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Indonesia: Digital Communications Energising New Political Generation`s Campaign for Democracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesian youth increasingly rely on digital communications to learn about politics, form political attitudes, and engage in political campaigns and protests.
- Online engagement shapes the fluid political identity of ‘critical young netizens’ with their own repertoires of ‘connective action’ (defined as collective actions based on digital connectivity) to manifest their deepening alienation from the dominant political culture.
- Young netizen participation in the #ReformasiDikorupsi protest adds new energy to existing democracy movements, and helps to expand their public support base.
- This new political generation evolving from the combined experience of connective and collective actions is likely to have significant impact on Indonesia’s democracy in the years to come.

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2019, Indonesia witnessed its largest wave of youth protest in two decades. The protesters sought to prevent ratification of the Bill for the Revision of the Criminal Code, which was seen to curb civil liberties and freedom of expression, and demanded annulment of new legislation that would curb the authority of the Corruption Eradication Commission. Both pieces of legislation symbolised a gradual return to authoritarianism, which many view as a real risk given President Joko Widodo's close ties with conservative and status quo forces. The protest, known as #ReformasiDikorupsi ('Reform Corrupted'), was also called the '2019 Student Movement' in the press due to the mass participation of students. It marked a 'comeback' of Indonesia's student movement and revived memories of the role of student protest in ousting President Suharto in May 1998. However, the #ReformasiDikorupsi protest fundamentally differs from the 1998 student movement, initiated as it was by a fluid alliance of non-campus groups. Moreover, the protest was largely spurred by digital communications, which engaged many students and other youths who did not identify as traditional activists. Their participation brought a new élan and new energy to earlier democracy movements, which in the past few years had also been rejuvenated by a new generation of activist youth joining their ranks.

This paper argues that the youths who joined the #ReformasiDikorupsi protest represent a new political generation, whose political attitudes and ways of 'doing politics' are significantly shaped by their prolific online activity as well as their coming-of-age experience in a post-reform era that confronts them with contradictory demands. Over the past decade, digital media had engendered critical democratic sensibilities among them and provided alternative channels for political engagement. This heightened a sense of political agency that prepared many for active participation in 'real-world' struggles. #ReformasiDikorupsi provided a tentative climax to these struggles, in which the mass participation of Indonesia's 'digital generation' exposed the novel possibilities of 'connective action'.

INDONESIA'S 'DIGITAL GENERATION'

People between the ages of 15 and 25 (the United Nations definition of 'youth'), or 15 and 29 (Indonesia's legal definition), constitute a sizable demography of 17% and 25% respectively of Indonesia's estimated population of 267 million in 2019.¹ They are the most frequent Internet users in the country – over 77% of Indonesians aged 15 to 25 is active online – and they are known to use the Internet predominantly for social media.² Thus, Jakarta's title of 'Twitter capital of the world', which it held for several years since 2012 according to the Global Web Index, is attributable mainly to Indonesia's 'digital youth'. However, internet penetration is highly unevenly distributed nationally. In 2018, even the Greater Jakarta Region had a reach of just over 65%, while the median percentage of internet use in Indonesia was less than 40%.³ Internet use in Indonesia is certainly growing: the country ranks third on the global index of countries with the highest absolute growth of internet users, and again third for the highest absolute growth in social media use and mobile connectivity.⁴ But this growth mostly occurs in urban areas, which increases rather than narrows the digital divide in Indonesia's population.

Indonesia's 'digital generation', then, is mostly limited to middle-to-upper-class, urban, educated youth, who form a minority of the much-touted Millennial generation. Yet, the term Millennial is typically associated with only that smaller proportion of youth. In January 2020, the Education and Culture Ministry announced that 'Millennial' was the most popular word in Indonesia in 2019, but this word mainly refers to the government's key target group for its 'Industry 4.0' policy. While large investments are made to facilitate the rise of a new class of 'Millennial techpreneurs' – for whom the current Minister of Education and Culture, the 35 year-old Go-Jek founder Nadiem Makarim, provides a role model – the vast population of underprivileged 'Millennials' remains neglected.⁵ Still, even the smaller proportion of relatively privileged youths constitute a population of millions, whose social experiences often do not correspond to the government's ideal image of successful entrepreneurial futures.

