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Amien's agenda for Indon reforms

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THE Javanese have an expression to describe the recent spate of chaotic events gripping Indonesia: Jaman Edan, the age of madness.

It was thus with good reason that the public lecture on "Democracy and Reforms in Indonesia", held last Friday at Universiti Malaya, drew a capacity crowd.

But the guest speaker was a political scientist. As a rule, quipped the chairman in his introductory remarks, political scientists try to predict and explain change. Most often, he joked, they fail.

Not this political scientist, of course.

Dr Amien Rais, professor in international relations at the Faculty of Social and Political Science at Indonesia's Gadjah Mada University, is also chairman of the 28 million-strong Muhammadiyah Islamic organisation.

He is widely credited to have played a major role in influencing the student dissent and "people power" movement, culminating in the resignation of President Suharto.

Born in 1944 in Solo, Central Java, Amien received his early education in Indonesia before continuing his studies in the United States.

He obtained his master's degree from the University of Notre Dame, and a Ph.D in political science from the University of Chicago.

The self-styled presidential contender was in the limelight last September when he announced his intentions.

Critics question his ability to successfully fill the gaping vacuum left by Suharto's departure, pointing out his lack of adequate support from the either the students or the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI).

The lecture, held at UM's Law Faculty, was attended by a capacity audience: local and Indonesian students, members of the public, a smattering of opposition politicians, local and foreign media.

"Since the 21st of May this year, Indonesia has entered a new era; the post-Suharto era," Amien explained. But the euphoria at Suharto's resignation was quickly sobered by the realities of the aftermath.

Looting and rioting, the angry mobs venting their frustrations against the Chinese minority, the unemployed currently numbering more than Malaysia's population, poverty levels skyrocketing to pre-1970 levels, and an economy that is technically bankrupt poses a direct challenge to Indonesia's continuing survival.

Former President Sukarno's administration was popularly known as the "Old Order".

This was followed by Suharto's "New Order". Subsequently, Amien characterises the current wave of change sweeping over Indonesia as the "Reform Order".

Amien defines this as efforts to restructure the political, legal and economic systems badly damaged by what he terms as mismanagement and corruption of the Suharto administration.

These reforms are important not only for Indonesia's survival, but to ensure it does not repeat past mistakes.

"A goat, for example, will never hit his head twice against the same rock, but the Indonesian people committed the same collective offence twice in one generation."

The first instance was in allowing Sukarno to establish a lifetime presidency for himself.

"He was forced out of power as a result, and there was soon a national

consensus never again to deify a leader like we did Sukarno," he remembered.

"But it was soon forgotten. We committed the same mistake again by allowing Suharto's power to spiral out of control."

Amien soon began to voice out his criticisms against the Suharto administration. In 1993, he began to openly invite the Indonesian public to consider the possibility of a succession in leadership.

"I felt that Suharto had reached a dangerous stage because every criticism against his mismanagement was taken as criticisms against the State. We were branded subversives."

Why did he decide to take such a risk?

"I consider it as wajib kifayah (religious obligation) to speak up against what was clearly wrong. ABRI, Golkar, the other political parties and the NGOs were silent," he said, "so Bismillah (in the name of Allah) I braved myself to be the one to say it."

If nothing else, Amien joked, "when the angels question me in the hereafter, I would be at peace for having discharged my responsibility of speaking up."

"But of course," he added, "the politicians will also defend themselves by arguing that since I had already spoken up, they have thus been automatically discharged of their own responsibilities!" he laughed.

What then would be the reforms that Amien is pressing for?

"There should be total reforms encompassing the economic, legal and political framework," he pointed out.

The first agenda of the political reform, said Amien, should be to ensure that the presidency is limited to a maximum of two terms.

The Indonesian Constitution provides for re-election of an incumbent.

"Presiden bisa dipilih kembali," Amien explained, "but our founding fathers and language experts have both understood this to mean only once again."

Amien provided the example.

"If I am invited to a friend's house for lunch and he asks me to have some more food, it means I help myself to one other helping, not to a second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh! That is mindless greed!"

Amien went on further in suggesting that the election of the President be changed to a direct electoral selection among candidates.

"Like in America, the voters themselves choose between individual candidates," Amien reasoned.

The current system of selection by the People's Constituent Assembly (MPR), said Amien, was undesirable as it left open the possibility of money politics.

Amien also explained at length about the economic and legal reforms needed. The soft-spoken Amien delivered his points lucidly, veering away from the indecisiveness plaguing many a politician in his position would be.

He has an agenda clearly mapped out, one which he graciously shared with the audience. He intends to create a political party and contest the presidency.

"My representative, Dr Shafie Malik, will assume leadership of this party. If the chances are good, then he will nominate me at the MPR to run for the presidency."

However, Amien is also quick to add that if his chances are slim, or if there appears another party that is more able to fill the void left by Suharto's departure, "then I better forget about it!"

If anything, he comes across as a wily politician, one who carefully weighs the pros and cons of each possible course of action before going ahead.

In fact, when asked for specifics on what he would do if he were President, he responded very generally, or with this analogy: "Hamka (Indonesia's renowned Islamic scholar) was once asked which direction a Muslim should face in prayer if he reached the moon.

"Hamka said: Prove to me first that you have actually landed on the moon. Then I'll explain to you how to do it!"

He is also quick to deflect giving his opinions on the possible impact of the Indonesian reform movement on Malaysia.

Having briefly met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad earlier in the day, Amien reasoned:

"Pak Mahathir and I agreed that although there are many similarities, the conditions in Indonesia and Malaysia are different," he said.

"I observed how a Malaysian Chief Minister carrying a large amount of money overseas had to resign. Indonesian politicians actually feel sorry for him. In Indonesia a sum like that is peanuts!"

The magnitude of corruption in Indonesia, said Amien, is mega-scale, and as such warrants a very different approach from Malaysia.

"When Pak Mahathir explained to me about the Western agenda regarding developing countries, I was enlightened."

Amien says that Indonesia should not be ashamed of learning from Malaysia, especially our success in maintaining racial harmony and equitable distribution of economic wealth.

"In Malaysia, the different communities can co-exist peacefully. In Indonesia, there should be something like the New Economic Policy to lessen the gap between the races."

Amien said that he was trying to introduce changes so that the Chinese in Indonesia would be known as ethnic Chinese, just like there are ethnic Sundanese, Javanese, Madura, Batak, and Palembang.

"This I feel is more egalitarian. We will be on equal footing. This should be the nomenclature."

Despite all the problems facing his country, Amien remains optimistic on its future outlook.

"If there is a democratic election, hopefully there will be a representative government with credibility and legitimacy.

"Then we will become strong again and take the moral lessons from Sukarno's and Suharto's era so that it is not repeated in the future," he concluded.

Whether or not Amien will emerge from this turmoil as the leader of the Indonesian republic remains to be seen. History has repeated itself twice in Indonesia. But if the Reform Order succeeds, hopefully, Indonesia will be better prepared to face its uncertain future.

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