

**“Civil Society and Government Relations in the Post Reformasi Indonesia:
Preliminary Observations”**

An Open Forum With

Muhammad A.S. Hikam
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January 19, 2010

On January 19, USINDO was pleased to host a talk by **Dr. Muhammad A.S. Hikam**, Vice Rector at President University, Jakarta. Dr. Hikam was formerly Indonesia’s State Minister for Research and Technology, 1999 to 2001, and was a member of the House of Representatives (DPR), 2004 to 2007.

Dr. Hikam discussed the state of Indonesian civil society and its recent developments. According to Dr. Hikam, the most important achievement of the Reformasi era was the expansion of civil society through its organizations (CSOs), which have promoted a more vibrant, active, and autonomous political space. This CSO expansion has contributed to balancing and maintaining important checks on state powers. Since 1998, these organizations have flourished in a manner never before seen in the nation’s history.

Dr. Hikam explained that the remarkable increase in CSOs would not have been possible without the opening of political space and overall changes to the political environment. Technological advancements over the past decade have also facilitated CSO advancement, as have

new media tools such as Facebook, which allow ordinary citizens to make their voices heard. Moreover, the strengthening of civil society in Indonesia has been augmented further by a growing distrust by the public of political leadership, including in parliament and political parties. For example, members of parliament are perceived as being biased in favor of the national police in recent allegations against Bibit and Chandra of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

Meanwhile, the government, at the central and local levels, has increasingly turned to CSOs for assistance on a variety of issues, such as poverty eradication, political education, and disaster relief. This is a marked change from the years before Reformasi. Nevertheless, civil society still acts at times as an almost parallel government structure, meeting needs not filled by government agencies. In addition, civil society and the government continue to bump heads on issues of corruption, human rights, and good governance. Until such time as the political process is truly institutionalized, civil society provides an important channel for representing the public.

Dr. Hikam suggests that the time has come for civil society to reevaluate its role in the post-Reformasi era, including its relationship with the government and other political bodies. In particular, he suggests that Indonesian civil society needs to strengthen its oversight capacity to the government as well as its capacity for internal management, including finances. Civil society should be at the forefront of progress in accountability by serving as an example. CSOs must understand that if they expect transparency from the government, then they too must be open to public scrutiny. A deeper look into management issues and organizational culture is an essential first step.

Dr. Hikam emphasized his wish to see more synergy between civil society and the parliament. CSOs can provide excellent assistance to parliamentary members, many of whom lack the capacity and even expertise to draft legislation. In a country where a large portion of legislators have no legal experience and on average have access to only one professional staff member, drawing from the pool of civil society experts is crucial.

On the other hand, it is also essential for members of civil society to be more attuned to the work of legislative branches and mechanisms that exist therein so it can positively impact legislation. Only by understanding the legislative process can civil society organizations truly provide

Questions and Answers:

Q: Dan Slater, a previous presenter at an USINDO event, has argued that modern day Indonesian politics has developed into a cartel-like situation in the Cabinet which makes it extremely difficult for civil society organizations to make a

constructive input. Dr. Hikam noted that when CSO members become members of parliament, they then act as if they were never part of civil society. There is much mutual suspicion between the two.

Indonesian civil society faces both internal and external challenges as it attempts to promote reform. Dr. Hikam noted his concern regarding the rise of identity politics; in particular, the growth of CSOs with religious-based identities. Such communalist tendencies can run counter to the democratic notion of citizenship, Dr. Hikam explained, especially if identity is used as an instrument for attaining social, economic, and political interests. Such a path can result in the demise of social responsibility and feelings of “belongingness,” which are required for a healthy and active civil society. Dr. Hikam noted how many minority groups understandably fear that with the passing of Abdurrahman Wahid (“Gus Dur”) there is no high-level person actively advocating for minority rights. However, while he says the political system is not currently strong enough to completely protect minorities, he feels there are important people committed to defending their rights. Lastly, Dr. Hikam noted that civil society is still prone to government intervention for short term political interests. This will negatively affect the development and maturation of CSO, and must be carefully maintained through rule-based interactions between the government and civil society.

difference. What do you make of his view?

