to the few small socialist groups.

Our Interview partner

Max Lane has been active in solidarity with the democracy movement in Indonesia since 1971. During most of the 1990s, he was the National Coordinator of Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASIET). He is the author of *UNFINISHED NATION: Indonesia Before and After Suharto* (Verso), *Catastrophe in Indonesia* (Seagull), *An Introduction to the Politics of Indonesian Unions* (ISEAS), and *INDONESIA OUT OF EXILE: How Pramodya's Buru Quartet Killed a Dictatorship* (Penguin 2023). He translated into English Pramodya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* as well as literary works by W.S:Rendra and Wiji Thukul.

The interview was conducted in written form.