Coming of age in a post-reform neoliberal climate that grooms them for a role as 'quality human resources' – the generation that will accomplish the nation's e-technocratic ambitions – the reality confronting Indonesian youths is rather one of economic and social insecurity. Substandard educational facilities, precarious employment prospects, frequent encounters with corruption and nepotism, restricted personal freedoms, and a general sense of estrangement from the dominant political culture, are among the everyday living conditions that hamper youths' aspirations for a good life. At the same time, their online activity – and, for growing numbers of them, their travels abroad for study or leisure – exposes them to global information flows and different realities that feed into a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship: of being a world citizen that is attuned to contemporary values and concerns shared by citizens globally, especially those of their generation.

Through digital media, many are also 'connected' with trends in youth-driven movements worldwide. From the democracy struggle in Hong Kong, to student protests against neoliberal reform and power abuses at universities in Latin America, North America and Europe, to the global youth protest against climate change, to the #MeToo movement against sexual assault and harassment, and other hashtag-based movements calling out various injustices, online circulation of stories of youthful struggle attune young Indonesians to contemporary concerns for which parallels with conditions in Indonesia are easily drawn. This provides youths with alternative and eclectic forms of political education. And as they engage with the stories online – by sharing news and personal statements about them, posting commentaries on personal blogs, retweeting related memes, or joining social media campaigns – this makes them feel themselves to be part of the story, also part of their self-expression.

These fluid online engagements also engender a more fluid political identity among youths, based on their everyday experiences and practices as young netizens – or critical 'citizens of the internet'. For today's activist youths, their political awareness and sense of agency were often 'activated' from a young age through such personalised online engagements.⁶ This also made many more inclined, once in university, to initiate their own fluid groups of like-minded peers – online and offline – that congregate around specific causes, rather than joining formal student organisations. To them, connective action – or personalised collective action that builds on digital connectivity⁷ – is an organic outcome of their alternative political socialisation as members of Indonesia's 'digital' generation.

#REFORMASIDIKORUPSI

Since early September 2019, social media began buzzing with calls for action, acquainting online publics with the hashtag: #ReformasiDikorupsi. This online preparation for action proved to have tremendous effect. On 23, 24 and 30 September, around the final plenary sessions of the outgoing parliament in which the Bill for Revision of the Criminal Code was on the agenda, tens of thousands of youths across the country staged demonstrations to protest against this Bill, the weakening of the KPK, and other controversial policies.

While the protest was initiated by a broad coalition of activist groups, the majority of demonstrators consisted of students from over 300 universities. But even the student masses on the streets were much more heterogeneous than those seen in usual student protests, since not all of them were mobilised through formal student organisations. Many belonged to different activist groups, or simply groups of friends intrigued by the social media buzz and decided that the issues concerned them, too. To stimulate their participation, youth activists had filled social media with attractive images and ‘to-do’ lists for the inexperienced student demonstrator, including the advice to bring their own water bottle, to put on sunscreen, and to dress appropriately for the heat. Such gentle stimulation combined effectively with the ‘ordinary’ students’ desire to express their discontent. Many were genuinely concerned about the prospect of a return to ‘neo-New Order’ authoritarianism, even if they had never experienced New Order rule.

The massive student turn-out gave the protest the impression of being the largest student movement since 1998. Commentators spoke of the rise of ‘Angkatan 2019’ or the ‘Generation of 2019’, identifying this movement as the heir to Indonesia’s long tradition of student movements, which has arisen to continue the unfinished struggle of the ‘1998 Generation’.⁸ People on the streets also tended to interpret this movement simply as one consisting of students who had returned to the streets to defend the rights of the people. One viral video on Twitter shows how bystanders spontaneously cheered groups of students that arrived at a train station in Jakarta to travel to Parliament, with occasional shouts of ‘Long Live Students!’ Such scenes had not been seen in two decades, and students who re-tweeted the video often commented that it gave them goose bumps – such was the emotive power of the public’s and students’ own reaction to the notion of a comeback of ‘student struggle’.

However, many students on the ground reject the notion of a direct lineage with the 1998 Generation; some protest signs even explicitly mocked this Generation’s absence on the streets and their ‘betrayal’ of the democracy struggle by joining the ruling establishment. Rather, many share a strong sense that they are representing a new and innovative movement based on their own political sentiments and experiences. One meme captures the sentiment well: it pictures two hands striking fists, one hand representing the ‘Group of Serious Students’ and the other the ‘Group of Students-Who-Like-To-Meme’. Both ‘groups’ had their own contributions to make, which together, so the meme suggests, create extraordinary power.

