


MAROONED IN THE JUNCTION: Indonesian Youth Participation in Politics

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“Politics? I’m sorry, but I don’t want to have anything to do with that.”

PINKAN¹, A 30-YEAR OLD ACCOUNTANT AT AN international consultancy firm in Jakarta, hurriedly gives “no comment” when asked about her opinion on youth political participation. She doesn’t even wait to see the full questionnaire to say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to have anything to do with that.” Asked about her reasons, she shrugs her shoulders and replies that all she wants is to lead a peaceful life and prioritize her career. “I think all politicians are opportunists and liars.” Pinkan is not the only young Indonesian who thinks this way.

Patrick is a former student activist who took part in the “*Reformasi*” movement, the movement that caused the downfall

INDONESIA		Country Background	
	Head of State	President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono	
	Government	Democratic, Republic	
	Capital	Jakarta	
	Population	238,452,952 (2004 est.)	
	Language	Bahasa Indonesia	
	Religion	Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism	
	Independence	From the Netherlands: declared in 17 August 1945, recognized in 27 December 1949	
	Suffrage	Voting age is 17 years old, universal	
	Currency	Rupiah	
	<small>Sources: The Official Website of the National Republic of Indonesia, Websites of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Wikipedia [date accessed 11 April 2005]</small>		

¹ Not her real name, as she asked not to be identified in any published material.

of the Soeharto dictatorship in 1998, following the severe financial crisis that hit the country a year earlier. He says his involvement with a local NGO engaged in political education is only a “stepping stone” for his future. Patrick first joined the NGO out of idealism. But this is not what keeps him there. He puts up with the organization’s low-remuneration-high-demand work style not out of idealism, but because it would be difficult for him to find another job without a university degree. Besides, he is allowed to live at the office for free!

The views of Pinkan and Patrick reflect a pragmatic attitude of many young Indonesians today, a stark contrast to the militant street riots in May 1998, when students risked their lives and safety to bring down the corrupt Soeharto regime.

Young Indonesians’ lack of interest in politics is problematic. The lack of political participation by young people is more of a result, rather than a cause, of broader political stagnation. This is because the transition from the repressive Soeharto regime was not accompanied by a “re-generation” of the political arena. By “re-generation,” we do not point to the generational succession aspect among politicians and political activists, but more fundamentally, to the ideological and political development of the country. Indeed, we find that there have been no meaningful political change even years after Soeharto’s ouster. This has had a significant impact on young people’s outlook on politics.

I. Indonesian Youth: A Profile

Who Are The Youth?

In Indonesia, there seems to be no agreement on a common definition of “youth.”

To Patrick, youth are high school and university students, or those between 15 and 24 years of age. He criticizes “youth organizations” such as *Angkatan Muda Golkar* (the youth arm of Soeharto’s former political party) whose members include people in their 40s. He says that such organizations are usually not concerned with youth issues and the next generation’s education. “I think they are just training people to maintain and continue the party’s influence.”

A different opinion is put forward by *Pergerakan Indonesia*’s Deputy Secretary General Martin Manurung. His proposal is that “youth” should extend to people up to 40 years of age, for the reason that succession in political organizations can be very slow. If the upper limit of youth is only until 24 or 30, people in their 30s have no chance of successfully entering politics as “adults.”

Interestingly, there seems to be no legal document that gives an official definition of youth in Indonesia. Moreover, the Indonesian concepts of teenager (*remaja*) and youth (*pemuda*) are often confused. The National Family Planning Board (BKKBN) defines the teenage years as, “the transition from childhood to adulthood.” The Board’s definition includes those between 10 and 21 years of age. However, according to the Board’s website, the age references can vary according to the local socio-cultural system.² According

² National Family Planning Board (BKKBN). (2004). Data & Informasi. Available online: <http://www.bkkbn.go.id/hqweb/pengelolaeria/pp1definisi.html> [date accessed: 4 February 2005].

to the National Health Department, teenagers are those between 10 and 19 years old and have never been married.

There is also the common misconception that “youth” are equal to students. There were no youth ministries under the administrations of presidents Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001-2004). The Ministry of Education was supposed to handle all matters concerning the sector. There are also few distinctions between student and youth organizations. Some activists who are no longer students in any university thus still actively involve themselves in students’ organizations.

In practice, the age that marks the beginning of one’s public life in Indonesia is 17. This is the age when one can obtain a national identity card (KTP) and is accorded the right to vote. It is the legal age for obtaining a driving license, watching “adult” movies in cinemas and buying cigarettes and alcoholic drinks.

Schooling System and Education

In a country with a population of nearly 240 million, there are 29.4 percent children (age 0-14), 65.5 percent of the population is in their productive age (15-64) and only 5.1 are old people over 65 years of age.³ In 1990, 95 percent of young people (age 15-24) could read.⁴ According to the UNDP, the number increased to 98 percent in 2002. Although more than 90 percent enjoy primary education, only 39 percent enrolled in secondary school in 1990, while 47.4 percent did in 2000.

