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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
POLITICS
OF THE
INDONESIAN
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MOVEMENT

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Preface: Introducing an Overview of Trade Union Politics

This essay introduces the basic, visible politics of the Indonesian trade union movement, with a focus on the period 2010–14. To provide this introduction clearly, it also presents an overview of the politics of trade unions before the end of the New Order and the legacies from the New Order, which constitutes the terrain of the current situation. Indonesia has experienced two major upheavals affecting trade unions, in 1965 and in 1998. It is impossible to understand current trade union politics without understanding those events and their legacies.

To provide this overview, I have primarily relied on documentary sources. Where possible, I have given references to English language material. To assist understanding of some developments, I have quoted at length from interviews, statements and articles by union figures, translating or using available translations. These include newspaper reports, material produced by union and activist groups and studies by commentators and academics. During the last twenty-five years, in the course of writing on Indonesian politics, I have also established communications with a range of people active in the union movement, most of them on the left of the political spectrum. I have been careful to refer to official publications of unions with which I have had no personal contact as well as to their statements to the media.

One argument I present here is that the emergence of trade unions after 1998 is a process still at its beginning. Even at the beginning of this process, there are more than fourteen trade union confederations, scores of federations, and probably thousands of new, or renewed, workplace unions. Many are registered only at the provincial or district level. It is impossible at this point to know exactly what is happening among the leaderships or memberships of these many unions. This essay concentrates on an overview of union activity that is visible as a factor on the national political stage. This means concentrating on unions whose memberships are probably a minority of the total union membership and an even smaller minority of the total workforce. This minority, through highly organized activity, has made a visible impact on both labour politics and national politics. This essay does not, therefore, pretend to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of the political life of the three million or more people who are union members, but rather an introduction to those union activities most visible in national politics.

There is a small body of literature that developed on labour politics in Indonesia since 1998. Most of these studies are very much case-study focused. Probably the most important book on the post 2010 period is the collection of articles in *Kebangkitan Gerakan Buruh: Refleksi Era Reformasi* edited by Jafar Suryomenggolo. The several contributors to this book are also actors in the labour scene, of one kind or another. These essays are also primarily case studies. There has been no attempt to provide an overview of the evolution of the trade union sector as a whole, nor of trade union roles in mainstream politics. Given the new, fluid and fragmented nature of the development of trade unions and labour politics, this is understandable. This attempt to provide such an overview of at least the political activity of trade unions is also challenged by this newness, fluidity

and fragmentation. It should be seen as an initial introductory essay. The size and the fragmentation of the subject matter, and the unevenness in the documentary material produced by the labour movement itself, mean that available data is also uneven and sometimes has an anecdotal character. However, I believe this introduction to the overall terrain will be a useful starting point for further observation, even as the labour sector further evolves and changes.

In trying to understand the developments introduced here, we need to approach the subject fully cognisant of the great difference between labour union politics in Indonesia and either in the advanced industrial countries or in developing countries where there has been prolonged periods of democratic space allowing trade union activity. Indonesia is both an under-industrialized country, where most manufacturing that does exist is relatively new, and which went for a period of more than thirty years without any real democratic space for trade union organizing. When approaching the experience of other countries, we can assume accumulated experience (traditions), accumulated organization loyalties and simplification and amalgamations, not fragmentation. Grasping the newness, the early stage of development after a long period of virtual non-existence, is crucial to understanding what is happening and the constraints on observation and analysis.