The ‘serious group’ denoted activists who had studied the issues and formulated the demands. While the demands evolved along with the protest and there were local variations, overall they were strikingly comprehensive. One list of demands that went viral was issued by the Yogyakarta-based Alliance of People’s Mobilisation. Under the banner #GejayanMemanggil (‘Gejayan Calling’) – referring to a junction connecting various

universities in Yogyakarta, which in 1998 was the scene of a deadly clash between students and security forces – this list includes nine demands that represent a sweeping rejection of the government’s anti-democratic policies.⁹

Activist groups have long campaigned around these issues, but now, they were acquainted to a large public, including the masses of first-time demonstrators. Even though not all of the young participants had a full understanding of the issues raised, their juxtaposition under a single hashtag exposed structural injustices that are structurally connected. This was a key point of the protest: to demonstrate that each policy introduced by this political establishment represented another nail in the coffin of democracy. It was a message any young participant could understand, as it corresponds to their generational sentiment of political discontent.

This message was made digestible through the contributions of the ‘other group’ of ‘meme-loving’ young netizens, whose colourful protest signs – filled with references to popular youth culture and youthful ‘irreverent’ humour, often with added hashtags that implied their ‘viral’ intent – helped to amplify the spectacle of protest and thus to attract public attention, while making the protest identifiable to ‘ordinary’ youth. As one sign stated: ‘I’m with the BTS [popular K-pop band] army, but today I’m with the Indonesian people’s army. #LongLiveStudents!’; others stated that they had skipped the live-streaming of the EXO [another K-pop band] concert to join the protest, thus satirically suggesting major sacrifice for the country. Other signs that went viral include: ‘Don’t kill justice!!! Just kill my ex!’; ‘We’re skipping school, they’re the stupid ones. #IdiotParliament’, and many others featured explicit sexual references, alluding to the contested Bill’s criminalisation of extramarital sex and co-habitation, or to the stalling of the Bill against sexual violence, for example: ‘Just Fool Around With Me (using the word for sexual adultery, *zinahi*), Don’t Fool Around With My Country’; ‘My Leaking Condom is None of the Parliament’s Business’; or, in English, ‘I Don’t Need Sex, The Government is Fucking Me Right Now’, with the hashtag ‘#RefuseToBeRapedByTheState’ in Indonesian. Such audacious statements served to mock government policy and desacralise the state, while their juxtaposition with ‘serious’ messages mutually reinforced the impact of both. Thus, alternating with ludic signs, messages such as the following gained all the more effect: ‘Women are raped; KPK is weakened; Forests are burned; Papua is occupied; Land is given to investors; Farmers are evicted; Workers are exploited; Privacy is threatened; Democracy is emasculated; Will the People be silent? NO - RESIST!!!’ As such protest signs went viral, together they formed a fluid collage of images that represented a mood board of this new political generation, rather than a fixed political narrative. This made the protest all the more appealing to a multitude of youth.

Online mediation increased the impact of the protest in other ways, too. For one thing, instant uploading of events on social media served as an alternative channel for broadcasting ‘raw news’ that seemed to be more trustworthy due its immediacy and diversity of reporting ‘from the ground’. This also had the effect that events in Jakarta were no longer automatically the centre of public attention. Events in small university towns were no less prominent online, especially if they contained ludic, poignant, or violent scenes worth sharing. Such was the effect of an incident in Kendari, a small town in South-Sulawesi where two students were killed in police violence, spurring the trending hashtag #KendariBerduka (‘Kendari Mourning’). For students elsewhere in the country, this ‘trending’ incident acutely amplified their sense of intimate connection while raising the

stakes of their collective struggle. For students in small towns, this online exposure demonstrated that their actions mattered, too – thus increasing their sense of political agency. This may impact their future mobilisational capacities.

Moreover, online mediation stimulated transnational connections with protesting peers in Hong Kong, who began carrying signs of solidarity with their Indonesian peers, and occasionally reached out to them via social media, offering moral support and advice based on their own hardened protest experiences. For Indonesian students, this heightened the sense of being part of a cosmopolitan generational movement against the ‘old system’, rather than merely following the footsteps of previous ‘Angkatan’. This notion of a generational break was further reinforced by other novelties of online mediation. One such novelty was online crowdfunding for protesters’ logistical needs, which introduced the idea of collective responsibility for resources. This reinforced the sense of being part of an organic assemblage rather than a traditional organisation that remains tied to the favours of patrons, and furthermore highlighted the need for transparency of transactions in the movement, in contrast to the secretive sources of funding that had marred student movements in the past. Transparency indeed became one of the movement’s core values, as the government’s lack of it in pushing through new legislation was one key point of criticism.