³ CIA (2005). *CIA World Fact Book*. Available online: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html> [date accessed: 4 February 2005].

⁴ UNDP. (2003). *Human Development Indicators*. Available online: <http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/index.html> [date accessed: 4 February 2005].

Although many Indonesian children go through playgroups and kindergarten, the schooling system begins with six years of primary education, followed by six years of secondary education (divided into 3 years of junior high school and 3 years of senior high school). After finishing high school, one can choose between higher academic education and vocational training.

During the Soeharto era, only primary education was compulsory. The state subsidized government elementary schools. This was later expanded to include junior high school, resulting in a nine-year education for all.

Youth Attitudes

Interviews with ordinary young people and activists are reflective of their political values and attitudes.

During the campaign period for the parliamentary elections in March 2004, Arsad and Wanto, two student activists of Mpu Tantular University in Jakarta, comment that students at their university are pessimistic about elections and the country's leadership. "Those who are in power right now are products of [Soeharto's] New Order regime. This country is not yet clean. Until all corrupt politicians are in jail and there are no more beggars on streets, we shall maintain our opposition to any incumbent government," says Arsad. As a member of the university's student council, he persistently participated in demonstrations against the Golkar Party.

Progressive Youth in Indonesia

by Martin Manurung

Indonesia would never be independent without the revolutionary young people who pushed Soekarno and Hatta to proclaim Indonesia's independence soon after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, which pushed the Japanese to surrender to the Allied forces. In addition, the "*Reformasi*" in 1998, which brought about democracy to Indonesia would never have taken place without the youth and student movements that successfully defeated the Soeharto's regime.

However, history has also shown that after successfully accomplishing the mission, the youth movement failed to use the power they have achieved to make the people's aspirations into reality. The main reason for this is the failure to establish the common ground for unity. Distrust has become a main factor that sharpens differences and weakens the youth movement in Indonesia. The distrust, which is instilled within the groups, came from the three-decade repression during the New Order era that divided the youth in three groups. First, the minority progressive revolutionary groups which mainly came from the study clubs established by the students. An example of a movement that was born from study groups was the People's Democratic Party (PRD), a leftist party that later pioneered the struggle for "*Reformasi*." Second, the conservative groups which mostly originated from religious organizations, which had been co-opted by the regime, such as the HMI (Islamic Students Association), and the GMKI (Indonesian Christian Student Movement). Those groups were part of religious-based parties that existed during the Soekarno's time and later in the 1960s supported the birth of the New Order regime. Third, the majority apolitical individuals created

by the “normalization of campus life” policy (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus*) aimed to distract the students away from taking part in politics.

Moreover, the regime also drew dividing lines that raised prejudices between those groups. As a result, the divisions also triggered a growing distrust between the young progressives. Furthermore, this resulted in difficulty obtaining a common ground for movements of young progressives.

An example of such distrust can be seen in controversies that arose recently when a group of young politicians and activists declared to join the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which is chaired by former President Megawati Soekarnoputri. The group is led by Budiman Sudjatmiko, former Chairperson of the previously mentioned People’s Democratic Party (PRD). Some people believe that the action to join the PDI-P is an opportunistic move, because in the past, the Soeharto’s regime co-opted young people and used the activists to incapacitate them. Therefore, to join a political party is like a taboo, and to be called an “idealistic fighter,” one must take a “*via dolorosa*” and to face the regime head on. However, reality has called for a different paradigm of which many continue to ignore. Indonesia is no longer facing an undemocratic regime and the strategy must change.

This is echoed in Wanto's remark: "I don't trust the political elites. I have no hope for this election. The ruling political parties have no meaning for the poor. We expected proof [of better things to come], not promises." Asked about his suggestions for a way out, Wanto replies: "The Golkar Party should be dismissed. It is the root of all problems. We have to cut the problems at the root. I don't know what else could be done for our future. Maybe we need more moral education to eradicate the corruption that has already become a 'culture'; we need to replace it with a culture of 'shame.'"

