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The Legacies of the Reformasi Movement in Indonesia

DOREEN LEE

On July 7, 2018, the president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo—or Jokowi, as he is called—stood on stage at a political rally in Central Jakarta’s Kemayoran fairgrounds, alongside several younger men linked to the pro-democracy movement of 1998, known as Reformasi (Reformation). Jokowi was simply dressed in white shirtsleeves and black pants, while the others wore black T-shirts with commemorative logos. They faced an audience of thousands, leading the crowd in a rallying cry of “Long live the people! Long live Jokowi!” The stage was decorated as if for a rock concert, reminiscent of the political spectacles led by Jokowi during his 2014 presidential campaign, which had aimed to reach voters oriented to a nationalist and yet tolerant flavor of Indonesian identity.

The rally was a reunion for the 1998 generation of student activists who had toppled Suharto’s authoritarian New Order regime (1966–98) with nationwide demonstrations two decades ago. Under the title “Consultation 98: 50,000 People Against Radicalism, Terror, and Intolerance,” the gathering invoked the spirit of Reformasi to call for workable grassroots and activist solutions to religion-based societal divisions and violence.

In recent years, Indonesia has witnessed a lethal string of domestic terror attacks by radicalized Muslims sympathetic to the Islamic State, most recently in a series of suicide bombings in Surabaya in June 2018. Political Islam has also grown more organized, institutionalized, and central to everyday life and governance in Indonesia. It would seem that democratization has encouraged rather

than reduced modes of political and moral exclusion.

The pro-democracy activists of 1998 hope to revive a grassroots populist movement that rallied around a secular and nationalist agenda. They envision themselves once again providing inspired political and moral leadership as they did in 1998, with the goal of swaying the outcome of national elections in April 2019. Proclaiming July 7 as National Unity in Diversity Day, the rally organizers evoked the foundational values of tolerance, pluralism, and nationalism as they endorsed Jokowi for a second presidential term.

The Reformasi-era veterans, who have varying degrees of political experience, embody a novel identity in Indonesian democracy—that of current and former activists. Many were university students in 1998 and were catapulted into the national spotlight when Suharto resigned. They have since come to represent an independent civil-society and grassroots approach to democracy. The July rally’s antiterrorism platform and Jokowi’s presence on stage, surrounded by a mix of junior politicians and former activists, gave a glimpse of the political alliances emerging around the most pressing issues likely to feature in the 2019 election: radical Islam, the rise of confrontational street politics, and the nation’s growing ethnoreligious divides.

The July 7 event was one of many campaigns, gatherings, and mobilizations that celebrated twenty years of Reformasi in Indonesia this year. In telling the tale of Indonesia’s transition to democracy, much has been made of the proliferation of new political parties, the curtailment of the military’s powers, and the decentralization of government. The democratic system has gained credibility through the state’s ability to hold local, regional, and national elections every five years. Elections

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increasingly appear to be free and fair. Despite vote-buying campaigns that distribute food and cash to poor, rural, and peri-urban citizens, observers have argued that voters remain fairly independent due to the decentralization of power and resources at the local elite level. Indonesia's shift toward direct presidential elections has also changed the rules of the political game, allowing a relative newcomer such as Joko Widodo to occupy the nation's highest office.

Yet the fault lines of class inequality, corruption, religion, and violence against minorities continue to trouble Indonesian democracy. There is growing sentiment among civil society and human rights groups that the reformist agenda has long since been displaced by oligarchic interests and an unexpectedly febrile media landscape that encourages divisive discourse. Still, the self-proclaimed return of a pro-democracy generation of activists suggests there is hope that a reformist bulwark can hold against further democratic rollbacks.

GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

In Indonesia, activists are strongly associated with youthful idealism and political avant-gardism. Student movements frequently arise and attract national attention. Many Indonesians know the lineage of youth activism in the country's history by heart.

Certain years confer a generational identity on youth associated with each landmark event: 1908, the founding of Budi Utomo, the first native mass organization in the Dutch East Indies; 1911, the founding of the Sarekat Islam, the first religiously based political party in the Dutch East Indies; 1928, a congress of groups that culminated in a nationalist pledge (Sumpah Pemuda); 1945, the generation that participated in anticolonial armed struggle and forced nationalist leaders to declare independence; 1966, the student movements that protested against the left-leaning Sukarno regime; 1974, the Malari incident, involving student demonstrations against foreign (mainly Japanese) economic dominance in Indonesia that led to anti-Chinese riots; 1978, anti-Suharto student protests and strikes; and most recently, 1998 and Reformasi. Each generation brought with it a range of modernizing, nationalist, and oppositional stances that reflected activists' relatively privileged backgrounds as educated, urban, and politicized youth.

*New sources of authority
have emerged in post-
authoritarian Indonesia.*

Youth politics thus have been inseparable from the national crises of their time. This historical perspective shows why politically active youth are considered to be a constant force for renewal and progressive change in Indonesia. Claiming a youth identity is akin to ideological positioning, such that 40-year-old men can claim that they remain idealistic agents of change in their new roles as politicians. As is common in other parts of the world that witnessed the disruptive political role of youth and university students in the twentieth century, there is a productive conflation between youth and popular dissent. Indonesian historians, and to some extent the Indonesian state, have crystallized such claims to popular representation by glorifying the lineage of youth movements. Even establishment political institutions may seek to incorporate radical and dissenting actors and thereby make a claim to regeneration and transformation from within.

Whereas early generations of nationalist youth were liberal Dutch-speaking elites with an internationalist political vocabulary and mindset, later generations, especially during and after the 1966 pro-military and anticommunist student movements, aligned with Cold War and regional polarities. The long era of depoliticization during the

New Order purged youth of any overt signs of radicalism, steering them toward incorporation in state-sanctioned nation-building projects and recreational interests like sports, music, and fashion. As the anthropologist James Siegel has noted, the apolitical consumerist figure of the Indonesian teenager (*remaja*) was invented during this time. Popular culture encouraged consumerism, Westernized lifestyles, and middle-class aspirations. Toward the end of the New Order, youth were cast as docile subjects in an expanding middle class that favored stability and order. Yet at the same time, student movements were ramping up in the final decade of Suharto's rule.

A pivotal moment for Indonesian activism came in 1997–98. The Reformasi movement marked the first time since the 1970s that university students and other youth openly resisted the state in significant numbers. Previously hampered by tight surveillance by the state security apparatus and by depoliticization laws that prohibited any form of campus politics, student activists had been able to launch only small-scale actions to express their

dissent against the New Order regime. The 1980s and 1990s were largely spent underground, as activists organized themselves into study groups to read critical and often left-leaning literature. Later on, some formed advocacy groups focused on labor, land, and human rights issues.

The Asian financial crisis provided an opening for activists to critique the collusion, corruption, and nepotism of Suharto's kleptocracy, and to remind the country of the long tradition of youth-led popular movements in twentieth-century Indonesian history. One of the signs that the dam was about to burst came when tacitly permitted antigovernment rallies that began in 1997 began to spill out of the confines of university campuses in cities like Yogyakarta and Jakarta. Activists garnered praise and legitimacy from a public suffering the combined effects of currency devaluation, price hikes, unemployment, and political repression. Students took to the streets, proclaiming an alliance with the masses. The state responded by shooting and kidnapping activists. This violence galvanized public mourning and even greater support for the movement. After students occupied the parliament, Suharto finally resigned in May 1998.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Two decades after Reformasi, onetime student activists are now reaping the benefits of their reputation as agents of change. To outsiders, it may appear that Indonesian democracy has treated anti-establishment actors well. Former activists have been appointed to high-profile roles as commissioners and board members of state-owned enterprises. Some work in government ministries, and a few have been brought into the president's inner circle as special advisers.

Many former activists joined political parties a decade ago and have risen to prominence in the party ranks. They now occupy important roles that emphasize media and community engagement, and are sought after as political speakers and experts. Some work in research centers and think tanks whose names often feature some variation of "Generation 98." Others have foregone party affiliation but still work for the campaigns and administrations of progressive leaders such as Jokowi and former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), or for local politicians running as independents.

The rise of the 1998 generation is not limited to formal political institutions, nor do current

and former activists form a distinct movement, constituency, or voting bloc. Hewing to a singular framework for viewing their activism, as the label "the 1998 student movement" implies, can obscure a number of important developments and underdevelopments in Indonesian democracy. The influence of the 1998 generation extends beyond politics into the fields of media, law, education, the arts, technology, and civil society.

In the years after Reformasi, a wave of talented scholarship recipients, many with ties to the student movement, took up postgraduate study in Australia, the United States, and Europe before returning to Indonesia. Others who stayed behind cultivated their own paths into the private sector and into public and associational life. Unlike the technocratic elite fostered by the New Order in the 1970s and 1980s, members of the new intelligentsia are not beholden to the state, nor are they primarily motivated by class privilege. Their attitudes toward civic life ensure that Reformasi-era values concerning citizen welfare and the public good remain deeply entrenched among a small but vocal segment of society.

The 1998 generation of pro-democracy activists has thrown its support behind the current reformist president for good reason: the engaging persona and political openness projected by Jokowi present a sharp contrast to the strongman politics and elitist agendas of his opponents. However, the politics of hope that Generation 98 and others have attached to Jokowi is tempered by pragmatism, since Jokowi's coalition-building strategies have tended toward accommodation and negotiation with positions that are antithetical to his own platform and values. (In August 2018 he named a leading conservative Islamic cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, as his running mate.)

EVERYMAN JOKOWI

Jokowi, the former mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta, was catapulted to fame as a new kind of outsider democrat when he arrived in the capital without hereditary political lineage or any strong ties to the political elite, but with a close affiliation to the common people. A former entrepreneur in the furniture business, Jokowi is sometimes affectionately known as "the carpenter," whereas his political opponents are viewed as elite "generals." His style of campaigning, known as *blusukan*, relies on frequent surprise visits to poor, crowded, and traditional settings—an approach that is both populist and photogenic. In the 2014 election,

Jokowi narrowly defeated Prabowo Subianto, a former general who was the alleged mastermind behind the kidnappings and disappearances of activists in 1998.

In contrast to previous presidents who amplified their charisma through traditional media (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono released music videos and books; Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, used his patrimonial ties to Nadhlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia), Jokowi is Indonesia's first social media-savvy president. He communicates with the public directly at a speed youth are attuned to. Indonesians are among the world's most connected users of social media, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms. Jokowi's official social media accounts show him doing ordinary things such as riding a train, inspecting a building site, playing with young children, and attending local prayers. In these moments and through these channels, he appeals to voters by appearing as a humble and socially engaged president with a grand yet achievable vision for Indonesia.

One of the priorities on Jokowi's agenda is developing infrastructure across the country. The president's office regularly announces new projects outside the capital city featuring local innovation, state-owned companies, and international financial and technological collaboration (mainly with China). These public-private partnerships build trains, mass rapid transit or light rail systems, airports, highways, and bridges, often at a very fast pace.

The successful projects largely overshadow the struggles and militant opposition of those displaced by infrastructure-driven development. The generally positive response to state investment reflects the growing pride of citizens in Indonesia's continued modernization and beautification. Jokowi has broken new ground by bringing such projects to the neglected, impoverished, and politically repressed provinces of Eastern Indonesia. His visits and plans for Papua are peace-building exercises as much as they are development projects. Secondary cities like Palembang, which is hosting the 18th Asian Games this year, have also benefited from urban revitalization programs and now boast prestige architecture.

These infrastructure initiatives have brought Indonesia into China's sphere of influence as Beijing's globe-spanning Belt and Road initiative reaches

southward. Critics of the president emphasize the growing national debt and quid-pro-quo compromises on national sovereignty incurred by what they dismiss as the vanity projects of his administration. The Indonesian economy is nowhere near as vulnerable to such pressures as those of smaller and poorer countries like Sri Lanka and Montenegro, which now face default or indenture because of the financial strain arising from their infrastructure partnerships with China. But the national debt has become a prominent theme for opposition figures who fan the flames of ethno-religious nationalism outward at China, and inward to stir up domestic anti-Chinese sentiment.

ILLIBERAL STIRRINGS

In the current moment, invocations of Reformasi history are no longer sufficient or compelling grounds for moral leadership. New sources of authority, including political Islam and entrepreneurial elites, have emerged in post-authoritarian Indonesia. While it is frequently observed that Indonesian political parties appear very similar in terms of their political promises, leadership, recruitment models, and constitutions, the growing divide over religiously inflected politics and secular nationalism is the deepest ideological rift in the country's politics today.

The nation has moved toward a majoritarian attitude that is accepting, if not outright celebratory, of pious politics. Politicians who can mobilize support by appealing to Muslim voters win at the polls. Meanwhile, local politicians are intent on building dynasties, drafting their spouses, siblings, and extended kin into de facto hereditary offices outside of the center's control. Indonesian politics do not enact democracy as much as they organize the patronage networks of new and old elites.

The political scientist Dan Slater sees Indonesia's trajectory as part of a wave of democratic rollbacks across Southeast Asia. The region, Slater argues, is providing grist for a new domino theory, though the perceived threat now lies not in Cold War era communism but in illiberalism. Countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines are the "new dominoes" that demonstrate how democratic institutions can serve or even enhance authoritarian tendencies.

Indonesia's slide toward illiberalism is characteristic of troubling trends not just in the region

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but worldwide. The popularity of the strongman Prabowo across Indonesia's social strata mirrors the middle-class acceptance of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines despite his brutal campaign of extrajudicial killings of the poor in the name of a war on drugs. It also bears similarities to the rise of Donald Trump and the mainstreaming of alt-right ideology in the United States.

Pro-democracy and human rights activists will have the very difficult task of combatting the authoritarian messaging of well-resourced political campaigns ahead of the 2019 elections. Signs of early campaigning are already present in social media and in orchestrated statements by opposition figures allied with Prabowo about the need for change. The hashtag #2019GantiPresiden (#2019ChangethePresident) circulates on posters and T-shirts and at public protests. While the slogan does not name an alternative candidate, it has begun to chip away at Jokowi's legitimacy by effectively reiterating what Prabowo's supporters have claimed since the 2014 election outcome: in an echo of what some Hillary Clinton supporters declared in the wake of Trump's election, the slogan implies that Jokowi is essentially "not my president."

Many observers see the 2019 presidential election as the ultimate test for Indonesian democracy. Several events and political endorsements have already served as rehearsals for the campaign. Grassroots organizations that promote nativist machismo, often on religious and racialized grounds, are expedient tools for directing attention toward particular candidates, and thus draw financial and political support from powerful politicians on the national stage. The impunity enjoyed by right-wing militias is a benefit of elite support; one such group is the infamous Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which has been linked to extortion rackets and organized violence.

In the "212 march" on December 2, 2016, a coalition of several Islamic groups organized a rally of hundreds of thousands in Jakarta to condemn Ahok, the Christian and ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta, who was accused (and ultimately convicted) of blasphemy for allegedly criticizing the Quran's injunction against voting for non-Muslims. The FPI played a central role in fomenting outrage against Ahok. The rally took place at the National Monument, in close proximity to the Presidential

Palace. Jokowi himself acknowledged the significance of the rally to Muslim voters by making a brief appearance to express his support.

The movement gained further legitimacy a year later when 212 alumni held a commemorative rally attended by Anies Baswedan, the new governor of Jakarta. In a feature film that followed, 212 was celebrated as a religious coming-of-age story, with no mention of its politics of intimidation. In its more routine activities, the FPI is known for practicing a violent form of moral policing, beating and intimidating its targets, secure in the knowledge that the police seldom intervene.

Illiberal tendencies are also visible at the top. The political parties that form the opposition are aligned with an old cast of characters from the Suharto era. Among those who have been politically rehabilitated are former New Order generals and human rights violators such as the presidential hopeful Prabowo (a former son-in-law of Suharto), and now Tommy Suharto, the late dictator's youngest son, who served several years in prison

for conspiring to murder a Supreme Court justice, yet is now running for legislative office in Papua on a platform of nostalgia for his father. Such figures are not only welcomed in the opposition: Wiranto, a retired general who was indicted by

United Nations prosecutors for atrocities during the occupation of East Timor, currently serves in Jokowi's cabinet as the coordinating minister of politics, law, and security.

Identity-based politics are on the rise, especially visible in anti-Chinese sentiment, which serves as a convenient political tool for scapegoating perceived political outsiders and non-natives, targeting ethnic Chinese across the class spectrum. Racist agitators focus on keeping Indonesian Chinese out of politics and stirring up anger over their presence and participation in the economy. Their religious identities as Christians, Buddhists, and Confucians compound their minority status. The coded "dog-whistle" politics of anti-Chineseness are commonplace and appeal not only to Islamists who proclaim the need for racial and religious purity; they also provide convenient pretexts for protectionist discourses that invoke national security and the health of the economy.

For Indonesian Chinese, the tentative steps toward cultural acceptance that began during Gus Dur's presidency are in danger of vanishing. The

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specter of the ethnic violence and rapes of Indonesian Chinese women during the riots in May 1998 continues to overshadow the official narrative of Indonesian tolerance toward ethnic others. The blasphemy case against Ahok showed the extent to which various groups, including middle-class Indonesians, were willing to band together to mobilize against the Christian, ethnic Chinese, and “neoliberal” governor based on shared religious conservatism rather than a platform of ideological or class commonalities.

Ahok lost the gubernatorial seat in Jakarta to Anies Baswedan, an Indonesian of Arab descent, who gained support with a religiously driven campaign. The result was not surprising, given the blasphemy accusations, even though many media sources reported evidence that Jakarta residents held a favorable view of Ahok’s track record in reforming the city administration and abiding by good governance principles. Ahok was then convicted of blasphemy in May 2017 (less than a month after the election, while he was still in office) and sentenced to two years in prison.

The case of Ahok—his ascent to high office, his outsider status, his adherence to discipline and transparency, and his engineered downfall—shows the limits to politicians’ independence from parties and patronage. This has implications for any reformist agenda that Jokowi would bring to a second term in office.

SLOW REVOLUTION

The outlook for deepening democracy appears troubled as long as Indonesians continue to pin their hopes on charismatic leaders who represent at least one of the pillars of the nation’s moral and political life: Islam, the military, and wealth. However, the balance of forces may seem to favor democracy if we consider bottom-up political transformations and mainstream public attitudes toward rights and freedoms.

Research by the political scientists Amalinda Savirani and Olle Törnquist shows that activists strongly believe that civil liberties and democratic freedoms have been strengthened in Indonesia over the past decade. Their optimism can be explained by the high number of former activists who are now participating in political institutions with access to power. For those who work in civil society, however, the political outlook is still a picture of long-term struggle and small gains. Grassroots politics as a whole has not produced significant accountability structures nor shifted political values

toward transparency or participatory democracy at the national level. Instead, activists have demanded social justice by means of the disruptive potential of street demonstrations and the viral effect of social media campaigns.

Efforts to redress past human rights abuses and state violence have not progressed much in the past twenty years beyond campaign promises to victims’ groups. Women are still underrepresented in most formal and informal political channels, and the pro-democracy movement is no exception. Feminist campaigns and LGBT activism are often viewed as special-interest, foreign, or taboo concerns. Religious freedoms are quite constrained for recognized minority groups such as Christians and still more so for groups that have not been granted the protection of state recognition, such as the persecuted Ahmadiyah, a Muslim sect. For the urban poor, access to a livelihood and shelter remain the most pressing issues: they are often subject to eviction and displacement without adequate compensation.

Yet marginalized resistance movements persist despite a hostile climate. The plurality of feminist Islamic traditions is noteworthy, as are the creative alliances that have sprung up between activists, architects, artists, interfaith networks, and other groups. Indigenous rights movements, environmentalists, and advocates for the urban poor have won legal battles in the courts. These gains are small-scale yet important precedents in the uneven post-Reformasi political landscape. They indicate how activists in local struggles have embraced a social-movement vision of justice that empowers them to mobilize collectively rather than individually.

Neighboring Southeast Asian countries could prove to be surprising role models. Just as Indonesia’s Reformasi movement and political transformation served as a model for the Malaysian opposition, Malaysia’s recent electoral upset, in which Prime Minister Najib Razak and his long-entrenched ruling party were ousted by voters sick of corruption and patronage politics, could inspire more organized and nonviolent activism during next year’s election cycle in Indonesia. Malaysian voters broke with tradition and crossed ethnic lines to vote for candidates who offered economic arguments rather than identitarian slogans. The consequences have included the arrest of Najib on corruption charges, the pardon of opposition leader and political prisoner Anwar Ibrahim, and the inclusion of young and ethnic-minority politicians in the new coalition government.

Meanwhile, even authoritarian Singapore has seen the emergence of homegrown opposition figures who carefully navigate the limits on dissenting speech and assembly in the city-state. Such instances of political change in the region offer concrete examples of how patient organizing and new political models can work to expand the space for democracy and resist the politics of fear and intimidation.

However, the outcome of the April 2019 election could very well look like politics as usual in Indonesia. Banking on the stability of instability—of porous cross-party coalitions that consis-

tently undermine any ideological or values-based approaches—more and more political parties are brokering connections between new-money capitalists and establishment figures, as well as providing a platform that helps newcomers climb the political ladder. Given the transactional nature and unpredictability of such arrangements, Indonesian democracy looks set to produce more contradictory allegiances and protectionist politics rather than a reformist agenda based on the rule of law. If there is any revolution to be had, it will be slow, steady, and consensus-based—and unlikely to come from the world of formal politics. ■