CONCLUSION

Faced with such massive resistance, Jokowi saw himself forced to defer the decision on the KUHP Bill. But the Bill was not revoked. For many of the young protesters who have had their first real taste of mobilisation, the protest marked the beginning of a longer struggle for a substantial democracy free from corruption and all forms of oppression. The current evolution of the #ReformasiDikorupsi movement into a new protest against the Omnibus Bill on job creation, which involves sweeping labour reforms that might detrimentally impact employment security, testifies to the movement’s versatility and viability. At the same time, this new direction challenges continued participation of middle-class youths, who might feel less personally affected. But activist youths are tackling this challenge effectively, finding ways to explain the implications of the Omnibus Bill in a language and format that appeals to ‘ordinary digital youth’; for example, by dividing the explanation over a series of shareable memes.

The combined experience of connective and collective action has given rise to a new political generation, who represent a drastic reconfiguration of what it means to be political. Knowing that they are confronted with a conservative government for the next five years, their rejection of the political establishment is likely to deepen. Meanwhile, activists within this generation are already attempting to expand this movement beyond its urban basis of ‘digital youth’, by connecting with labour groups and indigenous communities. Even if this does not develop into a fully-fledged political movement, this new generation is bound to have an impact on Indonesia’s democracy in the years to come; not just in terms of voting behaviour, but especially for the contribution they can make towards fostering a democratic political culture – if only by offsetting the shrinking space for opposition in Jokowi’s ‘unity government’, and in society at large.

The government would do well to listen to young citizens' concerns and acknowledge their contribution to democratic life – not just by including ideal-type 'Millennials' among its ranks, but by facilitating timely and transparent dialogue on policy directions with young members of civil society groups that are trusted by the young. Ideally such dialogue could be livestreamed on mainstream and online media for maximum transparency, which was indeed one of the students' requests during the protest. But given the depth of mutual estrangement this seems unlikely to happen. More protests are thus to be expected – online and offline.

¹ <https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2020/02/28/6e654dd717552e82fb3c2ffe/statistik-indonesia--penyediaan-data-untuk-perencanaan-pembangunan.html>.

² <https://www.bps.go.id/dynamictable/2018/05/21/1354/proporsi-individu-yang-menggunakan-internet-menurut-kelompok-umur-2015---2018.html>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-indonesia>.

³ <https://www.bps.go.id/dynamictable/2018/05/21/1351/proporsi-individu-yang-menggunakan-internet-menurut-provinsi-2015---2018.html>.

⁴ <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2020>; <https://www.globalwebindex.com/reports/market-snapshot-indonesia>.

⁵ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/longform/2020/01/22/underprivileged-millennials-being-young-and-poor-in-jakarta.html>.

⁶ Interviews with youth activists in Jakarta, February 2020.

⁷ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, 'The Logic of Connective Action', *Information, Communication & Society* 15, 5 (2012): 739-768.

⁸ <https://rmol.id/read/2019/09/29/404671/selamat-datang-angkatan-2019>; <https://theconversation.com/catatan-aktivis-98-untuk-demo-mahasiswa-2019-lanjutkan-perjuangan-124130>; <http://www.berdikarionline.com/selamat-berjuang-angkatan-2019-ukir-sejarahmu>.

⁹ These nine demands were: 1. Stop all repression and criminalisation of people's movements; 2. Withdraw all military units, thoroughly investigate human rights violations, and fully open up democratic space in Papua; 3. Tackle disasters and protect its victims; arrest and put on trial tycoons and corporations responsible for forest fires; revoke their Land Cultivation Permits and stop issuing new permits to large plantation corporations; 4. Revoke the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission; 5. Revoke the Law on Sustainable Agricultural Cultivation Systems; 6. Immediately ratify the Bill on the Eradication of Sexual Violence; 7. Revise problematic articles in the Criminal Code Bill, and review them with the involvement of various civil society groups; 8. Reject the Defence Bill, Employment Bill, Cyber Security Bill & Minerals and Coal Bill; 9. End and investigate all human rights violations and put perpetrators to trial.

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