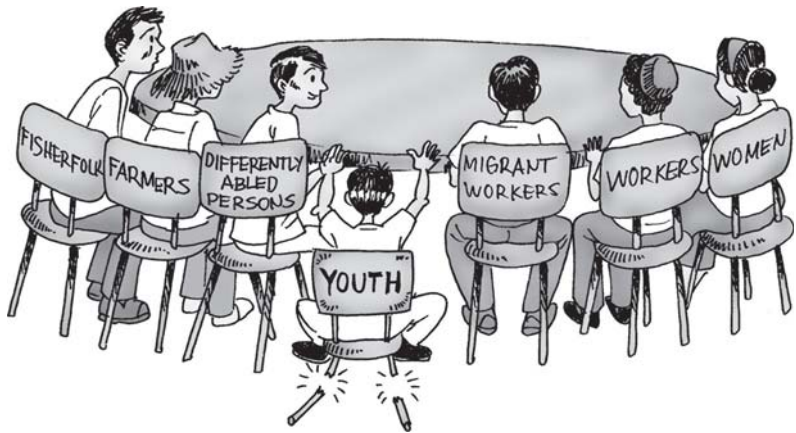
For Patrick, a member of the political NGO *Uni Sosial Demokrat*, young people lack opportunities to participate meaningfully. "The country as well as most organizations here is still run by the older generation. They dictate to us what to do and give us no chance at proving ourselves."

II. Official Institutions and Processes

Official Regulations and Institutions

There are no specific regulations or laws that define Indonesia's basic youth policies. It seems that policies on youth are subsumed under education or family and health policies. Compared to other sectors in Indonesian society (women, labor, peasants, even migrant workers) with better-defined state interventions, it can be stated that the Indonesian government doesn't pay much attention to its next generation.

During the Soeharto era (1966-1998), Indonesia had a Ministry of Youth and Sports. The Ministry was only resurrected under the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2004.



Young people have no role in decisions concerning youth policies and programs. Despite waves of protests from youth and student organizations, criticizing provisions on religious educational institutions and the privatization of higher education, the National Education System Law (*UU Sistem Pendidikan Nasional*) was passed in 2003. Another sad example was laid before the public during and after the recent national final examination (UAN) for high school students. Controversy arose due to a skewed grading scheme that raised the scores of low performers, while high performers' grades were lowered.

Few youth organizations have attempted to collaborate with the government. An example here is the Centre for the Betterment of Education (CBE).⁵ The center tracks children who stop going to school in several elementary schools in Jakarta and holds dialogues with education authorities.

⁵ According to its website (<http://www.cbe.or.id>), CBE is an independent organization that actively supports and facilitates efforts at improving education and learning in Indonesia.

The Legislative Realm and Elections

As mentioned earlier, the official voting age in Indonesia is 17, as soon as one holds a national identity card. Holding a valid national identity card or a marriage certificate is required for standing for public office (for national parliament and at the local level).

The regulations on the registration process have varied in the past. For the 2004 General Elections, voters were required to register in the locality where their national identity card had been issued. Someone living and working in Jakarta, for example, but holding a national identity card from Papua, had to fly back to his/her hometown to register as a voter. Many were unaware of the possibility of obtaining temporary identity cards and other regulations for voters living far away from their hometowns. Thus many young professionals in Jakarta failed to cast their votes with an election day falling on a Monday. Others took advantage of the long weekend to spend a few days out of town rather than go to the polling stations to vote.

Many other young people, often from an activist background, chose not to go to the polling stations because they do not trust the government, as expressed by Wanto and Arsad above.

Young People in Political Parties

Just because a young Indonesian joins political party, it doesn't always mean he or she really understands the party's political stance. It is not necessarily an indication of a person's ideological positioning. This is a sad legacy of the "floating mass" phenomenon during the Soeharto regime, when generations of Indonesians were kept politically unaware. Only three political parties, Golkar, the United Development Party (PPP) and the

Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), were allowed to operate under Soeharto.

The formation of the *Persatuan Rakyat Demokratik* or PRD (People's Democratic Party) was a conscious break from this. It brought together young, radical social activists from different parts of the country to campaign for democratic change. In its founding declaration, the PRD called for a restoration of full democratic rights and freedoms, a return to civilian rule and redistribution of the wealth of society to the poor. Metamorphosing from an association (*perhimpunan*) into a political party in 1996, PRD was established as a political vehicle against the state "to defend democracy by creating a civil society in which absolutism and militarism would have no place." Their goals were "sovereignty of the people, rule of law and respect of human rights."⁶

After the "fresh-air" of *Reformasi*, the post-Soeharto period saw the emergence of 250 political parties in 1999, among which 48 were officially eligible to field candidates in the 1999 elections. Many young people affiliated with political parties at that time. To our mind, that might have been the only period when young people openly expressed their political views and considered politics an important concern in their life, apart from their studies or careers.

Although there is a lack of data on young people's membership in political parties, the number, we believe, is more than 40% in each of the 24 formal political parties at present. However, from our limited observation, we estimate that young people occupy less than 20 percent of formal leadership positions within parties.

⁶ Stanley Adi Prasetyo et al., ed. (2003). "Discussion on the Role of Political Parties" in Stanley Adi Prasetyo et al (ed), *Indonesia's Post-Soeharto Democracy Movement*. Jakarta: Demos, p. 671.

At present, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), the Indonesian Democratic Party–Struggle (PDI-P), and the National Mandate Party (PAN) appeal to many young people. Television celebrities, fashion models and singers helped boost these parties’ popularity. Whether young people identify with these parties’ ideologies or religious bases or just “follow the trend,” is difficult to ascertain.

Youth Wings

In Indonesian political practice, parties used to maintain organizations, which are controlled by the ideological interests of the party. These organizations were referred to as *onderbouw* (a Dutch term). The Islamic Student Association (HMI) thus was, and still is, the *onderbouw* of Islamic Political Parties, while the Indonesian Nationalist Students Movement (GMNI) provides support to PDI-P the same way the Indonesian National Youth Committee (KNPI) does to Golkar.

Today, many parties continue to employ similar mechanisms to recruit new members and build successors among their ranks. To attract more young people, they organize public meetings in pubs or stage musical events. Learning from non-political groups, political parties have also started to adapt adult education and experiential learning in their workshops to make their political trainings more attractive.

Among the parties that competed in the 2004 elections, only two of 24 parties had youth departments or committees, namely, the Soekarno National Party (PNBK) and the Indonesia Justice and Unity Party (PKP). Three parties, the Star & Moon Party (PBB), the National Democratic Unity Party (PDK) the and PKP, have youth programs; while three others, the New Indonesia Association Party (Partai PIB), the Democratic Party (PD) and the Indonesia’s

Guardian of Democracy Party (Partai PDI), have integrated education and youth programs.

Political Campaigns: Democratic *Fiesta* or Free Entertainment?

The most widespread form of political participation in Indonesia is voting. Yet, as pointed out above, voting alone is an insufficient basis to determine whether young people's participation is motivated by ideological convictions.

For many young people, elections are just a social event they feel obliged to take part in. For some, it is simply fun spending time with friends and colleagues, free from school and work. In some villages, electoral committee members even dress in traditional clothing for this special day.

Staging music concerts and other forms of public entertainment during the campaign period has become common. This free entertainment, courtesy of major political parties, certainly draws the attention of many young people, especially those in the lower and middle socio-economic classes.



During Indonesia's first round of presidential elections on 5 July 2004, several young people gathered at the polling station in one of the poorer sections of Jakarta. "I certainly enjoy the holiday," says Indra, a high school student and first-time voter. Some of his friends watching the interview nod in agreement and express their joy at having a day off school. But do they vote? "Of course! Even though I don't know any of these candidates, I vote because I am an Indonesian and I have to take part in this democratic *fiesta*," proclaims Indra.

To Vote Or Not To Vote



www.kompas.co.id

In a less formal manner, young people also express themselves politically by participating in political campaigns. Some of them sympathize with a particular political party by contributing financial support, contacts and networks. But this does not automatically mean that these supporters also vote for a particular political party come election time.

In 1999, a number of young professionals supported the People's Democratic Party (PRD) by donating money and food. However, many of them later came out and said that although they supported PRD in spirit, the same way they supported their younger siblings at home, they chose not to vote at all, or become *golput* who is someone who casts blank ballots during the election.



To our mind, this behavior is surprising for two reasons. First, it illustrates that “support” does not necessarily mean “vote for.” Second, when they do not vote for a particular party they have supported, they do not “betray” it by voting for other parties.

Another example is that of a young woman working for a politician. She admits that she supported PKS by helping campaigners set a meeting with the politician she works for. However, she says that as long as the party remains exclusive to Islam, she will not vote for them. She prefers to become a *golput*.

This interesting revelation shows that young people are more critical than they may appear to be.

Another poignant example comes from Indonesia's war-torn province, Nangroe Aceh Darussalam. There, people admit that they voted in order to save their lives. "We don't know what would happen if we didn't go to the polling stations. Who knows, they [the Indonesian military] might have captured and tortured us for our alleged links with the rebel group GAM," said a lady whose identity must be kept secret for security reasons.⁷

III. Youth Associations

The Student Movement

Youth and students activists have consistently played important roles in Indonesia's history, beginning with the struggle for independence at the beginning of the century. This was also the case when massive street demonstrations forced Soeharto out of public office in 1998 and four students were shot dead in front of their University in West Jakarta. To some extent, the incident also reminded the public of the last years of the Soekarno's era, when students banded together as "*Angkatan 66*" (66 Forces).

Even after 1998, various student movements continued to be a critical voice. Students became targets of violent assaults at the hands of the military and other authorities for criticizing government. The Indonesian student movements became known for its critical, if not radical stance on the current state of affairs and its massive mobilizing capacity.

⁷ One of the writers of this paper, Adeline M.T, together with J. Sudrijanta, produced a documentary about general elections in Aceh entitled *Vote for Your Life* (Minima, April 2004).

There are two types of student groups. First, there are locally based student groups, such as student unions of certain universities, faculties or departments. Student groups identified with a certain locality also fall under this category. Then there are groups with special interests, political orientations or religious affiliations. This distinction, however, is not mutually exclusive. Many students are members of both interest groups and locally based groups. In certain situations, during demonstrations for example, the division is blurred even more.

Student movements have come under criticism over the last couple of years. Their reflections and analyses, although meant to be “radical,” are many times “outdated.” Stubbornly holding on to their confrontational positions, they criticize almost every single government regulation or policy. More often than not, students protest issues they don’t even understand, without studying the case or putting forward alternative proposals.



Yet, despite their naivety, the public continues to acknowledge, “The conscience of society are the students.”

On-Campus Student Organizations

In the late 1970s, the Soeharto government issued a set of decrees, which collectively came to be known as “Normalization of Campus Life- Coordinating Body for Student Affairs” (NKK/BKK). The aim was simply the restriction of students’ political life at universities. The most far-reaching restrictions were contained in the following decrees:

- a. *Minister of Education and Culture/SK No. 0156/U/1978*, which outlawed student political activity and expression on campus, allowing only “academic” discussion of political subjects.
- b. *Director General of Higher Education/002/DK/Inst/1978*, which put all student activities under the control of the vice-rector for student affairs (*Pembantu Rektor III*), assisted by the vice-deans for student affairs (*Pembantu Dekan III*) in each faculty. The decree created the Coordinating Body for Student Affairs, a campus institution that gave the rector effective authority to appoint or remove leaders of student organizations at will.
- c. *Minister of Education and Culture/Instruction No. 1/U/1978 & Minister of Education and Culture/SK No. 037/U/1979*, which outlawed campus-wide student councils (*Dewan Mahasiswa*) and limited the permissible content of student activities to student welfare, recreation, and academic/intellectual matters.

One of the campus institutions that suffered most from these regulations was the student press. In the 1980s, few student papers were established and those that did exist were closely monitored

and intellectually timid. In the late 1980s and in the 1990s, the student press again grew bold, but was subject to harassment and censorship from both university administrators and military and civilian authorities. This turned university administrations into, what some Indonesian commentators called, a “censoring, investigating institution.”⁸



Due to constant criticism, the restrictions were partially lifted in 1990 and campus-wide student councils were re-introduced. With the success of the student protest movement in 1998, the restrictions were placed under review.⁹ Nowadays, students are free to express their political views and organize student governments, although the precise status of the NKK/BKK decrees remains uncertain.¹⁰

⁸ Mulya T. Lubis and Fauzi Abdullah. (1981). *Human Rights Report, Indonesia 1980*. Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, quoted in Edward Aspinall. (1993). *Dissent in Indonesia in the 1980s*. Center of Southeast Asian Studies Monograph. Monash University, p. 9.

⁹ See Kompas Online. (29 May 1998). *Bakal Berakhir, Era NKK/BKK* and Republika Online. (29 May 1998). *Mendikbud Juwono Soedarsono: Konsep NKK/BKK Ditinjau Kembali*.

¹⁰ Compare Kompas Online. (29 May 1998). *Bakal Berakhir, Era NKK/BKK* with Kompas Online. (30 May 1998). *NKK/BKK Sudah Dicaput Tahun 1990*.

The Indonesian experience, consistent with experiences elsewhere, suggests that universities flourish as centers of academic excellence not when the government aggressively attempts to depoliticize campuses, but when there is space for autonomous political activity and students' basic rights as citizens are guaranteed.

Off-Campus and Religious Organizations

In this vast multi-cultural country, it is impossible to list every single off-campus youth association that reflects youth political participation in its mandate. It is noteworthy, however, that many youth organizations are religion-based.

- a. *Islamic youth organizations:* There is a range of Muslim organizations, from the most “fundamentalist” such as the Islamic Defender Front (FPI), *Majelis Mujahiddin*, *Laskar Jundullah*, and *Laskar Jihad*, to modern ones, such as the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*). Campus-based Islamic organizations are HMI and the Indonesian Islamic Student Union (PMII).
- b. *Catholic youth organizations:* The Association of Catholic Students of The Republic of Indonesia (PMKRI) and the Catholic Youth (PK) has a presence across universities. Instead of having branches at different universities, they have adapted a party-like structure with a central committee (at the national level), regional committees (at the provincial level) and branch committees (at the city/municipal level). Although these associations use “Catholic” as an attribute, they are not subsumed under the hierarchy of the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference nor are they affiliated with Catholic parties.
- c. *Christian youth organizations:* The Indonesian Christian Students Movement (GMKI) is the most prominent one.

- d. *Hindu youth organizations*: Known examples are the Association of Indonesian Hindu Students (KMHDI) and the Association of Hindu Youth (Peradah).

The orientation of these religion-based organizations is, broadly speaking, to represent believers' interests. Since religious institutions (Muslim clerics/*ulamas* and Christian churches) in Indonesia are not directly involved in politics, these youth organizations take on political issues related to religious concerns. Muslim students, for example, protested against a bill that was to discriminate against Muslim educational institutions.

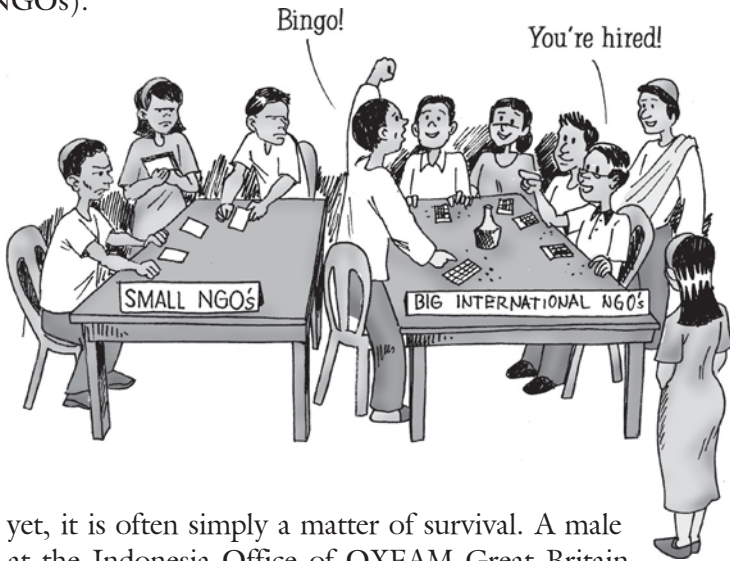
Young People in NGOs and CSOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) first came about in rural areas of Indonesia in the late 1960s. By the 1970s, trade unions and environmental groups started to mushroom as well. This is also when a less-confrontational term, "Self-Reliant Social Institution" ("*Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat*" or LSM) was coined, taking into account the character of the government at that time.

In the Indonesian context, the term "NGO" generally refers to more formal organizations, which receive funds from donors, while "CSOs" are more financially independent. Young people were especially drawn to this sector beginning with the *Reformasi* experience of 1998. They joined demonstrations and public gatherings or even became members of environmental and other cause-oriented groups. Many student activists also pursued the NGO-CSO career path after completing their higher education, as full-time staff or part of organizations' governing boards. The scholar M. M. Billah has referred to this as "class suicide," when

young people from the upper-middle class leave their comfortable life to join the struggles of the lower classes.

The NGO-CSO track has not been without criticism. There are those who feel that NGO-CSO work is becoming more and more “project oriented,” without necessarily being “professionalized.” Former activists fail to become agents of change by losing their vision of a “movement” and becoming too career or business oriented. This is particularly said of big international NGOs (BINGOs).



And yet, it is often simply a matter of survival. A male staff at the Indonesia Office of OXFAM Great Britain says: “Just be realistic, my friend. How would you cover your living expenses with a wife and two kids? It is still better I work for an NGO and not for a corporation or become a soldier. If I am too radical here now, like I was before, this institution will kick me out. If this happens, who will give me money to survive? You?”

A deeper analysis of this trend is needed. What is clear is that the involvement of young people in NGOs and CSOs needs serious re-thinking.

Young People in Social Movements and Civic Organizations

Apart from religious organizations, there are also many young people in social movements and other politically oriented organizations that cannot be categorized as NGOs or CSOs.

During the Soeharto regime, there were several underground left youth groups, such as the Indonesian Students Solidarity for Democracy (SMID). Especially in the aftermath of *Reformasi*, there has been a flowering of politically oriented organizations. There are youth groups in various sectors: rural (peasants), urban (marginalized poor), and industrial (labor/trade unions). It is often not easy or even relevant to establish definite political or ideological labels of these groups. Although they act independently, they do have working relationships or joint actions with other social movements. To some extent, young laborers have thus catalyzed the Indonesian trade union movement.

Young professionals have also organized themselves. May 19, 1997 marked an important moment, when young professionals organized a massive demonstration in front of the Jakarta Stock Exchange. Their banners read, “The game is over, Mr. Soeharto” and “Professionals need a new president.” In reference to historical events in the Indonesian struggle for independence, they proclaimed their “Statement of Indonesian Professionals in the Third National Revival.”

Since then, professional societies forged the Indonesia Professional Employees Forum (FPPI). This pioneering effort brought together numerous associations and movements founded by

professionals, ranging from charity organizations to political forums and public interest groups. From its height in the period from 1998 to 2000, the level of activity has, however, been declining in recent years. A saturation point may have been reached.

A female white collar professional in Surabaya shares that people are growing tired with demonstrations these days: “Demonstrations were indeed great, but people become less sympathetic. [Joining demonstrations] was our role at that time but that’s enough. Now we must get back to work and study again.”

What this shows is that changing contexts have given rise to different challenges for young professional activists of today.



Semanggi I and II (AP)

Starting with the street protests that drove Soeharto out of office, rallies and demonstrations have indeed become a popular form of self-organized political expression among young people. Since then, many political issues have been put forward by means of these mass actions. One of the biggest demonstrations of late was staged in protest of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. More than 3,000 people crowded Jakarta’s main road, marching five kilometers to the American embassy building.

However, not all-important issues are properly addressed in these mobilizations. Many participants are just followers who do not understand the importance or the true nature of the issue. The bill on the new education system was thus portrayed as an injustice from the point of view of religion, while the bigger problem actually lies with the privatization and commercialization of education. The powerful (the military, government or even corporations) also instigate counter-mobilizations to deflate attacks on their institutions, using democratic means to stop democratic efforts.

Nevertheless, rallies and demonstrations are obviously attractive to young people. Even high school students find these events interesting and exciting. In big cities, volunteers are easy to find and rallies are a part of student life.

A former student activist now studying abroad says: “When I was student in Indonesia, there was not a single month without a demonstration. I was so happy. When there was no demonstration, I always felt something was going wrong. Life was spiritless. For a student, demonstration is a must.”

Other Forms of Self-Expressions

Although rarely taken into account, there are also other forms of political participation and self-expression by young people. In many cities, there are informal groupings of street musicians (*pengamen-jalanan*) and other cultural groups, like the Full Moon Discussion Club (*“kelompok diskusi bulan purnama”*) initiated by artists in Jakarta.

The Internet and e-mail communication are also popular media for the political participation and self-expression of young people. From 1998 to 2002, gerundelan-miskinis@yahoo.com was

a famous mailing list maintained by Jakartanese young hippies. The website www.sekitarkita.com is also a good example of this “network society” type of participation.

Young women have also joined gatherings such as “The Voice of Concerned Mothers” (“*Suara Ibu Peduli*”), the “Peaceful Night of a Thousand Candles” (“*malam damai seribu lilin*”) commemorating the deadly riots of May 1998, and the “Women Movement Against Consumerism” (“*gerakan perempuan anti konsumerisme*”) in early 2003.

Many of these gatherings and networks transcend differences in class interest, ideology, race and other divides. These might well be the seeds of a strong civil society in the future.

A contributor of www.sekitarkita.com reflects: “I am more comfortable now. I don’t have to argue about differences in ideology anymore. When I was part of the voluntary team, we had difficulties organizing actions due to divergent interests with other group. As part of Sekitarkita, it is now much easier to cooperate with others.”

IV. The Youth and Political Change

In Indonesia, young people have always been the motor of political change. Sukarno, the first Indonesian president, was 27 years old when he became the chairperson of the Indonesian National Party (PNI) in the 1920s. Together with Hatta, who later became the first vice-president, they were the central figures of the independence movement when they were in their twenties, and took over the leadership of the country when they were in their early forties.

Under Soeharto’s New Order regime, however, youth political participation was suppressed. Within the repressive and highly

bureaucratized political culture, active young people were patronizingly referred to as *anak-anak* or “children.” By contrast, during the struggle for independence, young fighters were never referred to as *anak-anak*. Instead, they were known as *pemuda*, a term that literally means “youth” but refers to those at the forefront of the struggle for change. The Indonesian national revolution is, in fact, often referred to as the *revolusi pemuda*.

Then again, the student leaders and organizers of the 1990s were referred to as *anak-anak baik yang idealis* (“good, idealistic children”) by elite politicians. Of course, there were people over 40 years old who fought against Soeharto and there are people under 40 who still have a New Order mentality. But *Reformasi* is an idea that sprung from the youth. It was an ideal fought for by the youth and it was they who paid the supreme sacrifice during the deadly May riots of 1998.



Student-led Reformasi celebrating the end of the Soeharto era (Mike Wilbur/AP)

The period from 1998 to 2000 saw a rapid growth of the youth movement, particularly from the student sector. However, it is difficult to assess whether the extent and intensity of their organizing efforts are still comparable at present. It is also difficult to gauge whether youth groups only mobilize because they are agitated or whether they are also involved in crafting concrete reform agendas. A case in point is the recent debate on the privatization of higher education.

Beginning in 2003, four state universities based respectively in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung and Bogor pushed privatization designs forward.¹¹ The underlying idea is to subject education to the laws of the market—first introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The education budget thus stands to be cut by twenty percent. All 70 state universities in the archipelago would be forced to increase fees and impose other cuts.

Students actively campaigned against these attacks on higher education, demanding “free education for all, high quality education, and freedom of political speech and organization.”¹² Not only did they mobilize students on campus, but also agitated amongst poor people outside the campus setting. At present levels, parents pay around Rp 225,000 to 400,000 (between 19 to 33 EUR, which is equivalent to 1 to 3 months’ wages for workers) per semester. The IMF plans are said to increase fees to at least Rp 1 Million (83 EUR or 7 to 8 months’ wages). Under these conditions, it will become impossible for working class youth to go to university.

Yet, despite the protests of student and members of the academic community, privatization is here to stay. Lawmakers passed the new law on the National Education System, without listening to the students.

The lesson here is that contributions of young people in politics still largely go unacknowledged. Although the present situation is much better than during the New Order regime, the political culture of Indonesia is still paternalistic and follows patron-client patterns. This culture not only undermines the active participation

¹¹ See various publication in Indonesia during the time period from June to August 2003, like Yanuar Nugroho. (4 July 2003). “*Indonesia’s education system faces disaster.*” Opinion & Editorial. The Jakarta Post.

¹² Kompas. (3 July 2003). *Mahasiswa Tolak Otonomi Kampus.*

of women in politics,¹³ but also underestimates the involvement of the youth in this important arena.

Globalization is another important dimension to consider. The global success of the television quiz shows *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* shows how much people desire to share in the money-driven dream and the belief that happiness—in terms of money, status and lifestyle—is within everyone’s reach.

Says a former activist who is continuing her studies in the United Kingdom: “[It is] much better if I join MLM (multi-level marketing) than demonstrations. I will get something real: money. Demonstrating today only makes other people suffer. Our role was to throw Soeharto out of the palace at that time. Now is the time to earn some money.”

Today, young people everywhere drink the same soft drinks and smoke the same cigarettes; wear identical brands of clothes and shoes; play the same computer games, which run on the same systems and platforms; watch the same Hollywood films and listen to the same Western pop music.

This is the “change” that is commonly referred to when comparing student movements of the past (even the one of 1998) and now. Another former student activist who lives in Jakarta warns: “Time has changed everything. It is not easy to gather people. Students are more attracted to computers, McDonalds or shopping than attending a student meeting to discuss national issues let alone being involved in a movement. Look at the activists from before. They are now working for big corporations or rich NGOs [that pay them high salaries]... So, don’t dream.”

The issue is not purely an economic one. The most cunning exploit of neo-liberalism is that it penetrates the way people evaluate

¹³ For a more comprehensive discussion on women in Indonesian politics, see Adeline M. Tumenggung. (2001). “Feminine Politics” in FES-Young Women Leaders Network, *Young Women=New Politics?* Bangkok: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES).

things. It implants the “pleasure-prestige-status-luxury” principle among members of society.¹⁴ And this clearly affects youth participation in politics as well.

V. Assessment

The following points lead us to a simple assessment that concludes this study.

1. The involvement of young people in politics in Indonesia dates back to the struggle against colonialism in the early 1900s. Young people have always played important roles in social movements.
2. The year 1998 marks an important historical event. *Reformasi* swept the nation, driven mainly by young people, which resulted in the collapse of 36 years of military dictatorship.
3. After the momentum of *Reformasi*, many groups took advantage of the more democratic situation (more freedom and less repression), involving more young people in political education and engagements. Yet, there is still a lack of state initiatives to seriously foster youth political participation. This is where youth organizations and associations bridge an important gap in getting young people involved.
4. Youth participation in politics is being channeled through on- and off-campus organizations, as well as through formal and informal groups. Through these channels, young people have equipped themselves with organizational and networking skills in building their own movements. These organizations and institutions offer leadership and political awareness

¹⁴ See Yanuar Nugroho. (10 July 2002). “*Descartes might say: ‘I buy, therefore I am,’*” Opinion and Editorial, The Jakarta Post.

trainings, which enable young people to actively contribute to their respective movements.

5. The youth continue to organize themselves, even though their participation is not always acknowledged and subjected to paternalistic pronouncements.
6. Unfortunately, the political involvement of young people today is much affected by the current wave of globalization, particularly in terms of culture and life style. This has influenced the way they think and act in community life and politics. Although there seems to be no question whether young people should address central issues such as human rights and social justice, there is a big question mark whether this is actually the case.

How Meaningful is Youth Political Participation in Indonesia?

A former student activist who lives in Surabaya wraps it up: “There seems to be a need to reinterpret youth political participation. Of course I disagree with those who say that [youth participation in politics] has no meaning. But in these changing times, I find that the youth themselves need to be more creative in channeling their political aspirations. This is not only true for the youth, but also for the state and all of us. If the young people’s movement remains unchanged, I can guarantee that it will die soon. We need a new way.”

This statement reflects our thoughts at the end of this study. Youth involvement in politics will always be relevant, but there is a clear need to find new ways of encouraging more young people to become politically active. Otherwise, young people continue to be marooned in the junction: pulled in one direction by the “realistic” demands of life and pulled to the other end by youthful “idealism” and critical issues of the day.