



NEWS FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDONESIA : ATTEMPTS TO INVENT COMMON MEANINGS

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 [Gabriel FACAL](#)

Introduction

Contemporary social movements in Indonesia have been affected by recent rapid and profound socio-political changes. After the fall of President Suharto's regime (1965-1998) the country's legislature passed constitutional reforms, including key provisions to protect human rights, religious freedom, freedom of expression and of the media, and women's rights. Despite these gains, the administration of the current president, Joko Widodo (called Jokowi, 2014-2019; 2019-2024) has progressively undertaken policies that threaten the democratic rights of large sections of Indonesian society. The young Jokowi had entered the political arena with successful terms as mayor of Solo City and then governor of Jakarta, and his presidential campaign had stirred up the crowds of progressive youth. During his terms as president, the many policies and laws pushed through the parliamentary process without public consultation or transparency fueled opposition and led to mobilizations across the country.



November 4, 2016 demonstration against the Governor of Jakarta. On the sign: "We, the national police, condemn the blasphemers" (credits: Ade Haer)

From sectoral struggles to systemic causes

Several types of social movements have recently emerged, which can be categorized according to their degree of sectorization. First of all, they are social activities with little critical and demand-oriented content, but which highlight the shortcomings of the State's powers in the management of public affairs. Thus, the numerous initiatives of self-organization to face Covid: networks of information and popular education, physical practices intended to reinforce immunity against the virus, public kitchens. The State's shortcomings in guaranteeing the equality and security of its citizens are also exposed by LGBTQ associations, which defend their rights in the face of the executive's passivity, and sometimes complacency, in this area. Agrarian movements, whose narratives still do not penetrate the peasant collectives at the regional level, are forced to make compromises with agribusiness actors, particularly

palm oil promoters, and many collectives have suffered violent repression, often with complicity within the state. In addition to these isolated and invisible actors in the public sphere, several mass movements are showing an effervescence of mobilizations. Just ten days after the April 17, 2019 presidential elections, the "women's march" in Jakarta was joined by organizations for human rights, indigenous peoples, disability rights, and informal student groups. Soon after, record demonstrations mobilized the youth and urban segments against reforms aimed at weakening the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and against a proposed revision of the penal code that threatened civil rights. Galvanized by the activism of the "K-Pop generation" —drawing on references to online games and other images derived from digital culture— this movement articulates mobilizations in the streets and on the Internet. For Yatun Sastramidjaja, this movement is the expression of a new type of youthful resistance, the same one that, only ten years ago, had conditioned the access to power of candidate Jokowi, promoter of a "total reform" supposedly in favor of civil and social rights.



International's Women's day, Jl. MH. Thamrin, Jakarta, 8 March 2020 (credits: Gloria Truly Estrelita)

Another important dynamic of this movement was the establishment of an alliance between formal student representative bodies, human rights NGOs and activist collectives to defend Papua Indonesia. This alliance was renewed in early 2020 under the leadership of the professional unions to oppose the Omnibus Job Creation Bill.

The law, passed in 2021, includes a wide-ranging reform of labor legislation, which undermines workers' rights and job security. Lifting restrictions on the exploitation of forest lands by companies, it also threatens the environment and indigenous communities. In addition, for several months, rumors that Jokowi is aiming to change the law in order to run for a third term of office have sparked large-scale demonstrations. These demonstrations, which are led by student organizations, bring together not only opposition supporters but also government supporters, and are an opportunity to make additional demands, such as the freezing of prices for everyday consumer goods. Finally, a last category of movements concerns less conjunctural mobilizations that are subject to strong criminalization by the government. Thus, anarchist groups, whose demands are not understood by the authorities and who are disqualified on the basis of their alleged association with communism. The specter of communism remains alive and well and is largely fueled by former army officers who have been converted to political and business activities. Despite the eradication of communism in 1965-1966, the memory of the abuses suffered continues to be preserved and passed on thanks to a few nationals living abroad and the use of international networks.

SERI WARISAN INGATAN #4

AlterSEA

MENEKUSURI KISAH TAPOL 65: SIAPA MEREKA

Apakah tahanan politik (tapol) sama dengan tahanan kriminal?
Bagaimana Tapol diperlakukan di penjara pada masa Orde Baru?
Di sini, Mudjiati dan Tumiso menyampaikan kisah mereka.

Pembicara:
Mudjiati
Tumiso

Moderator:
Gloria Truly Estrelita

Pengantar:
Yerry Wirawan

Via Zoom:
Sabtu, 22 Mei 2021
15.00 - 17.00 WIB

Pendaftaran:
bit.ly/seriwarisaningatan4

"Navigating the history of '65 political prisoners : who are they?" monthly webinar series on the history of 1965 (credits: Sirin Farid Stevy), <https://altersea.hypotheses.org/warisan-ingatan>.

Inventing ways out of national framings

With the expanded use of digital media and a new culture of mobilization reinforced by transnational alliances, Indonesian social movements are increasingly converging. However, they are subject to a very strong supervision, both on the ground with the surveillance of an extended contingent of the intelligence agency (BIN) and on the Web, in the face of cyber surveillance patrols deployed by the police and private digital militias subcontracted by the State

(the buzzers). This repression favors the underground dimension of the movements, both for their internal organization and for the constitution of alliance networks. More specifically, in the case of professional unions, the leading forces are embodied by figures rather than by collectives, and this personalization favors the informality of interpersonal arrangements for agreements or conflicts with the state's governing bodies. This informal dimension undermines the trust placed in political organizations. The vitality of social movements is however manifested by the actions carried out as well as by their capacity for inventiveness. The artistic dimension, readily parodic and sarcastic, which is very prevalent both in the modes of action and in the content disseminated through clips, memes, and slogans, signals in this respect the capacity of these movements to create different types of common meaning. This unprecedented protest imagery expresses an agility in the manipulation of militant heritages and shows a fine understanding of the most current socio-political dynamics.



"My broken heart is enough, don't break the KPK!" (Credit : Antara/Andreas Fitri Atmoko)

Projecting beyond multi-sectoral struggles, current movements are initiating new convergences between causes described as "inter-community", "intersectional" or "inter-sectoral". This new generation connects issues of gender, class, race, but also ecology and social justice, as part of a dynamic deployed on a more global scale.

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About the author

Gabriel Facal is an anthropologist who has been working on Indonesia for fifteen years. His thesis (2012) focused on martial initiations in West Java. He then worked on religious militant groups and more recently on social movements. In 2020 he co-founded the Observatory of Political Alternatives in Southeast Asia (ALTERSEA), hosted by the Southeast Asia Center (CASE).

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