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Young Indonesians and WikiDPR: Between apathy and engagement

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Introduction

This chapter explores a compelling case study from Indonesia: despite a sense of apathy and disappointment that is increasingly characterising political discourse, a young group of citizens have found a unique way to engage with one of the country’s most unpopular political institutions. WikiDPR are an activist organisation staffed by young people, who use a combination of social media and youthful energy to engage with members of the national parliament (the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat – DPR).

The emergence of WikiDPR takes place at an interesting time in the history of Indonesian political reform. It has been 18 years since the beginning of the reform era known locally as reformasi, and there are divergent academic assessments regarding the trajectory of reform (Mietzner & Aspinall 2010, 1-2). Observers have long noted the significant successes achieved by reformasi in Indonesia – the opening up of the political arena, the freedom now experienced by the press, and a series of democratically elected Presidents, governors, mayors and parliaments (Tornquist 2013, 43-44). At the same time, some observers have identified and critiqued the deep oligarchic political roots that have continued to flourish even after democratisation (Hadiz & Robison 2013). There is also a growing perception that whatever momentum the reform movement possessed has now been lost, with continuing corruption, violence against minority groups and creeping authoritarian tendencies seemingly threatening the achievements of reformasi (Dick & Mulholland 2016, 45). Some of these trends led to a deterioration in the Freedom House ranking for Indonesia (freedomhouse.org 2016), but, more importantly, are impacting the mood of public discourse within Indonesia.

Within the context of this supposed stagnation of reform in Indonesia, the concern that young citizens are disengaged has increasingly been raised. Comparatively poor voter turnout in 2009 spurred a number of campaigns leading up to the 2014 election where young people were encouraged not to Golput – an Indonesian term used to describe absenteeism or the act of lodging an invalid ballot. While youth were an important support base for the successful presidential campaign of Joko Widodo (better known as Jokowi), a narrative had begun to emerge that presented young people as part of the ‘problem’ with Indonesian politics, due to their purported apathetic attitude. Political parties, politicians, civil society
groups and religious organisations began to actively urge young Indonesians to use their vote to shape the future of their country. Young converts to this agenda set up petitions to encourage their compatriots to take part in the election. Of course, the narrative that young citizens are apathetic or unengaged in politics because of their voting habits is not unique to Indonesia. But research has also pointed to the need to consider broader forms of political participation - in the context of Western democracies, for instance, Martin (2012, 138) has argued that ‘electoral forms of activity and engagement are becoming less popular among the young while non-electoral forms of engagement seem to be becoming more popular’.

Against this backdrop, the case of WikiDPR is insightful. In the context of Indonesian politics, it is important to ask why an organisation like this emerged, and why this group of young people are so actively engaging in politics. The members of WikiDPR may represent a tiny minority of Indonesian youth, but they can provide important lessons about the factors that drive diverse forms of political engagement. Indeed, this case study invites researchers to look beyond national voting data to uncover the diverse role played by young people in civic and political life. This is an important avenue for research in Indonesia, but within the context of this volume, common trends in the experience and civic engagement of young people across borders are also significant.

**Researching WikiDPR**

WikiDPR is a not for profit organisation established in 2014. According to its founder, Hayati Indah Putri, the impulse for creating the organisation was the lack of information available to the public about the work of parliamentarians (Hatherell 2015). Indonesia’s parliament does not operate a publicly available Hansard, meaning that it is difficult for regular citizens to access what is discussed in parliament, or to even know whether their local representatives are attending sessions. WikiDPR has sought to correct this gap by using social media to report on activities and discussions within the parliament (often in real time), and operate a website (wikidpr.org) where data about each individual politician can be stored and accessed by the general public. In addition to these core activities, WikiDPR also collate news about The House on their website and provide other content, such as interviews with members of parliament on youtube. Recently, for instance, the organisation produced an infographic detailing the percentage of politicians who attended parliamentary sessions from each political party.
What is perhaps most impressive about WikiDPR is that it is run entirely by volunteers. In order to provide constant social media updates, WikiDPR volunteers sit patiently for hours and record vast amounts of detail from parliamentary sessions. Often these sessions are heavy on technical detail, and last for extended periods of time. It is not usual for parliamentarians, who are paid to attend these sessions, to fall asleep – a luxury not available to the WikiDPR volunteers!

