
“Reform” times in Indonesia?

The ban on the activities of three environmental NGOs -LBBJ; Plasma and SHK Kaltim- in Kutai district, East Kalimantan has caused general concern. LBBJ (better known as PutiJaji) carries out community empowerment through legal rights education, Plasma is a forest campaigning organisation, and SHK Kaltim is a branch of a national network which promotes community-based forest management systems. They have played a very important role in campaigning on the Bontian people's struggles against Bob Hasan's companies; Rio Tinto's operations at the Kaltim Prima coal mine and Kelian Equatorial (gold) mine; the London-Sumatra oil palm plantations; the forest fires last year and earlier this year and the problems which the drought and rising food prices have caused for local communities.

The ban (No. 200-209/330/IV/1998, dated 26 May 1998) was issued by the local Social and Political Affairs office on the grounds that they were illegal organisations since they were not registered at that office. It is remarkable that the ban has come after the fall of Suharto. This may indicate the new government's attitude towards NGOs opposing large-scale commercial exploitation of Indonesia's natural resources, coinciding with President Habibie's strategy to overcome the economic crisis through the promotion of exports.

WAHLI (Indonesian Environment Forum) considers that:

1. This banning order is an arrogant expression of power which contravenes clause 28 of the Indonesian Constitution which guarantees the right to associate, meet and express oneself. The prohibition of these human activities also violates human rights in which there is now renewed interest in Indonesia.
2. This instruction also demonstrates that the authorities involved are unable to grasp fully the aspirations which are developing in the four corners of the country. It clearly demonstrates the shallow understanding of politics on the part of those involved in the face of the wave of reforms sweeping the land. It reveals that these authorities are still trapped in the paranoid, anti-change political rhetoric of the New Order (Suharto) regime.
3. The authorities involved do not recognise or understand the existence of NGOs --their history, vision, purpose-- nor their legal position or their position and experience at the very heart of a changing society.

National and international NGOs demand that the banning order on these three NGOs are immediately and unconditionally withdrawn.

Source: Down to Earth, 6/8/98.