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The past is not forgotten and will never be forgotten

Usman Hamid and Suciwati , Porong, East Java | Tue, 07/07/2009 9:18 AM | Opinion

Listening to the presidential candidates in the last debate, it was clear that their concerted appeal was that it was time for Indonesia to move on from the past.

Megawati presented herself as an example of forgiveness, while Jusuf Kalla and SBY focused more on reconciliation than accountability.

Their commercials show prosperous farmers, educated children and Indonesians climbing bright green hills. But there are some images you won't see in the commercials. In the last few days the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) has toured Java with a remarkable group of people affected by past crimes and has met with local communities affected by the continuing violation of their rights.

The writer William Faulkner once said that the past is not forgotten, and, in fact, it is not even the past. For those of us on the Kontras tour — a daughter whose father disappeared during the 1984 Tanjung Priok riot, a mother whose son disappeared one day in 1997/1998, another whose son was killed by sniper fire at a protest, a young mother whose husband was poisoned on an airline trip abroad — the past is something we live with everyday.

And so it is for the rest of Indonesia as well, for two reasons. On our trip, we met communities whose health and livelihood may be threatened by cement factories and mines, and others made homeless by a disastrous mudflow.

They are victims of the same fundamental problems as the victims of past abuses: Weak institutions that cannot protect people's rights and a resulting impunity for those responsible for negligence, arbitrary actions, or even serious crimes. And many future policies such as poverty reduction, agrarian reform, environmental protection, and economic development as a whole, are likely to be affected by the same patterns of abuse and impunity.

There is a second reason that these crimes should be a concern for all candidates, and for all voters. When people and governments are not held accountable for their actions, it changes the relationship between citizens and their leaders. Such a condition creates a climate of fear, exposes government critics to intimidation, and undermines confidence in the state to provide justice and protection.

For all these reasons we need leaders willing to address the past head on. We need policies to strengthen the capacity and independence of the courts, the Attorney General's Office, and the National Human Rights Commission.

We need leaders with the political will to see that justice is done, through an appropriate combination of prosecutions and extra judicial mechanisms of truth, reconciliation and redress. These measures must include military and other institutional reform.

As a non-partisan organization, Kontras does not endorse any candidate. Unfortunately, this is all too easy, as all three candidates haven't shown a clear commitment to justice for past crimes. And as important as these policies are, the current election is about more than policies.

Even a non-partisan organization cannot ignore the fact that among the vice-presidential candidates are two men credibly linked to major human rights abuses.

The fact that they are candidates says as much about Indonesian society as it does about the individuals or the parties that put them forward as candidates.

It is unlikely that such figures would be credible candidates for a national office in a country that had made full and accurate accounting of the past.

Elections provide citizens with an opportunity to reassert their aspirations for the future and their relationship with their leaders. It is where ordinary citizens can hold those in power accountable by awarding them a vote or choosing not to.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, our elected leaders, including those in parliament, have a lot of work to do. And so do the rest of us: if the nation is to move forward, we must address, and learn from, the past that all Indonesians still live with today.

The writers are members of the Committee of Action and Solidarity for Munir (KASUM) founded in 2004 in response to the assassination of human rights activist Munir Said Thalib on Sept. 7, 2004.

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