Given their dedication to their volunteer work in the context of a society where young people are often described as politically apathetic, it is important to ask why WikiDPR members have decided to volunteer for such an organisation. In order to address this question, this study invited WikiDPR members to participate in a qualitative survey. The survey was conducted online in the national language of Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia, with the age of participants being the only piece of personal information collected. Participants were reached through a link to the survey, which was distributed via organisers within WikiDPR. In total, 27 volunteers took part in the study. The total numbers of volunteers within WikiDPR at any one time is somewhat fluid due to ongoing recruitment, but this number represents approximately one third of the volunteer cohort at the time the research was conducted. Those who completed the informed consent and agreed to participate in the research were presented with eight questions or prompts, with space to write as little or as much as they wanted. While names and gender were not recorded, pseudonyms have been included below to link content from single participants and for stylistic purposes.

The State of Politics and Democracy in Indonesia

In attempting to understand emotional responses like apathy, despair or even hope, it is important to understand the role of worldview and perspective in shaping the attitudes of young people. In Indonesia, a society with a tumultuous 71 year history of independence, this endeavour is especially important. For older Indonesians, the period of authoritarian rule prior to 1998 provides some point of comparison, but for younger Indonesians, successive democratically elected governments have formed their only lived reality. While young Indonesians live in a more transparent and connected Indonesia, domestic frustrations, such as ongoing corruption scandals, are openly discussed and shared face-to-face as well as on social media. At the same time, internet enabled smartphones and increased opportunities for international travel enable Indonesian youths to construct a richer view of the political and
This study began by exploring the perspective of WikiDPR volunteers regarding politics and democracy. Participants were asked to discuss their perspective regarding the current state of politics in Indonesia, before being asked their views on democracy as a system of government and its suitability for Indonesia. These questions sought to identify the perspective of these young Indonesians on the political world around them, in order to better understand why they have chosen to engage in this world. Like the other questions within the survey, these questions were open ended, and allowed participants to write as little or as much as they preferred. The open-ended nature of the research also meant that responses to other questions sometimes strayed into discussing worldview.

It was clear that many of the young Indonesians surveyed were concerned about the state of politics in their country. Quite often this concern was based on the view that politics had simply become a tool for pursuing power, rather than furthering the interests of the community. Ruli, for instance, argued that:

> Our political system is very concerning because politics is often a tool for achieving power. In the end it is the community that becomes the victim and the current political conditions are due to the bureaucrats who seem to be too busy scrambling for the seats of power.

Similarly, Ani argued that Indonesia’s current political system was ‘badly damaged because the political elite rarely have a concern for the Indonesian nation and only prioritise themselves and money’.

The major concern for these young Indonesians was not, it seemed, about the system itself, but rather the individual politicians and bureaucrats who operated it. These political operatives were often labelled as corrupt, self-interested or immoral. For Rini, Indonesian politics is filled by ‘people who are lacking ethics, who can’t become a good example, who have questionable work ethic’. Similarly, Imam argued that at this time Indonesian politics was experiencing ‘moral degradation’. The majority of responses focused on the moral behaviour of politicians, bureaucrats and parties. In this way the responses in this study connected to a wider theme in social discourse within Indonesia which frames Indonesia’s contemporary political problems as the result of a ‘moral crisis’ rather than a failure of
systems, institutional design or as a stage in development. This notion has a long history in Indonesia – Herb Feith (1962, 223), for instance, noted the discussions of moral crisis in Indonesia as far back as the 1950s.

