

The struggle to belong. Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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Reform, Resistance, and Empowerment:

The Transformation of Urban Activist Groups in Jakarta, Indonesia, 1998-2010¹

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Abstract

This paper looks into the transformation of urban activist groups in Jakarta, Indonesia since the Reform Movement in 1998, particularly in the way they mobilize public protests. Known as Indonesia's "People Power" that took down the president in 1998, the Reform Movement originated from activist groups in the city. Although widely known as led by student activists, the Reform was supported by a diverse range of activist groups, among them are labor, human rights, and women's groups. Within 12 years, there had been many changes in Indonesia's national as well as urban political landscape that affected the dynamics of these activist groups. The key question in this paper is "How do social and political transformations in a democratizing country affect urban social movements?" This paper follows the transformation of three activist groups in Jakarta: a human rights group, a women's activist group, and an urban poor activist group, to analyze how grassroots activism in the city transforms along with the progress of the democratization process. The analysis will look into the relationship between urban space and social movements in two ways: 1) urban development and social movements; 2) the use of urban public spaces in social mobilizations. While the first deals with control measures from the political

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and social elites, the second involves direct encounters between the authority and social movement activists on the streets, in which the transformation of control and resistance play a role in the changing pattern of urban activism in Jakarta. This paper suggests looking at public protests as space rather than just another social movement strategy. By treating public protests as space, it is possible to analyze and explain the transformation of social movement activities by the three groups discussed in this paper.

Introduction

In 1998, waves of demonstrations hit Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. In May 1998, people took the streets of Jakarta to demand for the president's resignation. At the time, President Suharto had been in power for 32 years. Most of the people in the demonstrations were students from various universities, but the sentiments were shared by many Indonesians, especially after they were hit by the economic crisis in 1997. It was no secret that the regime was corrupt for decades. However, the military domination of the government was never hesitant to crack protests down before 1998. The protests culminated in the killing of five students at a demonstration at Trisakti University on 12 May 1998, followed by a riot that paralyzed the city for several days.

Nevertheless, the protests took place again days after that, and students stormed into the Parliament Complex on 19 May 1998 after Suharto's announcement that he would not step down. Students took over the complex, with many sitting on the rooftop of the Parliament Building. They refused to leave until their demands were fulfilled – that is, for Suharto to step down. When Suharto gave his resignation speech in the morning of 21 May 1998, students cheered with joy. Many of them jumped into the pool in the Parliament Complex to celebrate their triumph for the day².

The memory of the 1998 Reform Movement – so it was known afterwards – is still clearly registered in the minds of many Indonesians, especially those who were involved in the demonstrations. Many started their activism during that Reform Movement through various organizations. Although some have also gone on their own ways or even join the government in the new regimes that followed, many of the current activists have their backgrounds in the Reform Movement.

Now that Indonesia is known as one of the most democratic countries in the world, the context of social and political activism has changed much since the Suharto era, and so has the public sentiments against them. In 12 years, changes had occurred in Indonesia's national and urban political landscapes. These changes would in turn affect the dynamics of activist groups. Hence, the main research question in this paper is "How do social and political transformations in a democratizing country affect urban social movements?" In answering this question, this paper traces the transformation of three activist groups in Jakarta: a human rights group, a women's activist group, and an urban poor activist group. The analysis will relate their background to the actors and the ideals of the Reform Movement, and will

² Interview with Bhatara Ibnu Reza, a 1998 student activist, September 2007.

examine how grassroots activism in the city transforms along with the progress of the democratization process.

The analysis will look into the relationship between urban space and social movements in two ways: 1) the development and the transformation of urban spaces and places; 2) the use of urban public spaces in social mobilizations. The first deals with control measures from the political and social elites, the second involves direct encounters between the authority and social movement activists on the streets, in which the transformation of control and resistance play a role in the changing pattern of urban activism in Jakarta.

Urban Development and Social Movements

The city of Jakarta had been an uneven landscape for a long time. During the Sukarno era, Jakarta was the site of national symbolism, in which many development projects were built in the city under the rhetoric of nationalism. It was during this time many of the monuments – including the Welcome Monument at the Hotel Indonesia (HI) Roundabout – were built in 1962 to ‘welcome’ the foreign contingents for the Asian Games and the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFU). Hotel Indonesia was the first ‘international hotel’ in the city. The whole spine of Thamrin-Sudirman street, where these buildings were located, was also a new establishment, replacing Matraman-Salemba stretch – the old, colonial spine of the city in the east side – as the main corridor of the city.

In spite of these glamorous developments, many people in the city remained poor. The GDP of the country in 1965 fell by 8% following a steep recession³. Poor communities in Jakarta still reside in urban villages without adequate basic infrastructure and had to queue to get basic foods such as rice and cooking oil. Nevertheless, the president at the time, Sukarno, portrayed himself as a populist. His charismatic speeches always drew thousands of people to listen for a few hours.

Social movements in the city at the time, before the fall of Sukarno, were inseparable from the interests of the state. President Sukarno himself framed his political statements as the interests of the people. The most vivid example was the ‘Ganyang Malaysia’ (Down with Malaysia) campaign in 1963, in which the President was calling for the people to reject the formation of Malaysian Federation after their independence from British colonialism. As Sinar Harapan newspaper reported, on September 16, 1963, the British Embassy across Hotel Indonesia was confronted by tens of thousands of protesters who repeated Sukarno’s objection to the independence of Malaysia as a form of neo-colonialism that would eventually bring Southeast Asia under British control. When protesters burned the embassy on September 18, there were no reports of arrests after the attack. It was clear that during this time, social movements become the government’s tool to support its nationalist agenda (Padawangi 2008, 116).

³ The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html>, accessed 31 May 2011)

During Sukarno's reign, a 1960s student activist Harry Tjan Silalahi recalled that there were no protests to the Presidential Palace, because the image of the president was popularly untouchable⁴. Sukarno's populist image was rooted in his general meetings at the Sports Palace at Senayan Sports Complex, south of the Parliament building. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there were no social movements or demonstrations. Most protests were directed towards political parties or to the office of *Kotrar* (*Komando Tertinggi Retooling Alat Revolusi* = Revolution Retooling Highest Command) that used the former police headquarters at the northwest corner of the Medan Merdeka Square, in front of the Presidential Palace.

The development policies under the Suharto regime, since 1966, were focusing on the economic growth of the country, with an impressive ten fold GDP growth from 1965 to 1980 due to the oil boom⁵. However, most of the resources were absorbed to the capital city due to the centralized system. The Thamrin-Sudirman corridor developed as the main business district with stretches of skyscrapers that host large-scale businesses (see Marco's thesis!!). These developments, however, also hid the fact that many people in Jakarta were still lack of basic infrastructure services. The urban poor were mostly prone to floods and did not have access to improved drinking water as basic infrastructures. They were marginalized into the 'unwanted' areas in the city, in which they develop their sense of community in spite of their poor environmental and living conditions.

Social movements under the Suharto regime was largely suppressed, namely those who were against the government (Alatas 1998, Anderson 1991, 1993, Liddle 1992). There were accounts of direct suppression by the military officers on protesters who marched down the streets. The repressive regime at that time made it very hard for activists to stage protests without being arrested or beaten by the police. Dita Sari, a leftist activist, described how she faced the military in a 1994 protest that attempted to approach the Presidential Palace:

"[Although] the employees from the surrounding offices were out [on the streets] to watch [the protest] and there was a traffic jam, [the military] didn't care. Beating is beating. Even the fallen ones were still beaten... So, the killing... sorry, not killing, but violence, happened... They kept chasing us! I already lost my breath, you see, how should I [cope with it]? Getting beaten was painful... Even if they did not beat me, I already could not run long enough. I really could not catch my breath. They chased us, the military kept chasing. So we retreated until the horse statue, they kept chasing us [...] until where McDonald's is right now. They kept chasing." (Interview with Dita Sari, September 2007)

After the 1998 Reform, Dita Sari led the People's Democratic Party, which would later form coalitions with other bigger parties due to its low votes after 2004 elections. Dita's protest memory reflected how the military was politically very powerful. The power of the regime was directly represented by the military control over urban public spaces and its liberty to use public violence. Dita escaped when a public bus driver took her and some of her friends on board as members of the military

⁴ Interview with Harry Tjan Silalahi, 23 November 2007

⁵ <http://earthtrends.wri.org/text/economics-business/variable-638.html>, accessed 31 May 2011

were chasing them. Her bruises were so severe that she could not walk for days. Attempts to claim ownership of public space for political opposition during a powerful military regime that controls most forms of the public sphere would most likely result in physical injuries. Dita's memory was so traumatic that she mistakenly said "killing" instead of "violence." The change of words reflects the atmosphere at the time, in which activists believed the military would not hesitate to publicly kill them to show who was boss. The unwillingness of the political rulers to share urban public spaces represented their refusal to listen to the issues that activists raised. Instead, they turned the built environment into places of violence whenever opposition groups tried to voice their opinions through protests.

Besides the direct crackdowns on street protests, it was also common to hear the notion of 'kidnapping' activists during the Suharto regime. The 'kidnapped' activists were those that were more vocal, and usually they did not come back. Therefore, it was difficult to build grassroots activism for political resistance.

The first political demonstration after the economic crisis of 1997 was by the women of the Voices of Concerned Mothers (Suara Ibu Peduli). Attended by 16 women, the protesters had to plan two months ahead for the demonstration because they were aware of how high the stakes were. The first planning sessions were attended by 100 women, but the numbers dwindled through time because of the anxiety of many members of the consequences. Karlina Supelli, the organizer of the protest, was a scholar who was famously known as Indonesia's first woman astronomer. During an interview, she acknowledged that the situation was 'very dangerous' because the protest was held in February 1998, when Jakarta was on 'red alert' due to the Parliament Meeting to elect the president⁶.

In her narrative, Karlina recalled that she was feeling very nervous when she had to lead the protest. The nervousness indicated the impact that a high degree of control over space, which include the authority's access to means of violence to suppress those who challenge that control, on people's thoughts that would affect how they planned their activities. Those who dropped out indicated the high rate of self-censorship due to the violent consequences they might have to face if they voiced out their concerns. Karlina admitted she had to pretend that she was in a photo modeling session at the protest place, Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, to ensure that the police would not arrest her straight away. In her nerve-breaking encounter with the police who asked questions why she was there, she got help from one of the photo journalists who claimed that they were taking pictures for a calendar. The rest of the women later joined her to pretend that they were in a photo shoot, with their posters hidden in their big purses.

The demonstration finally took place for only 30 minutes before the police finally arrested three of the women, when they realized that it was really not a photo shoot. However, the women's protest opened the door for waves of protests against Suharto's regime, even when he was re-elected as president in March 1998. The women had proven that they could breach the militaristic control of public spaces. The wide coverage of the protest in the newspapers, magazines, and television inspired student

⁶ Interview with Karlina Supelli, December 2007.

movements, that already existed underground and in cyberspace, to take the streets later that culminated in the fall of Suharto in May 1998.

Democratic Change and Social Movements: Understanding the Dynamics

After the fall of Suharto and several incidents that followed, urban spaces became relatively much more open to protests. As the memory of the 1998 Reform Movement remained vivid in people's minds, there were preconceived notion that demonstrations reflect freedom of speech, which is a measure of democracy that the reformers were longing for. Therefore, there was this consensus that those who cracked demonstrations down were not democratic. Even when Law 9/1998 on the use of public spaces for demonstrations was tabled, there were heated debates on the notion of police notification for protests, calling it undemocratic. Afterwards, the law was passed and current activists held on to that as the legal ground for their demonstrations⁷.

The 1998 Reform also signified the birth of various non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations that became bases of grassroots movements. During the Suharto regime, activists felt that if they staged a demonstration, it should be big enough so that they were more 'safe'. "We were so confident before, because the more participants, the safer we were," said Karlina Supelli, when she remembered that there were 100 women in the beginning of the demonstration plan.

Currently, numbers are no longer associated with the safety of the protesters. Demonstrations in Jakarta are now relatively smaller in number of participants, but higher in frequency – there is always at least one demonstration every day in the city⁸. Under the Suharto regime, safety was the concern of the protesters, but now safety is the concern of the nearby businesses. The surrounding businesses at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout acknowledged that during big protests they had to shut the entrances that faced the roundabout, for 'safety precautions'. Big protests are associated with potential riots, which are also rooted in the trauma of the May 1998 riot that followed the demonstrations. Fear of attack is now not with the protesters, but with those with business interests around the demonstrations.

As the frequency grew higher and the sizes became smaller, it is also more difficult for protesters to attract sympathy of observers or passers-by⁹. The decrease in support towards protests is also coupled with commercialized developments in Jakarta in recent years. At least 21 mega projects had been approved from 2003 to 2010 – these developments typically feature shopping malls, high-end residential, commercial, and recreational facilities. With new commercial developments as large as 33.2 million square meters (Herlambang 2010), Jakarta's current urban development trends largely emphasize the expansion of consumption spaces. The glamorous developments stand in stark contrast

⁷ All interviewed activists agreed that the law only required them to file 'notification to the police' three days before the protest, not asking for permission.

⁸ Data from Jakarta Metro Police, December 2007.

⁹ Direct field observation and interviews with current activists.

with demonstrations on the streets that usually focus on those who are forgotten in these trends. A middle-class passerby at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout claimed that the protesters seem to have “nothing better to do” when they are protesting during office hours, and they were disturbances because they caused traffic jams.

Public Protests as Urban Space

Activists also realize this dwindling sympathy support, as they gradually reform themselves. Although many of the activists have backgrounds in the 1998 Reform Movement, their modes of activism had changed, especially with regards to using protests as their strategy.

Social movement scholars have identified public protests as one of the activities in social movements that can possibly increase the likelihood of the group to achieve their agenda. Scholars offer various perspectives on the impact of protests on social movements, depending on how they measure such. Della Porta and Diani (1999) define the use of social protests as one out of the four characteristic aspects of movements. Although distinctive, it plays a marginal role in political and cultural change. Buckman (1970) and Giugni (2004) call attention to a gap between protest rhetoric and reality, in that social protests have little impact on policy change. Giugni uses statistical measures in his study on the impact of anti-nuclear, ecological protests and peace movements on policy changes in the United States and Western Europe and found no direct effect. However, studying the success of protests by measuring policy change is not a thorough evaluation. To Buckman (1970), protests are methods used by the neglected in society to be visible. Turner (1969) offers five possible reactions from the dominant group, ranging from from surrender, ignorance, suppression, symbolic acceptance, to conciliation. Gamson (1995) measures the success of disruptive tactics through the acceptance of the challengers’ legitimacy and the attainment of new advantages for the group.

Protests in Jakarta through history since independence show shifting collective identities that activists publicly demonstrate. Under the Sukarno regime (1945-1966), mass mobilizations, such as the anti-Malaysia movement in 1963, reflected government agenda, which prioritized post-independence nation-building that constructed imperialist countries as the threatening “other.” In interviews, current activists regret the lack of shared identity among many social movements in Indonesia, as opposed to their unity against the New Order in 1998, when various cities in Indonesia mobilized to achieve the same goal--to bring down the regime:

“Where are students now? A student from ITS was (sic) dropped out because he supported the Lapindo victims? Where is the solidarity from fellow students? Nothing! Because the movements are malfunctioning! The movements are blunt, you know. [...] Why [could] the 1998 movements be that big? Because of the solidarity for the killed students of Trisakti and Semanggi I tragedy. What about now?” (Interview with Sinnal Blegur, activist for the disappeared, October 2007)

Sinnal's regret about the current activists' lack of solidarity reflects Indonesian society's transformation after the 1998 Reform. Karlina Supelli says, "Now everybody can talk about anything, anywhere, anytime. [...] In a situation when everyone has the room to speak, demonstrations [are] no longer an effective thing." Whether everyone in Indonesia has enough room to voice their opposition and dissent remains an open question, but Karlina and Sinnal's narratives show the change that the 1998 reform movement brought about, how it affects activists' perception of the best strategies to bring further change, and the kinds of changes necessary.

.The problem in studying public protests to date is the lack of explanatory power why protests remain an important part of social movements, although the impact on policy change is minimal. It would have been more useful if protests are seen as space – not only about the site that they use for the street mobilization itself, but space in a sense of relationship between people and the built environment as well as the relationship among the actors: the activists, the authorities, the government, the passers-by, and others who are involved in protests. My study in 2008 showed that protests are spaces where the invisible could become visible for that particular moment. Street vendors who are suppressed to remain invisible in the city center, for example, could make themselves visible during public protests, as the event would become relevant for their businesses of selling drinks, food, candies, cigarettes, tissues, hats, posters, and many more. Protesters who were politically and socially made invisible in the everyday life could come out and occupy strategic urban spaces. By claiming their rights to the space, they assert their visibility – materially it is temporal, but the images of their transient visibility could become a potential to support their cause.

The following are three cases of grassroots movements that had evolved through time from 1998 to the present day. Each case highlights how each group uses protests as integral parts of their movements, but each would also show how it had changed.

The Voices of Concerned Mothers (Suara Ibu Peduli/SIP)

The Voices of Concerned Mothers was born in February 1998, during the time of their first demonstration that led to their media profiling and continuous involvement in the Reform Movement. As Karlina described, the group was formed as an advocacy group for the advancement of women and mothers. Their main activities were giving seminars and workshops for women and mothers in Jakarta metropolitan area from the lower economic class to start small businesses. The group also helped each other to establish cooperatives to support the women to finance their businesses.

"These shared activities not only relieve women from their life burdens, but it makes them aware that they are not alone. From chats with fellow women in the midst of organization administration and monthly cooperative meetings, they can see that their daily problems are

more or less the same. But more than that, they are curious why these problems are never ending.”

From the women’s statement, the organization became a place for them to gain more awareness and develop curiosity to solve their problems. Inarguably, the economic crisis in 1997 was the trigger for this group to emerge, because the crisis had a serious impact on fulfilling daily needs. The US dollars skyrocketed more than five-folds, which caused the prices of basic necessities to go up. Most of these women were homemakers who had to manage their household expenses, especially in caring for the family. Through these gatherings, they became more aware that the affordability issue was not only their personal problem.

As mentioned previously, their first public appearance was in a demonstration in February 1998, when fifteen women protested against the rising milk prices at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout. In this protest, the women were supported by the journalists, who were already on standby at the site and ready to cover for them. During the protest, they were helped by another group, led by Father Ismartono (later served at the Commission for Justice and Peace at the Bishops Conference of Indonesia) who distracted the police by spreading pamphlets that there would be rice distribution at the Parliament Building. They were also supported by pro bono lawyers who were hiding behind the trees at the east side of the roundabout, ready to follow them when they got arrested.

Such a concerted effort to hold a demonstration in 1998 stemmed from their concerns over fulfilling basic needs and preparing food for the family, especially nutrition for the children¹⁰. Since then, the women were actively involved in the Reform Movement. Members of the Voices of Concerned Mothers joined with the women from *Kalyanamitra*, a women’s NGO in South Jakarta, to cook for the “public kitchen” that provided student protesters with food and drinks¹¹. They also delivered the food to the students who were camping at the Parliament Complex to demand for Suharto’s resignation¹². These activities show that the women were taking active roles in the Reform Movement. They invested their feelings and beliefs on the students, stating that they considered the students like their own children who needed proper meals and drinks. For this matter, they did not see themselves as being at the forefront of the resistance movement. They confined themselves within one of the roles of housewives, which was to cook for the family, but then projected that role to the level of the city.

The memory of the first protest at the HI Roundabout in February 1998 continued to stay with the organization, although most of the current members joined after that protest. They staged demonstrations that voiced their concerns over daily needs, usually about rising prices of basic needs.

¹⁰ On the following day, *Republika* newspaper accused the women protesters as “mothers who did not breastfeed their babies” because they were protesting against the high prices of milk. The coverage shows the stigma that would be placed upon protesters during the repressive regime – not only did they risk getting physically assaulted by the authorities, they also risked getting social stigma due to media control.

¹¹ “*Kiriman Nasi dan Air untuk Mahasiswa di DPR*” (“Rice and Water Delivery to Students in the Parliament Complex”), *Media Indonesia*, May 20, 1998; “*Terima Kasih Sita dan Para Ibu*” (“Thank You, Sita and the Mothers”), *Kompas*, May 25, 1998.

¹² Interview with the women of Voices of Concerned Mothers, November 2007

Public protests remained their advocacy strategy to address the impact of national policies on the everyday life of a home.

“Mothers are the first to be troubled if bills go up: phone, gas... usually prices go up, right? If gas goes up. For example, vegetables from the village, brought to Jakarta... So, the direct impact is to mothers. That’s why women went out to the streets, protesting... That time we mobilized quite many women from our service area... to protest. (laughs)... We brought banners, we brought... frying pans, big rice spoons ... We sang together, there were speeches too... We are housewives, if gas price go up, daily needs go up, we can’t cook. That’s why we brought frying pans, because they describe... kitchen, the life of a kitchen, as I call it.” (Mrs. Zainal, Focus group discussion, SIP/Voices of Concerned Mothers, November 2007)

Framing their protests as “from the hearts”, the women recalled fond memories of doing protests, particularly the one on 14 January 2003 as mentioned in Mrs. Zainal’s account in the focus group discussion. They felt the support of the authorities and the public during their protests, because they brought the concerns of a home to the public. From playing a role in the 1998 Reform Movement that paved the way for public appearances of civil society activities, the women were showing their resistance towards pricing policies that hurt their bookkeeping at home. The strength of their demonstrations was in their ability to connect with the concerns of the everyday people.

However, in the same focus group in November 2007, when asked, they answered that they no longer stage public demonstrations. The women stated that demonstrations took a lot of effort just for one appearance, and it also requires financial resources. More importantly, they also felt that demonstrations were “not really effective” to bring about the change that they asked. “After taking so much energy and cost, we still do not get what we asked. So we thought we’d better focus our efforts in our works with the communities.”

The women’s perception that they were “not being heard” in demonstrations came from the reactions from the government. Their demonstrations were usually well covered by the media, because of their ability to connect with the people’s sentiments by basing their advocacy agenda on the concerns in everyday life. However, their activism was rooted in the fact that they wanted to raise awareness of mothers and housewives on economic, social, and cultural rights (Pujiwati and Upik, 2007). They focused their activities on practical ways to address the economic hardship of housewives by helping them to find jobs or giving them loans through cooperatives (Pujiwati and Upik 2007, 3). With such material changes that they strived to achieve, the lack of reactions from the government towards their demands was in stark contrast. In this case, rather than continuing to demand the government to listen, they went back to on-the-ground grassroots activities to achieve small-scale changes that are more materially observable.

Jakarta Citizens' Forum / Forum Warga Kota Jakarta (FAKTA)

The Jakarta Citizens' Forum (Forum Warga Kota Jakarta/FAKTA) was formed in 2000 by former members of the Jakarta Social Institute. Azas Tigor Nainggolan, the chairman of the forum, was working at the Jakarta Social Institute until 2003, but had been involved with FAKTA since its establishment in 2000. FAKTA was established as a forum that voices the concerns of the poor in Jakarta. It has the vision of "building a clean, participatory, and transparent local government in Jakarta," making a just city for all, a city that serves the interests of the poor, abides with the law and human rights, builds capacities of the people, and increases solidarity and people's control of their city. They saw themselves as an "alternative city board" that would always put forth the interests of the "forgotten" citizens that were left behind by the members of the local parliament.

FAKTA's activities covered three areas: 1) litigation, 2) support, and 3) communication¹³. Under litigation, the forum provides support through their pro bono lawyers for the poor to file lawsuits when they feel their rights have been breached. For example, FAKTA was involved in class action lawsuits against the Jakarta governor for the floods in Jakarta in 2002 and 2007. Although the results of the lawsuits were not in their favor – many claim that it was due to the corrupt judiciary system in Indonesia that would typically work in favor of the powerful –, the fact that they could file lawsuits against the governor through working with the grassroots, collect data of their experiences during floods, was in itself an exercise of empowerment. Through these lawsuits, the poor were aware that the problems that they faced are systemic problems and that they had the right to file the suit. This was a change from before 1998 Reform, in which the people were restricted from forming resistance movements against the state or the actors of the state, especially when it concerns a military profile like the Jakarta governor during the two floods.

"We have public lawyers here. I am also a lawyer. I have a masters degree in Political Science. So, we have five lawyers here. We are handling the problems of Jakarta's urban poor. For that, we also have to relate to journalists often... because urban issues and concerns have to be the citizens' concerns. Where should we socialize it? In the media. That's why we also relate with the media." (Azas Tigor Nainggolan, interview, November 2007)

In the support activities, FAKTA was providing trainings and space for village meetings. Based in a house in Kalimalang, East Jakarta, they described themselves as partners of communities of street vendors, the disabled, trash pickers, urban poor, pedicab drivers, sex workers, public transportation drivers, market workers, and street children. The two-storey house that they use as their base was lent by a sympathizer who was not identified. Their community radio, Suara Warga Jakarta/SWJ (Voices of Jakarta Citizens) was also based in the house before it was shut down due to frequency takeover by the police radio in 2007.

Like the Voices of Concerned Mothers, the early members of FAKTA came from the 1998 Reform Movement. The Jakarta Social Institute was closely involved in the advocacy and legal support for the

¹³ FAKTA website, www.fakta.or.id, accessed 31 May 2011.

activists. FAKTA itself was established two years after the Reform Movement, and the nature of the vision, to be the “alternative voice”, inherently shows the resistance component. They often use protests as their strategies to “broaden their support” to the middle class and above.

“That time, we protested against demolition and displacement of the poor. On a Human Rights Day, during the early years after Reform... we went to HI (Roundabout), circling HI, standing at HI... Those who were displaced were all poor. So, we framed it as human rights, that everyone had the right to decent housing, that the government is authoritarian, ruthless. We framed it that way, so that we get support from the middle class... We brought residents there, not just one community, but several communities who had the experience of displacement... We gathered people who had been displaced or would be displaced. We marched...” (Azas Tigor Nainggolan, interview, November 2007)

FAKTA’s resistance towards government policies that disadvantaged the poor inarguably empowered the residents of the poor communities they served to voice out their concerns. They involved local community members as radio broadcasters by providing them training and the opportunities to do their own broadcast with the SWJ radio. All the broadcasters were part-timers – some of them were fried rice and satay vendors who did their business around the communities in the evening. As Nainggolan described in the case of the human rights demonstration, they brought poor communities to central parts of the city to protest. Community members were transformed through these experiences, especially those who had participated in the activities more often.

“The challenge is... we have to have courage. Like myself, I was usually asked to do a speech. From there, I would think, do I have the courage to do that? I was afraid that I would make a mistake, I was worried that I would say wrong things. If I said something wrong, I was worried that I would be arrested. That was my challenge... it really challenged my courage. Now that I look back... when I started talking, speaking, criticizing the government, wow... I don’t understand how I could have been so brave? Hahaha... that was... the challenge for me.” (Sumiati, FAKTA community member, November 2007)

Nainggolan and other regular members of FAKTA saw themselves as a “radical” group that would not fear to challenge those in power to demand the rights of the urban poor. Nevertheless, they also admitted that recently they are doing less protests compared to before 2007. When asked about the reason, Nainggolan claimed that since there was a change of governor in Jakarta in 2007, FAKTA’s advocacy style also changed. The previous governor was from the military. “I found Sutiyoso to be an authoritarian leader who disliked dialogue, but there were other good bureaucrats we could talk to in his administration,” Tigor said of the previous governor. After Sutiyoso, the governor was Fauzi Bowo, a civilian whom Nainggolan had known since his school days. “At least we can talk to this one,” Nainggolan says. With the current governor, FAKTA had also published a book “Governor for Citizens” (*Gubernur Bela Warga*) in 2009, outlining the targets that the urban poor would want to see from the governor’s administration.

Born after the Reform by the 1998 activists, FAKTA has transformed through the years in their grassroots activism strategies. They acknowledged that a few years right after 1998 they did demonstrations more often, which showed that the impact of 1998 movement was strong enough to keep the momentum for several years. Nevertheless, as demonstrations become a common strategy that increases in frequency, the image of demonstrations itself changes – from a patriotic image during the 1998 Reform to the image of everyday disturbance in more recent times. The hype for demonstrations have dwindled for a variety of reasons: they are not heard, but they are still jamming the streets. Ironically, this does not mean that the government is doing FAKTA's current strategy that relies more on negotiations with the governor was tied to the style of governorship, but it concurs with the sentiments towards demonstrations in recent times.

Kamisan

On 18 January 2006, a group started a regular demonstration across the Presidential Palace. They consist of families, relatives, friends, and also activists that have suffered from human rights violation that had not been resolved. Before they started the regular demonstrations, they claimed that they had been through lobbying in the parliament to call for a thorough investigation of three cases: Trisakti, Semanggi I, and II, which are incidents where student activists were killed by the authorities during demonstrations¹⁴.

“The Parliament has been conquered by the old politics. The New Order regime is now back in power. That means, for Trisakti, Semanggi I and II, although personally many members of the parliament were supportive to resolve them, institutionally they would vote against it... [So, the parents of the victims thought] Come on, we are tired, so how about doing a silent protest. We bring posters, banners like that, so that people would know that human rights violations in Indonesia were not addressed well.” (Sumarsih, interview, November 2007)

The group named the regular demonstration *Kamisan*, referring to the day (*Kamis* = Thursday) that they chose to stage it every week. Every Thursday, the same group will come in black clothes and their black umbrellas to do a silent protest across the Presidential Palace. They were demanding the president to address the human rights violations that had claimed lives of many but have never been thoroughly investigated. The group received support from *KontraS*, an NGO for victims of human rights

¹⁴ The Trisakti incident occurred on 12 May 1998, when students were demanding for change in the government for democracy and total reform. Four Trisakti university students, Elang Mulia Lesmana, Hafidin Royan, Heri Hartanto and Hendriawan Sie were shot and killed by the authorities, and 681 more were wounded. Semanggi I was 8-14 November 1998, in which students were holding demonstrations to reject the Special Parliament Session that they deemed unconstitutional, and to demand the president to overcome the economic crisis. Out of eighteen deaths from the shooting, there were five students: Teddy Mardani, Sigit Prasetya, Engkus Kusnadi, Heru Sudibyo and Norma Irmawan. A total of 109 people were wounded. Semanggi II refers to the incident on 24 September 1999, when students were protesting against the Law for Emergency Situations that they considered authoritarian. The authorities opened shooting and 11 people died, while 217 were wounded (*Melawan Pengingkaran* 2006, 175).

violations. The chief of *KontraS* in 2004 was killed on a flight to Amsterdam by arsenic poisoning, and his wife is one of the *Kamisan* protesters.

Most of the people in *Kamisan* have personal experiences as relatives or parents of victims, or even have become victims themselves. Before the 1998 Reform, many of the victims of human rights violence could not speak up because of the severe consequences that they would receive if they did so. The Reform had made it possible for the victims to present themselves and the victims of past tragedies to resist their forced invisibility. Among the members of the group were relatives from the Tanjung Priok tragedy in 1983 and survivors of the 1965 tragedy. It was predicted that more than 500,000 people were killed in 1965 on the reason of sweeping communists but the mass killings were never admitted by the government.

Kamisan garnered much media attention after the activists kept their commitment to stage the demonstration every Thursday. Its predictability in terms of schedule made it convenient for reporters to prepare their coverage. Moreover, many activists in the group were already well-known for their involvement in human rights activist groups or in their experiences during the 1998 Reform.

After several months, *Kamisan* activists decided that they would submit a letter to the President each week when they stage their protest. Each protest was followed by a coordination meeting to decide what they would do for the next protest, which included the topic of the protest that would structure their letter. The topic would always touch on human rights violation issues and demand the President to take action, but each letter would have a specific example, occurrence, or a specific side of human rights that they would like to highlight. In the coordination meeting they also talked about the positives and negatives of the protest they just staged and how to address it in the following week. For example, they would trace the number of reporters and their media companies each week, the number of policemen and intelligence, and visitors.

Nevertheless, the group acknowledged that the government had never responded to their letters. The letter would just be delivered every Thursday to the officer in the Presidential Palace, but there had never been a follow-up. In 2010, three years after *Kamisan* started, the protest structure changed. Usually, some core members of the team would assemble before the protest at *KontraS* office to take their tools and went together to the protest site. Lately, they just assembled directly across the Presidential Palace, and after the protest they did not have a coordination meeting. They just discussed there who would draft the letter and who would lead the next protest. The whole protest activity, which usually took 2.5 hours including the coordination meeting, is now shortened to one hour on-site protest.

Protests as Spaces of Reform and Resistance

The story of the three groups showed that each group's strategies and activities transformed through time, and the change mainly concerns how they think about and how they do demonstrations to push for their agenda. The Voices of Concerned Mothers and FAKTA started at or shortly after the

1998 Reform, and it was clear that they had belief on demonstrations as the way to voice their concerns at the earlier stages of their establishment. Nevertheless, the groups slowly began to leave demonstrations as a space for their activism to direct grassroots empowerment that did not depend on government changes. The Voices of Concerned Mothers focused their activities on sharing experiences and supporting women's small businesses, but did not go to demonstrations anymore, because creating space for demonstrations required much energy and resources but might not bring the change they wanted.

The changes in the three groups hinted that demonstrations are not merely social movement strategies. They are spaces within social movements in which the members can get together for a common cause, identify with the cause, and be empowered for being in the same space. Whether or not a protest is "successful" in achieving their demands depend on more than just the protest alone. However, whether a social movement is going to create the space for protest depends on the faith that the members have on the potential of the space to empower the members of the group. The empowerment may come from the achievement of their demands, and it can also come more subtly in the form of gathering with others who share the same identity or experiences.

Since protests have become a common sight in Jakarta, the spaces created by demonstrations have become more numerous but smaller in scale. While protests were allowed since the 1998 Reform, the response from the government had been indifferent. The protesters can do their demonstrations but the government usually did not listen. Most activists acknowledged that it was less likely that demonstrations would yield in the change they wanted. With the activists' dwindling faith and resources to stage demonstrations as their public space, grassroots activities become more focused in empowering their members through more micro ways and specific activities rather than direct resistance towards a higher power.

Conclusion

Although it is materially observable that demonstrations in Jakarta are now more frequent than the early Reform time, groups who have been activists since the 1998 Reform would claim that demonstrations now are different from the time of the Reform, and so are public support. The decreasing sympathy of the public towards demonstrations, the stigmatization of protesters by the middle class as unemployed and traffic disturbance, the lack of attention from the authorities in responding to their demands, and the existence of protest mercenaries have caused the shrinking of demonstrations as empowerment spaces. In the meantime, there had also been alternative channels for voicing opinions, as showed in the case of FAKTA that gained more access to be heard with the new governor.

Nevertheless, it is too early to tell that demonstrations have lost its relevance in the landscape of social movements in Jakarta or in Indonesia in general. The activists' shifting focus on more micro grassroots activities indicate the seeds of consciousness-building and socio-political organization among

citizens, which would potentially become the foundation of larger movements to challenged those in power. This shows that demonstrations as empowerment spaces have its time and contextual dimensions, and the space can always be revived when the organizational resources and social consciousness have been prepared through the micro activities.

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