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Civil Resistance and Inclusive Democratization in Indonesia

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Introduction

In the past three decades, there has been a global surge in the use of nonviolent protests by ordinary citizens to challenge dictatorships. The track record of these "civil resistance" campaigns has been surprisingly good: they have historically been more effective than both armed struggles and elite-driven transitions in advancing democracy around the world.[1] But how deep is the democratization that civil resistance produces? Does civil resistance yield greater political inclusion for traditionally marginalized social groups?

Recent research that we have conducted—as part of USIP's People Power, Peace Processes and Democratization Project—suggests that civil resistance can be a powerful driver of inclusion, but that such advances are far from guaranteed. Analyzing over 168 transitions to democracy between 1948 and 2016, we found that transitions sparked by civil resistance campaigns produced significant gains in ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic inclusion. However, we also observed substantial variation in terms of who benefited from these transitions. In this study, we investigate one particular case, Indonesia, to try to better understand why civil resistance campaigns produce better outcomes for some groups than others. We also draw lessons for local activists and global practitioners.

Our main findings are that:

- In Indonesia, the 1998 protest movement resulted in varied outcomes for different social groups. While Indonesia saw notable advances in terms of gender equality, other minorities experienced fewer gains.
- The advances in gender rights can be attributed in part to the strength of gender-based civil society organizations (CSOs).
- Efforts to advance inclusion were hindered by two major factors: a lack of collaboration among various CSOs participating in the protests and subsequent transition and a focus on the short-term goals of liberal political institutions, as opposed to longer-term goals of inclusion.
- International actors, especially the media, played a beneficial role by constraining the regime's ability to employ repression and making it more difficult for transition leaders to renege on commitments.

[1] See, for example, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Erica Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance," Journal of Democracy 31, no. 3 (2020): 69–84; and Jonathan Pinckney, From Dissent to Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

The 1998 Protests in Indonesia

Indonesia experienced a wave of protests in the first half of 1998, led primarily by student groups who were angered by the economic toll of the Asian financial crisis, state corruption, and President Suharto's instatement for a seventh term. Observing the strength of the student-led mobilizations, various other social organizations joined the movement hoping to advance their own political and social agendas as well. Women's organizations, such as the Voices of Concerned Mothers (Suara Ibu Peduli, SIP) and the Indonesian Women's Coalition (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia, KPI), brought attention to everyday economic concerns, such as the increasing price of milk, while calling for democratic reforms. Class-based organizations, such as the People's Democratic Party (Partai Rakyat Demokratik, PRD), were instrumental in generating support for the movement by turning out their networks of workers, farmers, artists, and students. With the country paralyzed by protests and riots, Suharto ultimately announced his resignation on 21 May.

The Power of Civil Society Organizations

Before and after Suharto's resignation, pro-democracy advocates generally fell into three groups: (1) student groups who were essential in removing Suharto from power, but who lacked a long-term agend; (2) political opposition leaders who were concerned primarily with liberal democracy and human rights; and finally (3) CSOs who often made political inclusion a high priority. The effectiveness of these CSOs, therefore, played a major role in shaping advances in inclusion.

Significant progress in female empowerment was made possible due to the strength of gender-based CSOs. These organizations were consistent in designing initiatives and putting them into action—both before and after the fall of Suharto's regime. For example, gender-based CSOs cooperated with progressive Muslim women's organizations, such as Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama and Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah to promote equality between men and women in all aspects of life. A coalition of civil society leaders and CSOs combatting violence against women, the Anti-Violence Against Women Society (Masyarakat Anti-Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan, MAKTP), took a leading role in condemning sexual violence against Chinese–Indonesian women that occurred during the May 1998 riots.

Failures of Collaboration

While women achieved notable gains in the aftermath of the 1998 movement, other social groups did not achieve similar success. A major impediment was a lack of coordination among groups with diverse interests. Pro-democracy groups and CSOs struggled to cooperate in the new political system. While they had previously shared a common goal of ousting Suharto, they now competed in their efforts to advance their own groups' particular interests.[2]

What could Indonesian CSOs have done instead? First, they should have pursued collaborative efforts in pursuit of shared goals. Particularly, valuable would have been initiatives that convened CSOs from different sectors in the design of a long-term project based on an intersecting issue. For example, CSOs concerned with gender, religion, and labor issues might have proposed activities that emphasized the importance of gender equality between men and women in religious life and workplaces. Such positive engagement between CSOs is not something unimaginable in the history of modern Indonesia. Indeed, in the world of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for instance, collaborative efforts between local and domestic and international NGOs to promote economic development have taken place in Indonesia since International NGO Forum on Indonesia (INGI) was founded in 1985. The collaborative efforts through INGI received international acclaim.[3] The joint efforts between women's and Muslim organizations in the previous section are another example but were too rare and short-lived. Further efforts along those lines might have yielded greater gains in inclusion.

Furthermore, CSOs ought to have pursued partnerships with the newly democratizing state. Under the Suharto regime, the relationship between civil society and the state was rife with suspicion: the regime feared CSOs posed a threat to its legitimacy while CSOs perceived the state as concerned only with its own interests.[4] Even after Suharto's resignation, these suspicions lingered, preventing meaningful cooperation between the two sides. One of the steps that CSOs might have taken would have been to discuss a pressing problem among

[2] For more details on the post-Suharto challenges faced by the CSOs, see Thushara Dibley and Michele Ford, Activists in Transition: Progressive Politics in Democratic Indonesia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
[3] Philip J. Eldridge, Non-Government Organizations and Democratic Participation in Indonesia (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[4] Mikaela Nyman, "Civil Society and the Challenges of the Post-Suharto Era," in Democratization in Post-Suharto Indonesia, eds. Marco Bünte and Andreas Ufen (London: Routledge, 2009), 251–275; Eldridge, "Non-Government Organizations and Democratic Participation in Indonesia."

themselves (e.g., how to gain and maintain financial and legal support from the state) before approaching the new government to propose a long-term partnership.

The Importance of the International Community

The international community played a crucial role in ensuring the success of the civil resistance movement as well as in promoting democracy in its aftermath. Global media played an especially important role, more so than foreign governments—as many of the latter were supporters of the Suharto regime. Unlike Western countries, the international media was critical of President Suharto and helped make possible a peaceful transfer of power from President Suharto to his successor, then Vice President B. J. Habibie.

Some examples of the influential international media were CNN and BBC, which covered the political turmoil in the capital city of Jakarta during the 1998 protest movement. The intensive media coverage, especially in the weeks leading up to the power transition on 20 May, constrained President Suharto from ordering a crackdown on demonstrators.[5]

After Suharto's resignation, the media continued to play an important role in pressuring the new leader, President Habibie, to follow through on promises of reform. Seeking to kick-start the national economy, Habibie desperately needed international media to rebuild Indonesia's reputation as a stable democracy and a safe place for foreign investment.[6] He, therefore, announced immediate reforms, including freeing political prisoners and guaranteeing freedoms concerning expression, mass media, and the right to protest.[7] International scrutiny, combined with the threat of a return to protest, ensured that Habibie made good on his promises. These reforms created a new space in Indonesia for CSOs to engage in political debate and advocacy, providing a necessary foundation for these groups' efforts to expand inclusion.

Conclusion

The case of Indonesia shows that civil resistance can, but does not necessarily, lead to advances in political inclusion. In the aftermath of the transition to democracy, women achieved significant gains in their access to political, social, and economic resources. This is

[5] Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia: Economic Crisis, Foreign Pressure, and Regime Change," in *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 144–167.

[6] Aspinall and Mietzner, "Indonesia: Economic Crisis, Foreign Pressure, and Regime Change."

[7] Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, *Detik-Detik yang Menentukan: Jalan Panjang Indonesia Menuju Demokrasi* (Jakarta: THC Mandiri, 2006).

largely attributable to the organizational capacity of gender-based CSOs. Other social groups represented by weaker CSOs saw fewer gains.

Progress toward inclusion in Indonesia was also limited by the fact that: (a) during the May 1998 mass protests, the pro-democracy actors paid more attention to the actualization of a short-term goal of reform (power transfer) than a long-term goal (inclusion); and (b) group fragmentation led to a missed opportunity for collaboration. The Indonesia case also suggests the involvement of not only internal actors but also external actors—especially international media—was critical to inclusion.

To improve civil resistance campaigns for greater inclusion in Indonesia, pro-democracy actors should take the following suggestions into account: (a) the need for collaboration among pro-democracy groups, between CSOs from different sectors, and between the state and CSOs; and (b) the support of international media in creating the essential preconditions for the implementation of CSOs' peacebuilding programs after the political transition.

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