A: CSOs can influence politics, but through different channels. They can mobilize public

opinion, and do have lines of communication open to governing bodies. The executive branch can be very smart in using civil society organizations to advance its own interests. Often, regional administrations have basically created CSOs that support a shared goal. This, however, varies by region. Now, civil society has more access to government, whereas previously the government chose who they wanted to deal with. My second observation is that civil society can now counter political society, not in terms of official politics, but rather in terms of creating an impression in the minds of the public.

Q: In terms of the need to strengthen political parties, is there a way for the DPR to build up its own accountability and independence?

A: The members of the House are as weak as before Reformasi, yet the U.S. is helping to strengthen the expertise and capacity of the DPR in terms of legislation. All the same, it is difficult to compare the Congress of the United States and that of Indonesia. You cannot compare them in terms of expertise, and nor can you compare them by the number of support staff. For example, the Congressional Budget Office publishes the budget in the United States, but in Indonesia it is only done through the Treasury and this only reveals a macro-level picture. Indonesia desperately needs help in terms of enhancing its legislative expertise. Some organizations, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have done a lot of work to reinforce the capacity of the DPR. More needs to be done, and we need more staff.

Q: You used the media as an example of a civil society organization; how are these media outlets doing in terms of exposing the behavior of the government?

A: Indonesia has the freest news outlets in Southeast Asia, and the media is leading the battle against corruption. While not all media outlets are objective, overall the media is very consistent in terms of reporting the misbehavior of the government. However, the media still faces all kinds of harassment and intimidation from the government.

Q: Are anti-growth [environmental] NGOs preventing investment in the development of Indonesia's infrastructure?

A: The influence of anti-growth NGOs on investment is overestimated; they are not the ones preventing foreign investment in Indonesia. Indonesia faces significant hurdles, including a national deficit, rule of law reform, and restrictive investment laws that put it at a disadvantage in attracting foreign investment compared to other Southeast Asian countries. Corruption is still too high, and the internal management of the government is also a problem, as are all issues that impact foreign investment in infrastructure in Indonesia.

Q: We are all aware of money politics in the United States. To what degree does money influence Indonesian politics?

A: The practice of money politics in Indonesia probably happens the same way as in the United States, except that in Indonesia, it is difficult to pinpoint the company or wealthy voice behind certain decisions. It is the media who uncovers this kind of game, and it happens quite often. I believe that it will be at least five years before any lobbying or campaign finance bill is passed that will address money politics in Indonesia.

Q: You discussed the inability of politicians to cater to the plurality of the Indonesian population. What kind of system would accomplish this or what reforms would you suggest?

A: The major issue here is the internal party selection process for candidate. Reform will require a major reconstruction of how political parties do this. This would prevent candidates, such as “celebrity” candidates many of whom are not qualified, from gaining seats in the House, who have little political experience and usually fail to achieve any legislative goals.

Q: In light of the weak culture of transparency and accountability, are NGOs not opening up to public scrutiny for fear that they can be accused of being lackeys of the West, in the event they receive support from international donors? Are these elements still there? Where is the reform movement taking them?

A: In the past, it was the other way around in terms of blame; the NGOs would accuse the government of being a lackey of the West if it took foreign aid. Today, the hesitation on the part of NGOs to be transparent has more to do with the problem of management. There are millions of NGOs who lack accountability. NGOs need to become leaders through example in terms of transparency.

Q: What is your vision for party reform?

A: Perhaps through another regulation from the Constitutional Court or the DPR aimed at reducing the number of political parties who compete in national elections. We could have a system like the two-party in the U.S., but more importantly no more than five political parties. In addition, women are

suffering under the new system. A quota for women in the DPR is a must in my opinion.