Despite this pessimism, some participants also saw reasons for optimism. Sari, for instance, argued that:

…it is still as it has been, but there is starting to be a change. We are starting to see the emergence of figures who care about this nation and give a glimmer of hope…

For Roro, optimism about Indonesian politics was connected to the involvement of the community:

we are on the way to democracy as it should be, hopefully. Although there is still a lot that needs to be improved and that requires the input of the community as a whole.

The notion that Indonesian politics were still undergoing change appeared in several responses. For Yudi there had been a ‘lot of change, both positive and negative’, while for Wati the political system was already ‘quite good, because it had started to become transparent’.

With this mix of concern and hope about the state of Indonesian politics, it was interesting to observe the response of these young Indonesians to the idea of democracy itself. Participants responded in greater detail to this question, and a wide variety of answers were provided. These responses demonstrated a diversity of understanding of just what democracy is, as well as different perspectives regarding the weaknesses of democratic politics in Indonesia.

For a number of participants, democracy was seen as a positive framework for Indonesia’s political system, albeit with some caveats. As Putri reflected:

…actually it’s good because it invites all of the community to contribute directly in government, but it is best that this system of democracy is complimented with responses or feedback that flow in two directions so we are not just left with apathy in regards to each other’s opinions.

Similarly, Imam argued that:

democracy can become a good political system in this country if the culture of corruption, collusion and nepotism is removed, the anti-corruption efforts are carried
out, everything that still has strong roots that injure democracy has to be removed so that democracy can become mature in Indonesia and Indonesia can see improvement.

According to these views and others within the research, it is not the concept or institutions of democracy itself that are at fault, but rather the practical problems which still impact the culture and practice of democracy in Indonesia. ‘I think it is good’, stated Fahmi in response to this question, ‘it is just the reality which has been carried out that is not fit. If it is done well it will be a good political system’. This view was also shared by Lani, who argued that:

At their heart all political systems are good. They have a good aim. All this time we have been blaming and continuously changing the system alone without realising…why isn’t it the actors within that political system who are corrected, because the system cannot change itself. The deviation is not in the system but in those who carry out the system. No political system will lead to good results if the ones who run the system are not as good as the original values or goals of the system.

A number of responses also appeared to connect values and norms related to democracy. Ideas about power, and the relationship between holders of power, emerged. Nina, for instance, commented that:

Yes, because power is held by the people [in a democracy]. Although in practice there is not much which works in line with that principle of democracy.

Other participants were interested in connecting with ‘Indonesian’ values, particularly values tied to Pancasila. Pancasila is a set of principles established during the 20th century as a basis for the Indonesian state. This guiding ideology was a key component of the discursive and institutional structure of the Suharto regime, but has retained much of its influence during the reform era. Yudi, for instance, connected with this concept in stating that:

For me, democracy in the political world is very important. Democracy is very suitable to be implemented in Indonesia and infused with the values of Pancasila. But it has to be observed that, a quality democracy is a democracy which is accountable. Daring to act, daring to be responsible.

A number of participants held less favourable views of democracy, either as a political system or as practiced in the current context. As one of the key themes in this book attests, apathy regarding the state of politics in liberal democratic states is not unusual for young people in many different socio-political contexts around the world. It should also be noted that public opinion surveys in Indonesia have found that the majority of young Indonesians
tend to see democracy as the most preferable form of government – and in slightly higher numbers than young Australians (Lowy Institute 2012). Yet within this research, there were specific concerns about democracy that rested upon assumptions about the nature of Indonesian society, culture or the current stage of political development. Ani, for instance, argued that:

Indonesia as a nation is not yet ready to use democracy like the system used in America because our political education is still lacking so we need guidance…I prefer the use of guided democracy like in the time of Sukarno which is more suitable for Indonesia.

Similarly, Yeni argued that:

in my opinion democracy is not the best system. What is suitable is Pancasila because the source is the values of the Indonesian nation. Democracy in Indonesia can’t be as open as in the West because Indonesian needs firmness in the running of its political system.

The need for more ‘authoritarian’ sources of power within Indonesian politics was echoed by several respondents – Ismail for instance argued that:

Yes [democracy is suitable for Indonesia], but for a couple of reasons also an authoritarian approach to governance. Because not everyone who governs is bad and not all parts of the community in Indonesia are good.

This observation echoes arguments that have been made throughout Indonesia’s history – though it should be noted that these claims have always been contested.

Ideas about democracy and authoritarianism were also reflected by some participants with reference to perceived weaknesses in Indonesian society itself. The Indonesian term ‘kebablasan’ (going too far) was used by several respondents to suggest that Indonesian society was not ready for democracy without strong leadership. Siti, for instance, argued that:

Maybe Indonesia needs leaders who are a little dictatorial. Democracy is indeed good, but Indonesian society tends to go too far or be excessive, and it results in the emergence of unnecessary commotion.

Rini also noted that:

…our democracy is too excessive. When everyone is too free to have an opinion and express themselves, harmful actions become unclear. The public doesn’t know what is
true or false…quality democracy should have strong control so that the process of democracy is directed.

These comments clearly echo some historical concerns in Indonesian social and political discourse regarding the desirability of political stability and leadership.

Overall, participants demonstrated a range of views on the existing political context in Indonesia. While there was generally a negative assessment of the state of politics, some participants saw room for optimism. The assessment of democracy was decidedly mixed, with some participants seeing the current form of democracy as suitable for Indonesia, while others sought to compare democratic principles with other political notions such as Pancasila and even authoritarianism.

The Role and Representation of Young People

In this study, participants were also invited to reflect on the representation of young people and the role of young people within Indonesia’s political system. These questions sought to further establish some of the contextual factors that informed these young Indonesians views of the world around them. The role of young people in politics is particularly interesting in Indonesia, where young people have played important roles during several important moments in Indonesia’s history. During the critical months of the reformasi movement in 1998, for instance, young university students played a pivotal role in bringing about the resignation of President Suharto through continuous street protests. Young people were also a key driving factor in the nationalist movement that would eventually lead to an independent Indonesia in the 1940s, as Suryadinata (1978, 113) identifies:

> It is clear that the pre-war youth movement in Indonesia not only constituted a vital component of Indonesian nationalism but on many occasions became the actual vanguard of the nationalist struggle. It was the secular youth movement which created and first popularized the Indonesian "national symbols" — the name of the country and the people ("Indonesia" and "bangsa Indonesia"), the Indonesian language, the Red-White Flag, and what was to become the Indonesian national anthem.

Even today, the historically important Sumpah Pemuda (youth pledge) taken by young nationalists in 1928 has become a national day and is widely celebrated by young and old Indonesians alike (Foulcher 2000, 377).
Within this study, participants were asked to discuss the views of their friends or the people around them in their life regarding politics. Despite the A number of pejorative adjectives were used in response to this question, but the most common were ‘apathetic’ (apatis) and ‘tidak peduli’ (don’t care). In many cases this sense of apathy was connected to the idea that the political process does not lead to real change. Fahmi, for instance, stated that:

…they consider politics as something negative. They really don’t care because in their opinion politics in Indonesia doesn’t influence change in relation to the nation.

Ruli similarly argued that ‘most of them don’t want to care because in their opinion caring about politics won’t change their life’. Nina argued that:

… most of my friends or the people in the environment around me don’t care about politics. They consider politics to be mind-numbing.

Some participants attributed apathetic attitudes to other sources. For Lani, the media were part of the problem:

Most of them tend to be apathetic because of the image that is created by the mass media and they don’t want to put in too much effort to find out what is really going on.

For Putri, the system itself made young people look apathetic:

Actually the generation of young people now really cares about politics in Indonesia, but because the discourse surrounding the delivery of aspirations is not sufficient, they end up looking apathetic.

Some participants like Uda saw an opportunity for change:

They still don’t care very much, because they think that there is no influence for their everyday life, but I’m certain that if I keep employing my method of giving information about political problems, bit by bit they will understand just how important knowledge about politics is.

When asked about the role of young people within politics and their potential to bring about change, participants responded with overwhelming positivity. This idealism contrasted strongly with the characterisations of the political system, and pointed towards the justification for becoming politically active. Siti, for instance, argued that:
… of course the young generation is very influential because the young generation are currently enthusiastic and idealistic in terms of creating a better political system.

Rini similarly contended that:

… young people are agents of change, young people who get involved in large scale movements can change the history of politics in Indonesia. One important point is that young people should be active because of objective reasons, not because they are influenced by political interests.

These views were shared by a number of other participants, including Ruli:

The young generation is a huge influence in Indonesia’s political system, because it will be the young people who will build Indonesia. Like Sukarno said: ‘give me 10 youths and I will change the world”.

While some participants thought that young people faced challenges in becoming a powerful political force, there was general agreement that young people were an important source of change. Yeni summed up this feeling well, stating that:

The younger generation is so important because they can provide a regeneration of politics in Indonesia’s system of government. Youths can change the political map of Indonesia if they can find a common vision for a better Indonesia.

These perspectives suggest a connection between today’s youth in Indonesia and popular notions of the role that young Indonesians have played during significant moments in Indonesia’s history. Importantly, these notions are not based simply on youth participation in voting, but instead on broader civic engagement. Hence while much contemporary discourse focuses on the supposed apathy of youth, and some participants identified this apathy in their own environment, there are clearly potential competing narratives.

**Why Engage in WikiDPR?**

As we have seen, WikiDPR volunteers surveyed here generally acknowledge the problems facing Indonesian politics, but see the potential for young people to participate in change. The study sought to understand the key motivations for these young people choosing to join WikiDPR and engage directly with the political system. To do this, the study asked participants firstly whether they have been active in politics previously, before asking them to
reflect on their reasons for joining WikiDPR as well as what they hoped their involvement would achieve.

The majority of participants noted that they had not been involved in politics before joining WikiDPR. Sari, for instance, noted that:

… beforehand I was never active…I only knew politics from the media on television and even that was not something I often followed”.

Further, Maya reported, ‘…never, the most involved I have been was voting in the presidential election (2004)’. There were a couple of exceptions, with one member stating their involvement in politics on a university campus, while a couple of other members had been involved in activist organisations previously. For most, however, WikiDPR was their first experience of political activism.

For some participants curiosity was part of their rationale for joining WikiDPR. Ari claimed that he was ‘…interested because the activities within WikiDPR could allow me to see and witness directly the political process’. Joko stated that there was ‘…a feeling of curiosity with the actual work of the DPR, the work that the community and the media were saying was so bad.’ Susi explained that:

I like the political world but I don’t understand politics. WikiDPR gives me access to learn and see politics in reality and directly from the political operatives.

Uda had similar motivations, hoping to:

… know directly the work of the respected members who say that they represent the community, I had no sense of internal satisfaction even when I can see them on tv, because much of what is presented in the media is already sanitised.

These responses and others point to a shared interest in comparing the image of politics and politicians common in the media and public discourse with the reality. Enclosed within this desire was a sense of hope that the reality might be more positive – or at least more varied – than projected.

For others, the reason for joining WikiDPR had more to do with a sense of duty or hope to change something about Indonesia’s political system. Ruli stated that she joined WikiDPR:

… because what I read in the profile of WikiDPR, is that their mission is to connect the community with their representatives, and I’m interested in taking part in that.
Putri said that “I was interested because there is not yet a community of young people who can enter directly into the area of politics”, while Bambang explained that it was his:

… initiative as a young person who cares about the work of the DPR, and thus wanted to know more about the extent of credibility possessed by the DPR members.

When participants were asked about what they hoped to achieve with the organisation, the result was a mixture of desire to develop personally from the experience, and hope regarding shaping the future direction of Indonesia. Ari, for instance, argued that he wanted to:

… add to my awareness about the world of politics, participate in overseeing government, and be able to judge political events on more than just the reporting of the media.

Joko wanted to:

… participate in opening up the awareness of the public about the performance of the DPR, the work of the people’s representatives that are elected by the community. And I also want to add to my own awareness about the issues that are now being discussed by the DPR that relate to my studies.

Some participants also spoke about the opportunity to make connections, to network, to make friends and to add to their experience.

A number of responses emphasised the desire to make a difference by being active in WikiDPR. These participants largely echoed the stated aims of WikiDPR itself, but with their own points of emphases. Dhani, for instance, wanted to ‘…give information clearly and independently to the community, without being edited by the considerations of group interests’ while Uda hoped that through his engagement with WikiDPR:

… the community can truly know about the members who represent them…there are members of the DPR who perform well but this is not heard, so that later when the election is held, the community can be sure of which people are suitable to represent the community of Indonesia.

Ismail observed that:

… there are an increasing number joining WikiDPR. Increasing numbers of young people that are aware that to advance we need to not just act but to do something. That is the same as being quiet and not doing anything. It is a waste.
Wisnu had a more specific aim for her participation:

I hope that the political world in Indonesia can be more open for the press, because whatever happens, the media has an important role in the reporting of politics in Indonesia.

Ari simply states that, apart from other personal interests, ‘WikiDPR has become by way of contributing as a young person’.

For participants in WikiDPR and this research, it was clear that there were a number of reasons for becoming politically active. The participants were generally not active before joining WikiDPR, and saw the potential for both personal growth and contribution to the community. It would be superficial to argue that WikiDPR’s volunteers participate out of an entirely benevolent desire to do social good, as clearly there are also self-interested reasons for joining the group. In the competitive Indonesian job market, volunteering is one way of developing useful networks and experience. Yet self-interest and contributing to society are not necessarily mutually exclusive in this case – for many participants, the development of one’s own civic engagement stood as an example and beginning point for other young people to follow.

**Conclusion**

This chapter makes no claims about the broader engagement of young people in Indonesia, or the way Indonesia’s youth as a whole see politics. The aim of this study was to explore a particular example of young people’s political engagement, and try to understand the sources of hope and enthusiasm driving the participants. The experiences of hope and activism presented in this study contrast in some ways with other case studies presented in this book, but there are some common themes.

Importantly, the young people included in this study were not unrealistic about their political context. Through the research it was clear that these young people generally possessed a quite sober understanding of the nature of politics in Indonesia and had divergent opinions about the appropriateness of democracy as a political system, and the change that they thought needed to take place.

Yet their response to their political context is important. Volunteering with WikiDPR is a choice to engage directly with the existing political system, and specifically with the
unpopular national parliament. This form of activism could be contrasted with other activities, including abstaining from voting or protesting. So while narratives surrounding young people in Indonesia have typically focused on apathy, this chapter, although presenting findings from a small group of youths, provides some counter balance to established narratives about young people. WikiDPR is an example of an inventive and thoughtful application of time and energy by young Indonesians, aimed at addressing deficits within the Indonesian political context. The views of volunteers themselves largely demonstrate their belief that young people can still make a difference within Indonesia’s political system, and that joining an organisation like WikiDPR is one way of achieving this.

While it is important to understand that this is a small piece of the puzzle in a country as large as Indonesia, the findings presented here suggest that we may find other case studies that challenge established ideas regarding the role and behaviour of young people. National voting rates are only one measure of these trends: we need to also look at the involvement of young people in local politics, in neighbourhood organisations, in social movements, and indeed in inventive groups like WikiDPR. Just as Martin (2012) has noted that young people in western democracies are choosing to be active in new and innovative ways, the same is likely to be true in Indonesia. Grasping this tapestry of civic and political engagement will provide a more nuanced and complete picture of the role of young Indonesians in their society, and given they will inherit the political system in the future, this task is an important one.
References


