

Demystifying the Left, healing the old wounds

A. Bagus Laksana

YOGYAKARTA

It is a bit surreal to see the sudden rise of fear of communism in certain circles in our society recently. Several events related to the 1965 massacre and leftist topics, including academic events, were canceled due to intimidations.

This fear is rather odd, as communist ideologies and Marxist ideas have declined rather dramatically in the last two decades or so.

It is still fresh in our memory how Cuba has begun to open itself to the West. Just a few weeks ago, something unthinkable happened: The promenade of Havana was transformed into a capitalist space where Chanel, one of the icons of capitalism, staged a fashion show.

And Venezuela, earlier dubbed the socialist paradise, has been thrown into a deep economic crisis under socialist President Nicolas Maduro. Global terrorism seems to be posing a more demonic threat than communism or Marxism.

So what is really behind the recent surge of fear of communism in our midst? Undoubtedly, the rising number of activities and discourses on leftist ideas and movements in Indonesia recently has more to do with the need to heal the wounds of

our shared national past than with communism as a rival political system. It is not a revival of communism, but an invitation to look into our troubled past.

However, there might be a genuine interest in leftist ideas today, especially among the young. But it is a bit presumptuous to call this a revival of communism.

This surge of interest perhaps signals frustration with the current economic and political system that is largely driven by neoliberalism. It is an expression of distrust, rather than anything else.

And this is rather normal in the political and intellectual dynamics. The popularity of Bernie Sanders, a socialist democrat, among young Americans in the current presidential campaign might indicate voters' distrust of and resistance to the domination of the political establishment supported by the interest of the Wall Street.

According to a survey by Republican pollster Frank Lunts, 58 percent of young people in the US choose socialism over capitalism as the most compassionate system; 28 percent say the most pressing issue facing America is income inequality (*usnews.com*). It is hard to call these young people "socialists".

They are interested in those al-

ternative ideas, but not ideologically bound by socialism as a system.

They will not be ready to die for it. These labels do not matter that much anymore to them.

We might remember the Occupy Wall Street movement some years back. This movement died out rather quickly and did not change capitalism, but it is the voice of young people against inequality and income disparity. It is a longing for another world, for a new way of managing social and political life toward more tangible justice for all.

So, what is wrong is not the aspirations of the young, but the way we manage our society.

Unfortunately, in our society, leftist ideas have been imagined as a specter, a ghostly monster so menacing that it will ruin everything we cherish as a nation.

Communism and Marxism have been turned into a "mystified" category. It is shrouded in mystery, and no one is supposed to know what it really amounts to, even at the level of public, academic or scholarly discourse.

Therefore leftist ideas instill fear in most people, but they are turned ironically into something more appealing to others for the same reason. It is odd that the collapse of socialism and the communist regimes, as

well as the crisis and declining appeal of Marxism as a system of thought among intellectuals, have failed to "demystify" the specter of communism here. As a nation, we are lagging behind the development of the larger intellectual discourse in this sense.

One of the dreadful things associated with communism and Marxism in the popular imagination in our society is its supposedly atheistic presuppositions and hence, its collision with religion.

The obsolescence of Marxist analysis is proved in public and scientific discourse.

Upon closer reflection, the relationship between Marxism, socialism and religion is much more complicated.

Marxist ideas have been put to use by certain religious thinkers and movements, but have also been criticized and transformed.

A case in point is liberation theology, a strand of Christian theology that drew major insights from Marxist analysis of social dynamics but without succumbing into its materialist (atheistic) ontology or fun-

damental view of things.

Recent scholarship shows that this theology is in crisis, after enjoying some popularity in the 1970s and 1980s.

One of its biggest lacunae lies in its reliance on the old-school Marxist analysis of social inequality and injustice.

This analysis has not been able to keep up with the most current and advanced development of capitalism, which has transformed itself from an economic system into a comprehensive program of human formation.

In the words of Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher, capitalism presents itself more and more as an ensemble of technologies, skillful at molding human desire.

Capitalism does not work through the state, but it governs human desire through the mechanism, which surpasses the state. Thus, capitalism has penetrated our lives far more deeply than we normally think.

Unaware of this development, liberation theology put its revolutionary thinking rather ironically in the capitalist framework by relying on the state as a place and power for resistance against capitalism, as Daniel Bell wrote.

This eventually deems the resistance of liberation theology futile.

The point is that the obsolescence of Marxist analysis is proved in public and scientific discourse. The Catholic Church under John Paul II put liberation theology under suspicion and discipline due to its undue reliance on Marxism and its connection to political revolutionary movements that at times condoned violence.

But what made liberation theology reflect more seriously on itself is not so much the Church's disciplinary actions against it, but rather its internal coherence as a system of thought and its accuracy vis-à-vis the development of social reality and problems that it tried to address.

Perhaps we will do better as a society if we offer public and academic space of discourse to leftist ideas.

The validity of these ideas should be put to rigorous intellectual and academic scrutiny, rather than collective fear and disciplinary politics.

Society at large will judge whether these ideas merit serious consideration. This way we would demystify these leftist ideas and see them for what they are.

The writer is a lecturer at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta.