Youth, Politics and Social Engagement in Contemporary Indonesia

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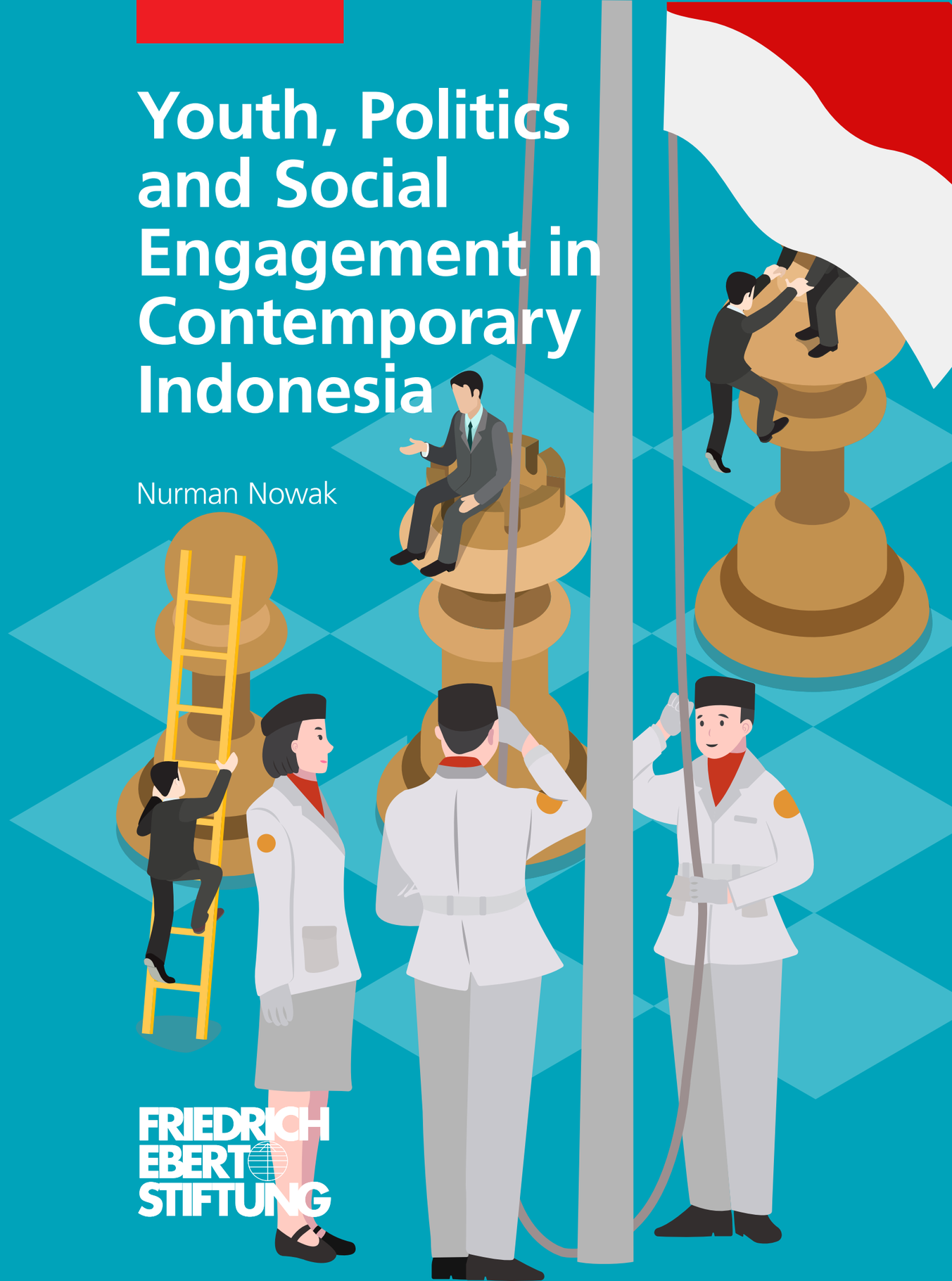
Nurman Nowak



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Content

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Nurman Nowak, University of Göttingen
14 January 2021

Executive Summary:

- (Indonesian youth make up a quarter of Indonesian society and youth development is decisive for the country's future socio-economic development as a demographic bonus is reached. They are the driver of the digitalization of everyday life, as more than 80% are connected to the internet. Social media is widely used, mainly to connect with their peers, but it also serves as an important source of information about the general state of affairs.)
- Youth have played a decisive role at all historical junctures of Indonesia's political development, especially the student movement. Yet the transformation of the political system in the early 2000s brought about its decline into marginalization and has caused a polarization defined by a conservative Islamic right and a democratic, liberal/progressive left that defined Indonesian politics for the largest part of the past two decades.
- The demographic dominance of youth renders them potentially a decisive electoral factor as they make up about 50% of the electorate. Millennials and GenZ however are perceived as reluctant in participating in formal politics, despite being (or perhaps because they are) better informed about politics than any other group. New alternative forms of activism have since emerged, be they political or social, online and offline, which counters the claim of political apathy. Their engagement, however,

is limited to the local affairs and structural shortcomings of Indonesian civil society hampering the development of institutionalized and international cooperation.

- The effects of the COVID19-pandemic have imposed devastating effects on the young generation. Youth have been identified as the most vulnerable group to unemployment and as internet access is unequally distributed along social and geographic (urban/rural divide) lines, the study-from-home measures (closure of schools and universities), will consolidate social inequalities and have long term effects for the development of youths in underprivileged positions.
- In the past two years, the student movement has appeared to revive itself and shows signs of overcoming the polarization of the past decades as the government is being criticized of falling back into authoritarian patterns of governance which in turn has brought about a new common cause and moral calling to defend the democratic and liberal achievements of the *reformasi*-movement. However, a momentum of Islamic tinged right-wing populism is threatening to co-opt this revived student and youth agitation augmented by the destructive effects of corona-policies.

Introduction

The future belongs to the youth! is a phrase often heard by politicians and activists and indeed, a glimpse into the history of the past let's say 100 years shows that if the youth organizes its rebellious energy and takes a stand in the affairs of the nation or even the world, unthinkable change is possible. Social upheavals, technological progress, economic, and political transitions and the realizations of utopia are often unleashed and welcomed by the young generation. Yet they may also be the first at the receiving end of their destructive side-effects and crises that are decisive for the future of a community, society, nation or even the world.

Indonesia law UU no. 40 of 2009 defines youth as Indonesian citizens between the age of 16 and 30 years. Contemporary discourses divide them into the millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1997 and GenZ, born between 1998 and 2010. According to official numbers, there are 64,19 million youths in contemporary Indonesia as defined by the state, one quarter of the entire population (BPS 2019). The fate of Indonesia's future development rests on their shoulders, as population development is approaching the so-called *demographic bonus*, a demographic condition in which the productive population outnumbers the non-productive one. If managed properly, this demographic bonus can bring about positive effects for sustained economic growth but it requires great efforts in terms of education and employment opportunities by the state to create favorable conditions for this to happen (BPS 2019). In the meantime, it is the commercial sector that is going to great lengths to win consumers from this group with consumerism being rampant, especially among urban middle and upper middle-class youth. As the first digital natives in history, youth are the driving

force behind the digitalization of everyday life. According to the latest youth report of Alvara Institute 88,4% of millennials and 93,9% of GenZ are connected to the internet with the latter spending more than seven hours online everyday giving evidence to the claim that Indonesian youth are utterly tech savvy (Ali and Purwandi 2020).

This article is, however, concerned with the role of Indonesian youth in politics and civil society. The upcoming chapters will shed light on the political development of Indonesia from a youth and student perspective. As we shall see, their contributions have been decisive in bringing about the current state of political affairs and due to their demographic mass, they are potentially a powerful political force. Challenging the claim that millennials and GenZ are apathetic to politics, new forms and ways of political and social engagement will be presented and finally, the effects of the corona pandemic in conjunction with the newest political developments will be put forward.

The role and legacy of youth activism in Indonesia

The famous Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer once stated that the "history of the world is the history of its youth" and indeed, youth and students have played a decisive role at important historical junctions in the country's political development as a backdrop from the social and political changes they experienced.

It was youth who were at the forefront of the nationalist movement that emerged in the early 20th century to resist and eventually overcome colonialism. In a meeting in 1926 in Batavia, today's Jakarta, the youthful attendees pledged loyalty to the Indonesian Nation based on the principles of one unified land, one nation and one language. Every year on 28th October the so-called *sumpah pemuda* (youth pledge) is commemorated with a national holiday. 17 years later in August 1945, the Japanese government, whose troops occupied the Indonesian archipelago at the time, surrendered to the allies. With the occupying force defeated and the former colonial masters still away, a nationalist euphoria broke out. Fanatic radical nationalist youth-groups, the *Pemuda Indonesia* (Indonesian Youth), were at the forefront to demand immediate independence. Impatient to wait any longer, a gang of *pemuda* kidnaped Sukarno, the preeminent leader of the nationalist cause, to force him to finally proclaim independence the next morning, the 17th August 1945. In the subsequent *Indonesian revolution* youth from all backgrounds formed the backbone of the army of the republic of Indonesia that fought British and Dutch forces. General Soedirman himself was only 29 years old when voted in as commander in chief. The *pemuda* are seen as the primary actors in Indonesia's national revolution and heralded as heroes in the general public to this day.

Twenty years later, in 1965 another juncture of Indonesian history was reached in which youthful protagonists would play a key role, prompting the emergence of the most important youth movement in Indonesia – the student movement. In the mid-1960s the

political climate in Indonesia was at a tipping point as President Sukarno and the communist party of Indonesia (PKI) grew ever closer which worried the conservative sections of the military and the Islamic-oriented part of society. Tensions eventually escalated in 1965 and prompted anticommunist students to found the Indonesian Student Action Front (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia – KAMI) that organized mass protests demanding the ban of the PKI, a purge of leftists from cabinet and eventually the dismantling of the Sukarno-government.

What followed in the upcoming years was the establishment of an authoritarian state with the military as its main pillar and general Suharto as President at its helm. Basic civil rights were scrapped and any political agitation outside strict government-controlled institutions was suppressed, though with one exception: Once the campuses were cleansed of leftist elements, the students who helped to set-up the New Order regime were almost exclusively the only group in Indonesian society bestowed with the privilege to openly criticize the government. A new notion was developed that would frame student activism to this day: the students as a *moral force.* In this understanding, political agitation by students is "motivated by moral principles and ethics uncontaminated by the dirty and corrupting world of politics" (Aspinal 2012). Students may take action to save the nation at times of crisis and as such student activists positioned themselves as staunch but loyal critics of the Suharto regime, demanding integrity, criticizing unchecked destructive developmentalism with the aim however to stabilize the regime they had helped to bring into power.

In the 1970s, massive student protests swept through the streets which provoked the enactment of the campus-life normalization acts (Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus - NKK) that suppressed political agitation on university campuses. This policy did curtail any student activism for a considerable time but it also pushed the more outspoken and radical students into the underground where they developed clandestine structures. In the meantime economic consolidation led to the expansion of the Indonesian middle class whose youth flocked to the campuses. While there were about 255.000 students in 1970, this number rose to 1,6 million in 1990 and then to 3,6 million students by the late 1990s (Aspinall 2012) making university students a considerable social mass. With this increase, the clandestine structures of student activism eventually expanded in the late 1990s. When the Asian financial crisis of 1997 hit the country, another decisive historical junction was approached. Student activists mobilized the student masses and set the scene for the ensuing popular uprising – the *reformasi* movement - that demanded and eventually realized a democratic Indonesia.

Youth activism and the emergence of new arenas of struggle

Civil rights among others the freedom of press, speech, assembly and association were restored and the first free and fair parliamen-

tary elections with 48 participating parties took place in 1999. The subsequent five years saw tremendous change with the implementation of a decentralization of power from the national to the district level. While 1998 – 2001 saw three presidents coming and going i.e. Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati Sukarnoputeri (2001-2004), a phase of relative calm ensued with the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), the first directly elected president in Indonesian history.

It was in 1999-2004, the period when power structures were being reorganized, that the student movement showed signs of dissolution as the realization took hold that the idea of a unified student movement solely motivated by moral principles is a myth. As Yatun Sastramidjaja pointed out, the success of the student movement to garner support from the wider population in toppling the Suharto regime was the result of its ideological diversity thereby making it possible to reach out to all milieus of Indonesian society (Sastramidjaja 2019a). Once the unifying cause vanished, ideological differences and personalized loyalties to political elites came to the fore, which pitted students groups against each other, causing a process of fragmentation that has lasted ever since. The main divisions can be roughly defined as two politico-cultural streams, the Islamic stream and the student left.

Many researchers of Indonesia's transition to democracy agree that it was mainly the activist work of the student left that eventually brought about the fall of the New Order as they were the first to demand the abolishment of the military's preeminent position and the resignation of President Suharto hence departing at least partially from the *moral force*-notion. Their ideological outlook is based on (neo-)marxist ideas of the New Left, the Frankfurt school of philosophy and other leftist schools of thought. As elsewhere in the world, the student left is and was always ideologically divided, but they share a general vision for their country i.e. an open society with a just distribution of wealth, a cultural and political system that is inclusive to all citizens irrespective of religions, ethnicity, class etc. and democratic structures in all spheres of government and the economy. Numerous leftist student organizations existed in the years of the long transition (early 1989 – 2004) yet splintering and the departure of important activist networks into formal politics have led to its decline into marginalization (ibid).

Yet this is by no means the end of progressive youth structures in Indonesia's political landscape. The democratization of the Indonesian system led to a massive increase and expansion of an independent civil society in which actors are operating at all spheres from the districts to the national level. While some activists became politicians, many others entered or founded new Civil Society Organizations (CSO) in the fields of human rights, legal aid, the fight for land rights of the indigenous, farmer's, urban poor, the worker's, the environmentalist movement, women and youth empowerment etc. These structures are vivid and attractive for students and youth with a progressive leaning and idealist mindset in

contemporary Indonesia (ibid).

These organizations are often loosely connected to each other in the form of personalized activist networks i.e. many know each other from campus or conferences, yet institutionalized cooperation is hampered by structural weaknesses such as competition for funding and affiliations to opposing patronage-networks. While many CSOs are part of international networks and their agendas refer to the UN-SDGs, most of them focus on issues of local significance (Aspinall 2012).

The other side of the spectrum is dominated by political Islam which has ever since been an important pillar in Indonesia's political and socio-cultural landscape, and gained a renewed traction with the so-called Islamic awakening i.e. the increase of religious piety among youth and the wider society. Its emergence was sparked by the agitation of students returning from the middle east who were inspired by dakhwa-groups (Islamic missionary groups) they encountered there. They preached in communities throughout the archipelago and found receptive audiences as religion provides for orientation in the face of fundamental social changes sparked by rapid development and rampant urbanization. Islamic organizations are among the most active and socially influential. Today they can be divided into a mainstream and conservative camp, and both are represented by numerous student and youth organizations, off and on campus.

The mainstream Islamic camp is among others represented by the HMI (Himpunan Mahasiwa Indonesia – Islamic Indonesian student association) that finds its roots in the pre-New Order and has a following of about 500.000 students. HMI maintains links to all Islamic parties in the current post-*reformasi* era but insists on being independent. Its alumni are to be found in powerful positions in the civil service, parliament and civil society (Interview Fajar Iman). Together with other Islamic organizations it remains the main protagonist of *dakhwa*-activities (Islamic missionary activities) on campus.

The Islamic awakening also gave rise to conservative Islamic groups of which *dakhwa tarbiyah* is the most important protagonist, cultivating a form of study and interpretations of the holy Islamic scriptures in a literal manner, the theological foundation of religious fundamentalism. Adherents of the Egypt-based but transitionally oriented Muslim brotherhood infiltrated Indonesian campuses in the 1980s and 1900s through the *tarbiyah's* channels, popularizing teachings of Islamist thinkers like Sayyd Qubt. In 1998, activists from these networks in unison with other conservative oriented student groups founded KAMMI (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia – Indonesian Muslima Action's front). KAMMI maintains strong links to PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) a conservative Islamist party and offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (Laskowska 2019).

In contrast to the student left the Islamic movement has developed a strong ideological foothold in Indonesia with representation in parliament through PKS and long-term

strategies of political agitation based on decades-long ideological socializations of its senior and junior adherers. Islamic conservative organizations are the most popular and successful organizations among Muslim students represented by a myriad of organizations on and off campus (Sastramidjaja 2019a). Many maintain an international outlook in their calls of Islamic solidarity e.g. by supporting the Palestinian intifada or the Uighurs in China and hold meetings with Islamic groups in other countries.

The power of the conservative Islamic movement led by youthful activists is best illustrated by their successful conquest of hegemony in Indonesian Islam in the mid-2000s. At the end of the 20th century, Islam in Indonesia had a reputation of being exceptionally tolerant as a result of the influence of liberal minded Islamic intellectuals who led the two preeminent Islamic mass organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. They were eventually sidelined as a new generation of young Islamic activists, socialized and groomed in the conservative *tabliya*-networks, were successful in installing conservative *Ulamas* (Islamic scholars) in strategic positions. Soon fatwas i.e. non-binding legal opinions were enacted stating that pluralism, secularism and liberalism are incompatible with Islamic teachings, a heavy assault on the progressive developments since *reformasi* ushered in (van Bruinessen 2012).

The effect of this "conservative turn" (ibid) in Indonesian Islam led to increased intolerance, persecution and in parts violent actions against religious and sexual minorities. Discourses emerged that suggested that it is against Islamic teachings for women and non-Muslims to exert power over Muslim majority populations in high offices. This conservative Islamic movement represents a countermovement that intends to do away with the progressive achievements since the fall of Suharto. It could strive and impose its influence on Indonesian society also due to the laissez-faire and inclusive approach of the SBY-administration (2004-2014), that was more co-opting than confronting conservative forces. And like its progressive antipode this illiberal countermovement finds a large part of its membership among students and other youths in the wider Indonesian society.

Youth and student activism in the Jokowi-era: A polarized society

This polarization is an important driver of political agitation in contemporary Indonesia. When this countermovement is plotting another assault on progressive institutions, the other side will mobilize its adherers to defend the achievements they have fought for and vice-versa.

In 2014 this polarization would reach a first climax in the context of the presidential elections. Islamist groups joined forces with Prabowo Subianto, ex-son in law of Suharto, former general of the Indonesian armed forces deemed responsible for the violence against the *reformasi movement* and now presidential candidate. His contender was Joko Wido-

do (or Jokowi), who maintained an image as a progressive newcomer, untainted by the corruption that remains notorious among the political elite, the radical antipode to the New Order general Prabowo. In 2012, he won the Jakarta-elections, making him governor of Indonesia's capital before the PDI-P party embraced him as presidential candidate in 2014.

The 2014 presidential elections were deemed decisive for the future of Indonesia's political development, which mobilized many former *reformasi*-activists of the student left. They would unite behind Jokowi and form a network called *Seknas Jokowi*. This network succeeded in mobilizing thousands of youthful volunteers from a myriad of progressive social movements that would boost Jokowi's youthful, corruption-free image which turned out decisive in persuading voters of the millennial generation in Jokowi's favor. (Sastramidjaja 2019b)

The Jokowi era that lasts to this day would turn out to be a tumultuous one and consolidate the polarization which escalated in late 2016 when the biggest demonstrations in decades erupted in Jakarta. His former vice-governor Basuki Tjahja Purnama (or Ahok), a Chinese Indonesian and Christian, had since taken over the governor-office once Jokowi became president. In September, a video with doctored subtitles became viral showing him allegedly insulting Islam in a speech. On 2 Dec. 2016 mass protests with 500.000 participants under the notion *bela islam* (defend Islam) led by the controversial ulama Rizieq Shihab were unleashed demanding Ahok's prosecution (Grassi and Nowak 2017). Many of the demonstrators were members of the millennial generation, senior pupils of Islamic high schools, university students and independent youth following the call to "defend their religion". This Islamist-tinged anti-Ahok movement had a sour side effect as the events posed a challenge to Indonesia's pluralist and inclusive national culture. This then sparked counter demonstrations with thousands of participants, mainly from the urban middle- and upper class in favor of Ahok and in defense of the pluralist and inclusive narrative of Indonesia's nation-building. But their activism was in vain. In the upcoming gubernatorial elections of February 2017 Anies Baswedan, who has since been embraced by PKS and Prabowo's party Gerindra, won by harnessing religious sentiments while Ahok was soon after sentenced to a two-year jail term.

Youth and formal politics in the Jokowi-era

The Indonesian demographic development has bestowed another strategic position on Indonesian youth – the decisiveness of the *youth vote* that represents almost 50% of the electorate in presidential elections.

The 2014 elections are generally considered the first Indonesian elections with a special online election campaign catering to the youth on social media and YouTube. In 2019, both camps spent millions of dollars for online campaigns on multiple social media platforms and would go to great lengths to create a youthful image of their respective election

candidates (Sastramidjaja 2019b).

When president Jokowi entered the Stadium to open the 2018 Asian Games, he rode in on a big chopper bike, wearing a Denim jacket and white sneakers - his election campaign outfit. Soon after, he presented his administration's infrastructure development achievements in the same vein, by touring Papua on a motorbike with some members of his cabinet. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook feeds would soon be flooded with these pictures and videos, impressing the millennials and GenZ as the comments suggest. The Prabowo-team on the other hand picked Sandiaga Uno as the running mate, a politician in his 40s who made his fortune as a businessman in the US and would soon model his image after prominent entrepreneurs like Elon Musk – the new role models of the millennials and GenZ. Influencers with millions of followers were hired to speak up in his favor contributing to the *#gantipresiden*-campaign (change president-campaign). And both camps would urge their supporters to be cyber troopers who would comment, share posts and create memes. However, besides this symbolism, there was little that corresponded with the actual problems youth are facing i.e. education, affordable living as well as improving "youth facilities" in public places (Irwanto 2020)

While the 2014 presidential elections were deemed decisive for the direction of Indonesia's future political development and the *young vote* was identified as the key for Jokowi's victory, one should note however that less than 50% of them actually casted their vote. And while the general election participation in 2019 reached a new high with 80%, the youth vote was again relatively low.

This gives evidence to the claim of many youth studies that millennials and GenZ are apathetic to formal politics while at the same time better informed than any other generational group about the political affairs of the day (Chen and Syailendra 2014, Tumenggung and Nugroho 2005). Political news typically pops up in Facebook, Twitter or Instagram feeds somewhere between cat videos and selfies. Apathy, however, does not necessarily mean disinterest. In 2019, vlogger Vincent Ricardo's fact checking video about the claims made in the election debates earned him millions of views (Insani 2019). Hence many observers suggest to interpret this apathy as a reaction to the direction the democratic transition has taken of which youth are very well aware.

While nominally the track record of democratization seems impressive, a number of studies have come to the conclusion that the new democratic institutions have been captured by old economic and political elites. Many of the new political parties e.g. represent political vehicles of former cronies close to the Suharto-family who reestablished themselves as powerful influential figures (Robison and Hadiz 2004). Politics is considered an elite affair, where the interests of the common good take a backseat. A related issue is the notoriety of corruption scandals. Just recently a cabinet member was arrested for his involvement in a graft case related to COVID19 relief goods (Fachrinasyah 2020). Corruption, collusion and

nepotism are as rampant in the new system as they were in the old and against this background the young generation's apathy to formal politics is comprehensible.

As one response to this, a number of journalists and former activists founded the Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI) in 2013, a self-proclaimed millennial party "no longer hostage to old political interests, bad track records, historical legacies and bad images from previous parties". To obtain and hold office, one cannot be older than 45 years old and 50 percent of party officials need to be female. Their agenda comes in a progressive anti-intolerance, anti-corruption and pro-pluralist rhetoric yet the membership of individuals known to have been involved in corruption cases and transactional politics and the unconditional support of controversial law-enactments have tarnished this image considerably (Sastramidjaja 2019b).

Student organizations at campuses that are linked to youth wings of political parties have since tried to market themselves in more un-political non-partisan ways as a study about students' organizations at Universitas Indonesia shows. The Gerindra-linked (Parbowo party) TIDAR e.g. promotes a "five love philosophy" based on "self-love, mutual love, love for learning and love for the good mannered and love for Indonesia'' while the PDI-P (Jokowi-party)-linked GMNI has a "non-partisan, non-conformist appeal to students who are secular-minded, into indie-rock and concerned about the indigenous state of affairs of the republic at the grassroots level" (Chen and Syailandra 2014).

Apathy to politics is also apparent in the extra-parliamentary sphere, perhaps best illustrated by the marginalization of the student movement. And while there is indeed a strong participation of youth in other social movements, be they conservative, progressive or otherwise, this is not representative of Indonesian youth in general. Additionally, these movements are not youth movements in the literal sense i.e. demanding rights and airing grievances for and of the young generation such as *Fridays for Future* in the West, but represent particularistic or sectional interests in which youth agitate alongside activists from other generations.

As far as the marginalization of the student movement is concerned, there are also structural factors that have to be taken into consideration that haunt the entire social landscape. A renewed trend of privatization in the policies of higher education excludes youth of underprivileged backgrounds from universities who cannot afford the fees which hamper political agitation. Students complain of tighter schedules and higher workloads, the accompanying features of such policies leaving little time and space for social engagement. Likewise, campus authorities have become increasingly intolerant with student activism on campus (Sastramidjaja 2019a).

Beyond formal politics – New forms and ways of participation

Youth apathy to politics however does not mean that there is a general rejection of social engagement. Whenever another catastrophe

hits the country, students and youth organize donations and funds to support relief efforts. There is also a strong demand for volunteering activities e.g. as teachers in NGO-run schools for underprivileged children, often based in so-called urban kampungs, the dwellings of the urban poor or at places further away in neglected districts and towns where the social infrastructure of government is absent. The relief efforts to counter the social effects of the corona crisis is another case in point. For several months youth and students were seen to give out food, hand sanitizers and masks. They assisted in organizing and setting up make-shift hand washing sinks and created online fund-raising campaigns to finance their efforts. These forms of social engagement however are often referred to as 'charity activism' and considered beyond the political sphere (Sastramidhaja 2019b).

The claim that youth are apolitical becomes even more fragile once one looks behind the distinctions of the formal and informal. In fact, less than 7% of youth are actually official members of an organization of any sort (Dewi, 2020). Dr. Muhammad Faisal, founder of the Youth Lab Indonesia and his team of committed researchers have extensively studied Indonesian youth in an ethnographic approach.

His narrative of contemporary youth engagement stresses the conjunction of political activism with independent alternative youth culture. Beginning in Bandung in the early 2000s, a movement took hold that blended activism with indie rock music, pop culture and certain fashion styles that was soon picked up by youth in other Indonesian cities. An example of this kind of youth activism is the punk rock band *Superman ís dead* from Bali and its huge fan community. In 2015, the band declared its solidarity with coastal communities who would lose their livelihood caused by reclamation projects on the Bali coast for new types of luxurious hotels and resorts. They were involved in the attempts to form a social movement under the notion *tolak reklamasi!* (stop reclamations!) for which the band provided the soundtrack of resistance as well as the mobilization of thousands of youth from Bali and beyond. Such indie pop-culture intertwined with (sporadic) activism is ubiquitous in Indonesian cities and happens in informal ways, often around musicians and bands in the underground. The networks and friendship-ties that develop in these contexts then roam the streets if a political issue catches their attention or in a more hands-on activity, support e.g. the creation of an urban gardening project in the neighborhood or the founding of coffee shops that sell the local coffee (Interview, November 2020).

Online activism is another form in which the millennial and GenZ generation are dominant. Although frequently referred to as 'clicktivism' without any real impact in reality, this form is often considered pseudo-activism, yet this label is misleading, as the efforts by many youth e.g. in setting up fact-finding initiatives that debunk and expose fake-news is a meaningful and important contribution to online literacy.

These examples show that much of the po-

litical and social agitation by the young generation goes unnoticed as it happens in informal ways often linked with other spheres.

As elsewhere in the world, political youth activism is dominated by members of the middle class. And while students have indeed become a considerable mass in the millions, they make up only about 10 percent of the youth population (BPS 2019). This points to a problem with the general notion of 'youth' as that term brushes aside the complex diversity this (quasi-)group entails. Youth are divided by place (urban and rural), gender, social class, ethnicity and religion which influences not only ideological orientation and identity but also in fact their capabilities of participation.

In the urban world of Jakarta, social inequality manifests itself in social segregation. While the youth of the middle class spend much of their time in the many shopping malls, the young generation of the urban poor loiters in the urban kampungs and the streets of the city in search of employment in the informal sector. The members of this youth group whose numbers are not exactly known but reach the millions in e.g. greater Jakarta, are a target for recruitment of so called *preman* organizations like Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR – Betawi Brotherhood Forum) or Ormas like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI – Islamic Defender Front). In the absence of state power, these groups control parts of the informal world i.e. informal street markets and bus terminals where they charge protection money from street vendors and control parking lots. The FPI is notorious for its assaults on "immoral" establishments like alcohol parlors and bars. Both organizations have been "hired" in the past as street muscle by investors or politicians in the context of conflicts over the control and use of urban land, and during elections they often serve as voting banks in which the highest bidder can buy thousands of ballots and can provide protesters for street demonstrations. The FPI e.g., played a vital role in the organization of the anti-Ahok protests of 2016. Yet these organizations are also known for their involvement in charity and community relief efforts, and may protect urban kampungs hit by disasters from looting or are sought after as manpower in attempts to rebuild destroyed urban kampungs after evictions. For many impoverished youths, these organizations offer employment and a welcome distraction from the daily struggles they face and their engagement in relief efforts may also receive some appreciation and respect (Ian Wilson 2019). More importantly though, Habib Rizieq, the founder and leader of the FPI has risen to become a political actor, aligning himself to the anti-Jokowi camp with the result that most of the urban-based *preman* and community organizations and networks linked to the FPI now represent an oppositional force. They are however more than mere objects in the political game of their patrons. In personal conversations, members of such organizations put forward comprehensive and legitimate reasons for their involvement, stating that the movement is giving them a chance to air their grievances against the government. Youthful members then become actors in the political arena and the civil sphere themselves, not in all instances unconsciously and at times deci-

sive in the power struggles that prevail[1].

Youth policies, the government and the corona crisis

It has become clear thus far that in the process of the consolidation of elite politics, issues concerning the common good have taken a back seat and neoliberal agendas that favor the interests of big business remain the norm. This also becomes evident in the implementation of the government's youth development programs although official state policies and laws stress the importance of youth for the future development of the Indonesian nation.

The policies of the last two decades stress youth entrepreneurship and the promotion of micro, small and medium enterprises (UMKM – Usaha mikro, kecil dan menengah) as a strategic field to improve the welfare of youth in the face of stagnating industrialization that would allow a different approach. On the local level the municipal institutions concerned with UMKM-coordination (Dinas UMKM) offer a myriad of educational programs and funding schemes to realize this policy. This policy is likewise pretty much in line with youth aspirations as many studies have revealed that becoming an entrepreneur is the most popular desired occupation of millennials and members of GenZ (Faisal 2019).

The pressing issues among youth, however, are education, (reproductive) health, employment, food security and the spread of extremist ideology. A summary by The SMERU ResearchInstitute (Dewi 2020) regarding the current state of youth (2018/2019) revealed among other things that the quality of education is in a dire state in international comparison with Indonesia reaching 72nd place out of 78 participating countries in the 2018 PISA-study. In terms of unemployment, the statistics show that three out of four unemployed citizens are youth despite most of them having at least a high school degree. Stunting, a health condition that hampers the early development of children due to improper nutrition and diet remains rampant, which is not only a problem of food security but contributes to the impairment of education, an issue particularly common with youthful mothers.

According to a UNESCO-coordinated study from 2013 (Ramadhan 2013) there is no coordinated policy implementation as there were eight different programs coordinated by different ministries defining different intentions and even following different definitions of youth. This condition according to Fajar Iman Hasanie, a youth researcher from Merial Institute has not considerably improved since then (Interview, November 2020) despite a presidential decree in 2017 that defines this aim. The UNESCO-report further laments that youth, despite their inherent diversity, are regarded as a homogenous category which ignores problems that are specific for particular sub-groups such as teenage mothers or youth with special needs. Many youth policies hence do not address the problems that prevail sufficiently. Another reason for this is the insufficient inclusion of youth organizations in

1 Field Research, Jan. 2020 – Dec. 2020

the drafting of laws and policy development. The few youth leaders who were consulted reported that their voices in the meetings were not heard or ignored, a legacy of a culture of paternalism of the new order era, in which society was seen as a big family in which children or youth are to obey the elderly i.e. the senior civil servants, and are not to demand concessions nor air grievances. The report further acknowledges the work and successful impact of NGOs and youth organizations, especially those who consider the specific conditions of the local or sectoral environment, but criticizes that many of them are not eligible to receive funding from youth program budgets as these organizations often do not qualify to be recognized as youth organizations as defined by an outdated registration process provision.

These problems however represented the status quo before the corona pandemic hit the country. In the time of writing, early December 2020, there have been more than 586.000 positive corona cases and 18.000 have perished - and counting. While youth are less prone to severe cases of the disease they are affected by the pandemic in other ways.

As a backdrop from the virus containment measures, the Indonesian economy has since tumbled into a recession causing the loss of 2,76 Million jobs. In total, 9.77 million people were unemployed in August 2020, up by 37.61 percent from August 2019 as reported in early November (Akhlas 2020a). Youth have been hit considerably harder than any other generational group. According to statistics by the ministry of manpower, 67,7% of youth aged between 15 and 19, 27,7% aged between 20 and 24 years and finally 11,65% aged between 24 and 29 have lost their jobs (Dewi 2020). These figures only show the situation in the formal sector. The informal sector, where most of the urban poor youths find employment has been hit even harder.

There will likewise be long term effects in youth development in the years to come. In June 2020 the government decided a COVID19-stimulus budget of 695,2 trillion Indonesian Rupiah (Rp.) (ca. 49,3 billion US-Dollars) to support the economy and fund social relief programs and medical treatments (Akhlas 2020b). The reshuffling of the state budget to finance this endeavor required costs in other ministry's budgets which will have a lasting effect on the implementation of policy programs, including those that cater to youth.

In the capital and some areas throughout Indonesia, schools and universities have been shut for weeks if not months with students urged to study from home. Structural disparities will widen the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged even further as internet access is unevenly distributed while study conditions at home differ considerably, posing a challenge for poorer and rural youth to keep up.

Approaching a new juncture

The Jokowi government, despite being busy in dealing with the corona situation, has since continued to implement its investment-friendly agenda in recent months in the

guise of the so-called omnibus-bill, a reform designed to attract foreign investment. However, it has been criticized because it cuts back worker's rights and environmental protection measures.

In October 2020, once the second partial shutdown in Jakarta ended, a series of mass demonstrations ushered in to protest the upcoming Omnibus-bill enactment. The mobilized crowd represented the entire spectrum of Indonesia's extra-parliamentary political landscape. Trade unions, members of the urban social movement and environmentalist groups marched alongside Islamic groups of all leanings, reviving the student movement that was prominently represented not the least by 6000 members of the BEM SI (All Indonesian Executive Student Body – Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa Seluruh Indonesia), the official non-partisan, secular and politically neutral student affairs institution present at all Indonesian campuses who roamed the streets with fellow students from the leftist as well as the Islamic camp (Interview with Chairman of BEM SI, December 2020, Field Research Notes).

The revival of a unified student movement is a trend that became obvious in November 2019 when a first wave of mass student demonstrations swept through the country protesting a number of highly controversial laws that had been enacted: A reformed criminal code that made criticism of state institutions and the president punishable, and curbed the power of the corruption eradication commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi - KPK), a new Ormas-law (mass organization law) that gives the government the power to dissolve organizations deemed threatening to national unity and the so called Electronic Information and Transaction law (EIT) which allows prosecution of criticism aired online. These laws were officially justified to defend democratic institutions, curb hate speech and the spread of fake-news online and offline, but critics have since interpreted these enactments as a revival of state authoritarianism (Amnesty International 2019). A number of activists who used social media to mobilize for the demonstrations and criticism have been prosecuted under the stipulations of these new laws (Warburton 2019, Aspinall 2020). Additionally, Jokowi's cabinet became reflective of rampant elite politics when the conservative Ulama Ma'aruf Amin who played an infamous role in the stirring of anti-Ahok sentiments became vice president, and even more so when Prabowo Subianto was co-opted and given the defense minister post after the last elections. This not only estranged progressive supporters but deprived the conservative opposition of its leading figure.

The widespread anti-authoritarian sentiment brought about a new common cause and restored the notion of student and youth activism as a *moral calling* which has at least partly overcome the polarization of the past decade. This has the potential to bring about a new social movement demanding social justice, freedom and integrity. Moreover, the youth could turn out to be a decisive actor as they represent a huge social mass augmented by the economic impact of the corona crises.

It could be a window of opportunity for progressive youth and students to unite once again to defend the democratic achievements former generations have fought for. Yet a momentum of Islamic tinged right-wing populism is threatening to co-opt this revived student and youth agitation augmented by the destructive effects of the corona-policies. Indeed, it seems that another juncture in Indonesian history is being approached in which the youth and the student movement can play a decisive role by following its moral calling – what direction will it take?

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List of Abbreviations

BEM – SI	Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa – Seluruh Indonesia Student Executive Body – All Indonesia
BPS	Badan Pusat Statistik The Central Bureau of Statistics
DPR	Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat People's Representatives Council
FBR	Forum Betawi Rempug Betawi Brotherhood Forum
FPI	Front Pembela Islam Islamic Defenders Front
Golkar	Partai Golongan Karya Party of Functional Groups
GMNI	Gerakan Mahasiswa Nasional Indonesia Indonesian National Student Movement
HMI	Himpunan Mahasiswa Indonesia Islamic Indonesian Student Association
ITE	Electronic Information and Transaction Law

KAMI	Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia Indonesian Student Action Front
KAMMI	Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia Indonesian Muslim Student Action Front
KPK	Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi Corruption Eradication Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NKK	Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus Campus Live Normalisation
PDI-P	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia – Perjuangan Democratic Party of Indonesia – Struggle
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia Communist Party of Indonesia
PSI	Partai Solidaritas Indonesia Party of Solidarity of Indonesia
PKS	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera Prosperous Justice Party
UMKM	Usaha Mikro, Kecil dan Menengah Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises