

## **STUDENT ACTIVISM IN POST-AUTHORITARIAN INDONESIA: HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM, MOVEMENT DYNAMICS, AND SHIFTING POLITICAL NARRATIVES**

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**ABSTRACT.** This study investigates student activism in post-authoritarian Indonesia, focusing on the interplay between higher education reform, movement dynamics, and evolving political narratives over the past decade. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we surveyed 497 undergraduates from social and political science faculties at 26 Indonesian universities and supplemented our analysis with a document review of student movements from 1999 to 2021. The study examines the transformation of Indonesia's higher education system, the defining characteristics of contemporary student activism, and the predominant socio-political issues driving post-authoritarian student movements. Our findings show that student activism primarily occurs through various platforms, including social media, organizational participation, public discourse, and street demonstrations. Strategic alliances between campus-based groups and external civil society actors have become increasingly important in facilitating these movements. These movements have increasingly focused on issues such as justice, civil liberties, and welfare, while the rise of anti-oligarchy sentiments highlights ongoing dissatisfaction with the unfinished process of democratic consolidation. The analysis further uncovers a shift in political narratives, reflecting the changing priorities of the student movement in response to Indonesia's political evolution. This study offers valuable insights into the role of student activism in shaping the state's post-authoritarian trajectory, contributing to the broader understanding of the youth movement in contemporary Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Student Activism; Post-Authoritarian Indonesia; Higher Education System; Movement Dynamics; Political Narratives

## **AKTIVISME MAHASISWA DI INDONESIA PASCA-OTORITER: REFORMASI PENDIDIKAN TINGGI, DINAMIKA GERAKAN, DAN PERGESERAN NARASI POLITIK**

**ABSTRAK.** Studi ini menyelidiki aktivisme mahasiswa di Indonesia pasca-otoriter, dengan fokus pada interaksi antara reformasi pendidikan tinggi, dinamika gerakan, dan narasi politik yang berkembang selama dekade terakhir. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, kami mensurvei 497 mahasiswa sarjana dari fakultas ilmu sosial dan ilmu politik di 26 universitas di Indonesia dan melengkapi analisis kami dengan tinjauan dokumen gerakan mahasiswa dari tahun 1999 hingga 2021. Studi ini meneliti transformasi sistem pendidikan tinggi Indonesia, karakteristik yang menentukan aktivisme mahasiswa kontemporer, dan isu sosial-politik utama yang mendorong gerakan mahasiswa pasca-otoriter. Temuan kami menunjukkan bahwa aktivisme mahasiswa terutama terjadi melalui berbagai platform, termasuk media sosial, partisipasi organisasi, wacana publik, dan demonstrasi jalanan. Aliansi strategis antara kelompok berbasis kampus dan aktor masyarakat sipil eksternal menjadi semakin penting dalam memfasilitasi gerakan-gerakan ini. Gerakan-gerakan ini semakin berfokus pada isu-isu seperti keadilan, kebebasan sipil, dan kesejahteraan, sementara munculnya sentimen anti-oligarki menyoroti ketidakpuasan yang sedang berlangsung dengan proses konsolidasi demokrasi yang belum selesai. Analisis ini selanjutnya mengungkap pergeseran dalam narasi politik, yang mencerminkan perubahan prioritas gerakan mahasiswa dalam menanggapi evolusi politik Indonesia. Studi ini menawarkan wawasan berharga tentang peran aktivisme mahasiswa dalam membentuk lintasan pasca-otoriter negara, yang berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang gerakan pemuda di Indonesia kontemporer.

**Kata kunci:** Aktivisme Mahasiswa; Indonesia Pasca-Otoriter; Sistem Pendidikan Tinggi; Dinamika Gerakan; Narasi Politik

### **INTRODUCTION**

The involvement of students plays a significant role in the democratic process in Indonesia. The collapse of the Suharto regime in May 1998 made the student movement gain widespread recognition as a catalyst for important events in Indonesia. A series of economic and political crises since 1997 have sparked large protests from various groups. The public linked the fall of the Suharto regime with the student movement through massive demonstrations

(Akbar, 2016). It strengthens the position of students as inheritors of a long tradition of struggles for regime change in Indonesia.

During the New Order regime period, characterized by limited democratic participation and restricted freedom of speech (Freedom House, 1998; Gazali, 2002), students emerged as a strategically significant group to assume various crucial roles. Their status as an educated class, broad social capital, strong social bonds, and relatively strong militancy made them a formidable political force. This phenomenon exhibits

a notable contrast compared to older political and intellectual figures, who frequently assume entrenched positions within existing structures, are assimilated into the system to maintain stability and project an image detached from the broader societal context. The student movement's strategic significance and autonomy have contributed to its notable reputation, particularly evident during the 1998 demonstrations when the public placed considerable expectations on its capacity to foster transformative alterations within the existing structures (Aspinall, 2012).

The student movements, which were previously the focal point of attention, experienced a decline in significance after the regime change, as they were supplanted by better-prepared actors in the political arena. Post-authoritarian political processes have made the student movement less determinant and relevant, leaving students struggling to define a new format and identity (Weiss & Aspinall, 2012; Sastramidjaja, 2019). However, it is too early to conclude that the student movement has become less valuable and more impactful than its role under authoritarianism. Examples of significant national student movements include Santiago, Chile (2011-2012); Montreal's "Maple Spring" (2012), Taiwan's Sunflower Student Movement (2014), and Hong Kong's "Umbrella Movement" (2014). These movements demonstrate that student movements can still play a significant role.

Examining student activism and movements has been a longstanding area of scholarly inquiry. The predominant focus of academic research on student activism throughout the 1960s-1970s has been on the examination of student collective action, protests, boycotts, and campaigns directed against governing authorities (Scott & El-Assal, 1969; Weinberg & Walker, 1969; Altbach & Lipset, 1969; Braungart, 1971). This movement began in the 1950s with civil rights protests in the US, peace marches in Europe, and expanded to include feminism, environmental issues, and global justice (Roberts, 2015). During this period, scholarly research also focused on student activism in various regions and countries. Notable studies conducted include Philip G. Altbach's investigations in Europe (1968), India (1968), Japan (1963), and Asia (1970), as well as Martin Lipset's examination of student activism in the United States (1966) and other industrialized nations (Lipset & Wolin, 1965).

The student movement that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s has been regarded as a paradigm for subsequent movements to establish a framework that mirrors the defining features of the present-day movement. Despite the limited participation of

students during that period, it was widely perceived that activists represented the collective voice of their generation (Blackstone et al., 1970; Inglehart, 1977; Roberts, 2015).

Student activism studies have expanded to include engagement with the education system, idea spread, international issues, transnational collaboration, and the expansion of feminism, identity, and global justice (Lipset, 1968; Ross, 1969; Gill & De Fronzo, 2009; Cini, della Porta, & Guzmán-Concha, 2021). Comparative studies consider the global spread of activism ideas and practices, as well as transnational collaborations in Africa (Luescher, Loader, & Mugume, 2016), Asia (Weiss & Aspinall, 2012), Latin America (Levy, 1991; Guzman-Concha, 2017), and Europe (Klemenčič, 2012).

Several studies related to student activism in post-authoritarian regimes explain the role of students in advancing democracy. In his scholarly work, Bryan (2019) analyzes the influence exerted by protests organized by college-aged students on the development and structure of democracy in South Korea. Student protests from the 1960s evolved in each subsequent decade, adapting to the regime and socio-political events of the nation. In Chile (Donoso, 2016), the Chilean Student Movement in 2006 and 2011 allowed leftist political powerhouses to redirect their political agenda. The political agenda shifted from focusing on democratic consolidation and governability to prioritizing equity-enhancing and democratizing reforms. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong (Ortmann, 2015), student activism has played an essential role in deepening the expansion of democracy in a complex situation since 1997. The Umbrella Movement 2014 marked the end of Hong Kong's democratization process, with college students playing a significant role in political activism since the 1970s.

In the context of student activism and movements in Indonesia, several scholars have provided explanations and interpretations during the authoritarian New Order (Fischer & Sudarsono, 1971; Budiman, 1978; Magenda, 1988; Heryanto, 1996; Widjojo, 1998; Aspinall, 2012; Weiss & Aspinall, 2012; Sastramidjaja, 2019). Most studies in this context explain how student activism deals with the pressure of the autocratic regime and how changes around students relate to demographic, economic, and higher education policies.

This article focuses on important studies on Indonesia's post-authoritarian regime student activism and movements. Several studies provide an interesting perspective. Sunyoto Usman's (1999) study on post-reform student activism in Indonesia

focuses on two poles: becoming a moral movement and a political one. Students may operate outside bureaucratic and political institutions as a moral movement but can transform into politicians in the future. Meanwhile, as a political movement, students may focus on political institutions and implement policies.

Edward Aspinall (2012) contends that student activism in Indonesia is a moral force with ethical complexities and moral power, originating over thirty years due to the country's history of authoritarian regimes. This strategy enables students to articulate opposition constrained by authority, facilitating the regeneration and development of their political identity. According to Weiss and Aspinall's (2019) study, the student movement in Indonesia following the reformation period is experiencing a decline in political significance and displaying a sense of ambiguity.

The potential influence of democratization and regime change on the strategic approach of Indonesian student action is worth considering. Within the context of historical recollection and idealization surrounding the student movement, it is plausible that the selection of activist methods may vary while maintaining their strategic significance (Sastramidjaja, 2019). Given student's significant role in Indonesia's democratic landscape, their engagement in the political process is a subject of great scholarly interest. Particularly noteworthy is the examination of their socio-political perspectives and active involvement in various forms of activism pertaining to the ongoing political developments.

The term "student," as used in this article, refers explicitly to university students, whereas "student activism" refers to the active involvement and participation of the younger generation based on their student identity (Watson, 2022). Activism, in this particular situation, refers to the acknowledgment of a problem by a person or a group and the subsequent engagement in actions to resolve it and bring to transformation (Martin et al., 2007). Activism relies on collectivism, making social interactions, networks, and knowledge crucial for its implementation (Hall, 2019; Martin et al., 2007). According to this definition, any group activity students undertake, such as online petitions, protests, involvement in social movements with other alliances, joining public discourse, or similar actions, can be classified as student activism.

This article departs from the question: What is the current state of Indonesian student activism in the contemporary development of higher education? What are the characteristics of Indonesia's contemporary student activism? What are the

main issues of the post-authoritarian Indonesian student movement? This article will be divided into three discussions: First, this article describes the development of Indonesia's higher education landscape and policies. Second, this article describes our survey findings, focusing on organizational engagement, public debate or discourse involvement, and their views on the urgency of their current roles and activism. Finally, this article discusses the character and orientation of the narratives that developed around the post-authoritarian student movement.

This research provides critical insights into the shifting dynamics of student activism in post-authoritarian Indonesia, addressing a gap in the literature on how neoliberal higher education policies and unresolved democratic reforms shape contemporary movements. By revealing the rise of anti-oligarchy sentiments and cross-movement alliances, the study demonstrates how activism has evolved beyond traditional middle-class issues to challenge structural inequalities. These findings are vital for understanding the broader political consequences of youth mobilization in Indonesia, particularly in resisting oligarchic power and incomplete democratization. Ultimately, this work enriches global discussions on social movements in post-authoritarian contexts, where student activism often serves as a barometer of democratic development.

## METHOD

This article results from our research, which uses quantitative methods to explore our primary data and qualitative methods to explain historical aspects and interpretations of student existence. The quantitative data was collected through digital questionnaires distributed through messaging platforms. The population in this survey is comprised of undergraduate students of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at several universities. A total of 497 respondents were included in the study, representing 26 universities across multiple regions of Indonesia. The sampling method employed involved random clustering, with the number of respondents proportionate to the population size of the area in which the university was situated. The survey was carried out within the time frame of August 1 to September 30, 2021.

The eligibility requirements for respondents include being enrolled in at least the third semester of the 2020/2021 academic year and not having completed the final exam or thesis. The selection

of students with these characteristics assumes they are more politically literate and understand various concepts, theories, and history regarding national political developments. In addition to the quantitative data gathered through research, this article incorporates document analysis as a qualitative data source, drawing from materials such as Ministry of Education records and news reports in various media, especially from Kompas and Tempo, regarding student actions during 1999-2021.

Data analysis is employed to examine three key aspects: first, the development of higher education in Indonesia and the characteristics of policies. Second, is the students' involvement in organizations that serve as platforms for student collectivism and participation in public discourse or debate. Third, several noteworthy student protests and actions demonstrate the features of the main concerns raised by student activism.

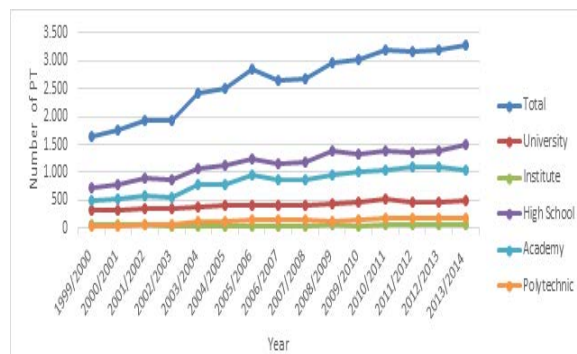
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Indonesian Higher Education Landscape: Expansion of Universities and Student Enrollment Under Neoliberal Policies

This section aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of student activism in Indonesia, with a particular focus on the post-authoritarian period. The conditions surrounding student activism can be understood in two dimensions: objective conditions, which pertain to the political system, and subjective conditions, which are associated with the social background of students and the level of employment available (Megenda, 1988). This section describes the objective conditions under which educational opportunities and higher education policies are part of the political system.

The number of students and higher education institutions provides a macro picture of the position of students among productive age groups, the landscape of the higher education environment, and the significance of their numbers as activism entities. The characteristics and roles of students are related to several objective conditions, such as the development of higher education (Perguruan Tinggi/PT), the number of students (population with higher education), and opportunities to receive higher education.

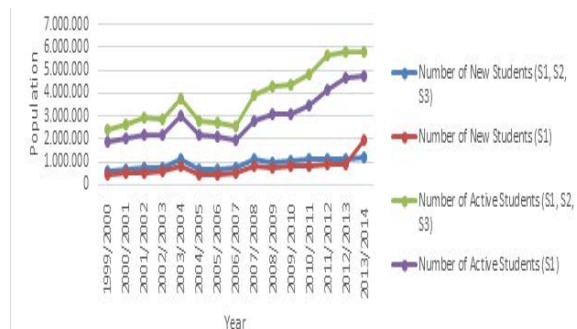
The expansion of higher education institutions in Indonesia, encompassing various establishments such as universities, institutes, colleges, academies, and polytechnics, witnessed a notable surge after the reform period (Figure 1).



Source: Ministry of Education and Culture/MoEC (2015)

**Graph 1. Development of Higher Education Institutions by Type (1999/2000-2013/2014)**

In 1999/2000, the total number of universities was recorded as 1.633. Subsequently, during the academic year 2013/2014, there was a notable rise in the total count of universities, reaching a figure of 3.280. Between 1999 and 2014, there was a noteworthy rise in the number of universities, namely a twofold increase of 1.647. In 2018, the number of universities was reported to be 4.670, as stated by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC, 2020). In 2018, there was a significant rise of 65,5% in the number of universities compared to 2000. The upward trend observed in the university's enrollment figures is consistent with the data presented in Figure 2, which depicts the number of students.

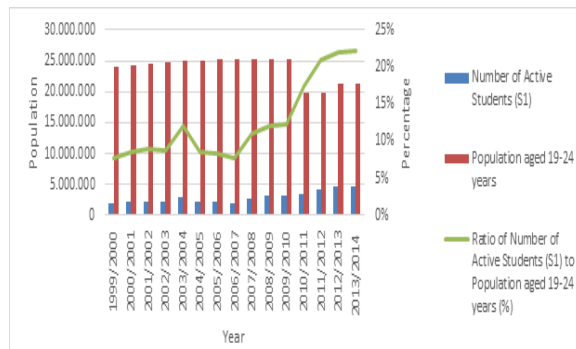


Source: Ministry of Education and Culture/MoEC (2015)

**Figure 2. Number of Higher Education Students (1999/2000-2013/2014)**

The total number of active students in 1999, the aggregate number of enrolled students, encompassing those pursuing undergraduate (S1), master's (S2), and doctorate (S3) degrees, amounted to 2.38 million. According to Figure 2, there was an increase in the number of students to 5.83 million in the year 2014. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC, 2020), the aggregate number of enrolled students in 2018 amounted to 6,951,124. The number of new students in 1999 substantially increased by 472,17 percent over 20 years, with the initial count at 628,268. In 2018, there was an observed growth in the student population, reaching 1.472156 individuals, as reported by the Ministry of Education and Culture

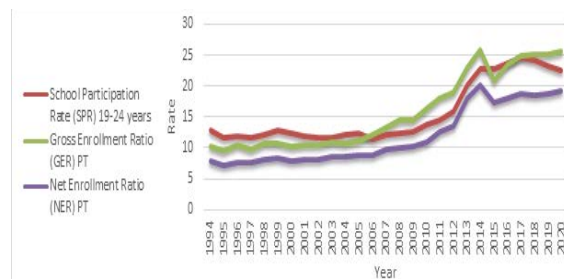
(MoEC, 2020). The student population experienced a significant growth of 234,32% over 20 years.



Source: Ministry of Education and Culture/MoEC (2015)

**Figure 3. Ratio of Active Students to Population Aged 19-24 Years (1999-2014)**

The assessment of higher education opportunities can be conducted by examining the population aged 19-24 ratio to the number of active students (S1/S1) and the extent of involvement in higher education. Figure 3 illustrates a rise in the ratio of active students to the population aged 19-24 between 1999 and 2014. The percentage of individuals with higher education aged 19-24 witnessed a notable rise, escalating from 5% in 1999 to 30% in 2014. The observed increase is consistent with the upward trend in university enrollment, as depicted in Figure 4.



Source: Statistics Indonesia (2023)

**Figure 4. Participation Rates in Higher Education in Indonesia (1994-2020)**

There exist three metrics for assessing university-level educational involvement: gross enrollment rate/GER PT (angka partisipasi kasar/APK), pure enrollment rate/PER PT (angka partisipasi murni/APM), and school participation rate/SPR (angka partisipasi sekolah/APS). The GER is a metric used to assess the proportion of the school-age population enrolled in higher education. It is calculated by comparing the number of students enrolled at the higher education level with the total number of residents within the corresponding age group without considering the accuracy of age reporting. At the same time, the PER serves as a metric that reflects the proportion of individuals within a specific age range enrolled in higher education programs that align

with their respective age groups. In comparison, the SPR measures the proportion of individuals in a particular age cohort enrolled in higher education. The education enrollment rate in Indonesia's higher education level has consistently increased from the New Order era and the subsequent democratic transition period from 1999 to 2019.

The increasing number of universities and students indicates a more educated class. In contrast to the preceding decade, during which access to higher education was comparatively restricted, contemporary students benefit from an expanded array of resources, including a larger student population, a greater variety of student organizations, and more extensive networks. On the one hand, it presents an opportunity framework that enhances the importance of student action. Conversely, the rise has transpired with the expansion of neoliberal education policy.

The neoliberal principles in higher education policy are crucial in addressing challenges posed by the growing student population and institutional expansion. According to Hill and Kumar (2009), these practices can influence an individual's educational orientation, activities, affiliations, care for significant matters, and propensity to initiate transformative actions. Neoliberal higher education policies focus on students as consumers, transitioning them from universities to the labor market, emphasizing fiscal independence, and narrowly redefining knowledge based on economic understanding (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Neoliberal policies in Indonesia are evident through a range of policy and technocratic regulatory models (Muhaim, 2002; Silalahi et al, 2017; Sunendar & Adriany, 2023). The characteristics are reflected in indicators like graduation accelerations, alumni absorption in the labor market, student satisfaction as service users, and curriculum reconstruction based on market needs.

Neoliberal higher education policies undermine the democratic mission of student activism by impeding the formation of critical learning communities, fostering social solidarity, and cultivating civic engagement (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Such policies constrain the development of students' analytical and organizational capacities, which are essential for reimagining and transforming society. Consequently, they pose structural barriers to sustaining student activism as a viable force for systemic change.

The expansion of the number of students and universities in Indonesia has had contradictory implications for student activism. On the one hand, a larger student population provides a broader base for mobilization. On the other hand, the commodification



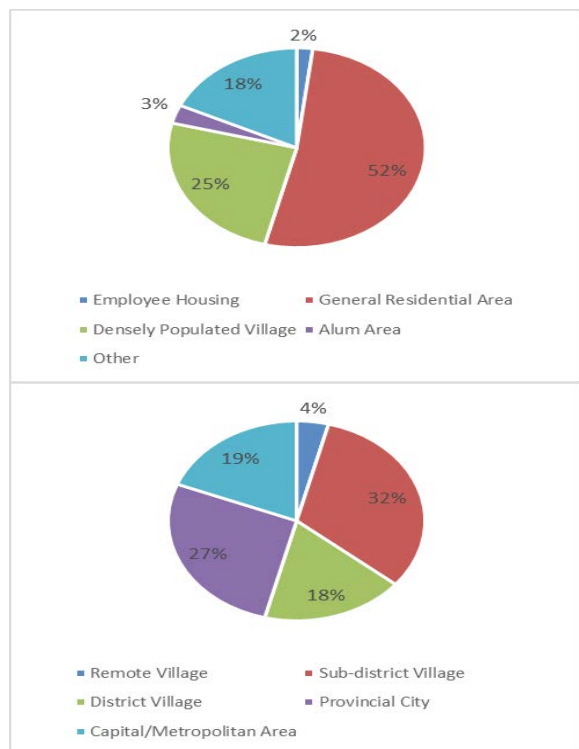
of higher education – coupled with rising tuition fees and corporate-style university management – has depoliticized many campuses. The corresponding increase in student numbers in the graph above may indicate a quantitative increase, but not necessarily a qualitative strengthening of the student movement. Rather than fostering a new generation of activists, this expansion may have weakened the movement's traditions, as universities increasingly function as credentialing institutions rather than spaces for the formation of activism.

### Survey Data and Interpretation

This section analyzes three key dimensions of student activism: (1) organizational participation, (2) engagement in public debates, and (3) perceptions of activism's role in post-authoritarian Indonesia. The findings are based on original survey data collected by the research team, with interpretations drawn from the empirical results presented herein.

#### Background of Student Respondents

Eligible respondents were enrolled in at least their third semester (2020/2021 academic year) but had not yet completed their final thesis or examinations. This selection criterion ensured participants possessed sufficient political literacy, including familiarity with key concepts, theories, and historical trajectories of Indonesia's political development.

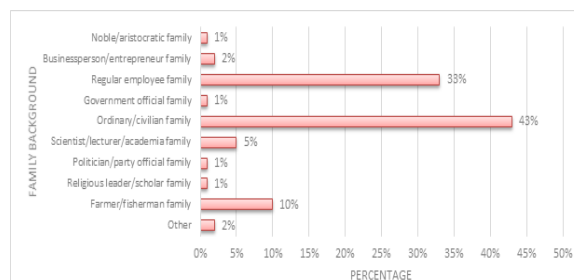


Source: Aminuddin & Ramadhan (2021)

**Figure 5. The Respondent's Residence Environment (Left) and Location (Right) during High School**

Respondents were categorized by their residential environment and high school location (Figure 5). A majority (52%) lived in public housing, followed by densely populated settlements (25%), employer-provided housing (18%), and slum areas (3%). Geographically, 32% resided in sub-district villages, 27% in provincial towns, 19% in metropolitan areas, 18% in district villages, and 4% in remote villages.

Figure 6 illustrates the family backgrounds of participants. The majority (43%) identified as coming from commoner households, followed by employees (33%) and farmers/fishermen (10%). In contrast, only 5% reported familial ties to academia (scientists, lecturers), while 2% originated from business families. A negligible proportion (1%) belonged to elite backgrounds (religious scholars, politicians, government officials, or aristocrats), with 2% falling into unspecified categories.

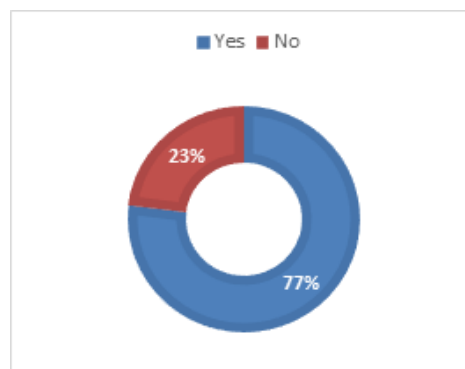


Source: Aminuddin & Ramadhan (2021)

**Figure 6. Respondent's Family Background**

#### Student Activism within Organizations

Organizations have historically been central to student activism in Indonesia, serving as institutional frameworks that structure and sustain mobilization efforts. Beyond facilitating coordination, they provide enduring networks that adapt to evolving forms of activism. Consequently, evaluating student participation across organizational affiliations remains critical to understanding contemporary movement dynamics.

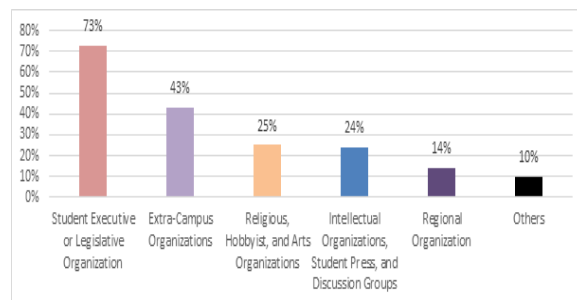


Source: Aminuddin & Ramadhan (2021)

**Figure 7. Student's Active Involvement in Organizational Activities**

Survey data reveal that a significant majority of respondents (77%) participate actively in student organizations, while the remaining 23% report no involvement (Figure 7). This disparity underscores a strong propensity for organizational engagement among students, suggesting collective activism remains a prominent feature of campus life.

We inquired about the type of organization that 77% of the respondents had joined. 73% of respondents from various kinds of organizations are involved in executive and legislative organizations at the university. Meanwhile, 43% of respondents joined extra-campus organizations. Approximately 25% of participants are engaged in intellectual associations, student publications, and forums for discourse. Furthermore, it is worth noting that 14% of the participants surveyed opted to become members of regional organizations, while a mere 10% chose to join organizations of other categories, as illustrated in Figure 8.



Source: Aminuddin & Ramadlan (2021)

**Graph 8. Type of Student Organizations Respondents Participate In**

These percentages indicate that intra-campus organizations, such as the Student Executive Board (Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa/BEM), Student Legislative Body (Badan Legislatif Mahasiswa/BLM) (both at the university and faculty level), and the Student Association (Himpunan Mahasiswa/Hima) at the department or study program level, are organizations that attract students' interest in organizational activities. In addition, student involvement is also quite high in extra-campus organizations such as the Islamic Student Association (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam/HMI), the Indonesian Muslim Student Movement (Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia/PMII), the Indonesian National Student Movement (Gerakan Mahasiswa Nasional Indonesia/GMNI), the Indonesian Christian Student Movement (Gerakan Mahasiswa Kristen Indonesia/GMKI), and so on.

The notion that university students possess a comprehensive understanding of state-related matters continues to be widely upheld. Student organizations serve as platforms for accommodating

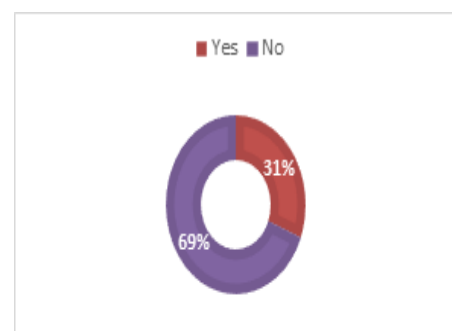
and channeling various values and emotions. The group facilitates the sustainable renewal of organized student activism. The organization also serves as a platform for internalizing university student ideals, including introducing student movements, cultivating awareness as agents of change, establishing a space for scholarly conversation, and promoting engagement in student activism.

Generally, the university is a conducive environment for developing student organizations and activism. The university's intellectual environment encourages independent and critical thinking toward political consciousness. Historically, under Indonesia's authoritarian regime, where academic and expressive freedoms were suppressed, campuses served as vital sites for democratic discourse and socio-political critique.

### *Student Activism in Public Debates or Discourses*

Public debate constitutes an integral component of democratic political engagement. Beyond examining activism through organizational participation, this study evaluates respondents' involvement in public discourse and their perspectives on related activities. The findings are presented in Figure 9 and 10.

Our survey reveals a paradox in student activism. While 77% of respondents reported active engagement in student organizations, only 31% acknowledged their participation in public debates, leaving significant majority (69%) uninvolved in formal discourse. This discrepancy suggests that organizational membership does not necessarily translate into public intellectual engagement. Nevertheless, a lack of active participation in public discourse does not automatically indicate their level of understanding and opinions regarding public matters (see Aminuddin & Ramadlan, 2022).

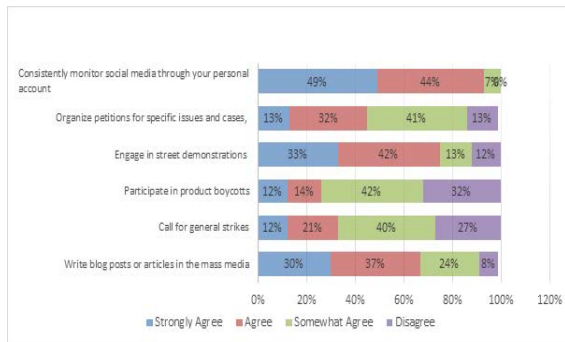


Source: Aminuddin & Ramadlan (2021)

**Figure 9. Student Participation in Public Debates or Discourse**

We surveyed individuals who indicated their participation in public debates to gather their opinions on different types of activism. A significant proportion of students, 49% strongly supporting and 44% agreeing with social media as a key platform

for political expression. Similarly, the act of blogging and publishing pieces for mass media received significant approval from the participants, with 30% expressing strong agreement and 37% agreeing. This overwhelming endorsement underscores how platformed dissent has become central to contemporary student movements, reflecting both the democratizing potential of digital tools and the constraints of institutionalized activism in neoliberal universities.



Source: Aminuddin & Ramadlan (2021)

**Figure 10. Student's Viewpoints on Involvement in Public Discourse**

While street demonstrations remain the most widely endorsed form of activism – garnering strong support from 33% of respondents and agreement from an additional 42% – the data reveals a striking paradox: students exhibit far greater skepticism toward less confrontational tactics, such as petitions, boycotts, and general strikes. A notable 41% rejected petition campaigns. Similarly, product boycotts faced resistance, with 42% expressing partial disagreement and 32% outright opposition. Most strikingly, mass strikes – historically a powerful tool for labor movements – were met with disapproval by 40% of respondents, while 27% completely opposed them, possibly reflecting a middle-class aversion to radical disruption or a strategic preference for symbolic, rather than material resistance.

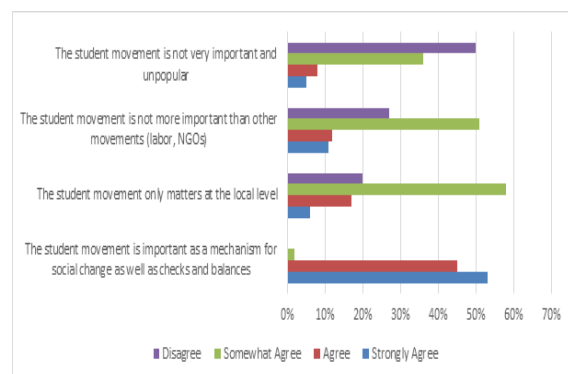
The data indicate that media-based activism – encompassing both social and conventional platforms – is widely adopted and positively received. This finding aligns with existing research highlighting the younger generation's active participation in public discourse via digital platforms (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2023). Notably, social media activism serves as a critical tool for marginalized students, enabling them to articulate their perspectives while benefiting from the relative safety of anonymity and physical detachment, which mitigates risks of institutional retaliation (Byrne, 2021).

A similar occurrence transpired with street demonstrations or protests. Student street demonstrations have consistently played a significant

role in political reform campaigns worldwide (Weiss et al., 2012). Street demonstrations distinguish themselves from other forms of activism not solely by their heightened level of action. Historically, demonstrations have served as a means of expressing resistance to censorship and questioning the legitimacy of formal political communication. Nevertheless, activities like seminars and official discussions are still bound by the official communication framework. The act of taking to the streets exemplifies the demonstration as a form of opposition (Heryanto, 1991). Street protests have been a defining characteristic of student movements. This approach continues to be applicable to modern student action.

### *Student Viewpoints on Their Activism*

Beyond analyzing structural changes in higher education – such as alterations in the number of universities and policy adjustments, as well as the engagement of student organizations and involvement in public discourse – this section explores student's perspectives toward their present socio-political status and roles. Survey respondents were asked to assess the urgency of student activism, with their responses summarized in Figure 11.



Source: Aminuddin & Ramadlan (2021)

**Figure 11. Perceived Urgency of the Student Movement Among Students**

The study probed students' perceptions of their movement's significance and popularity, revealing a striking dissonance between self-perception and external critiques of post-Reformasi activism. While half of the respondents rejected the notion that student movements are unimportant or marginal, and another 36% leaned toward disagreement, only 13% combined (8% agree + 5% strongly agree) conceded declining relevance. This suggests a defiant self-image among activists, who cling to the historical legacy of student movements as vanguards of change, even as broader critiques of their fragmentation, elite capture, or middle-class bias.



Concerning the comparative significance of student movements vis-à-vis other movements, such as labor unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it is noteworthy that 51% of surveyed students expressed their disagreement, while an additional 27% indicated their dissenting stance. A mere 12% of respondents express agreement, while a little lower proportion of 11% firmly affirm their agreement. This percentage signifies that the individuals in question perceive their actions to be significant, either on par with or comparable to the actions of other collectives. This proportion also addresses the concern that the influence of the post-reform student movement has decreased due to the existence of various strategic groups. This stance may reflect nostalgia for the 1998 Reformasi movement's hegemony, but it overlooks the material and organizational disparities today. Unlike labor or agrarian movements, student activism often lacks sustained grassroots leverage, relying instead on episodic mass mobilizations (e.g., the 2019–2020 anti-oligarchy protests).

Regarding the significance of student movements solely at the local level, 58% of respondents express moderate agreement, while 20% hold a contrary viewpoint. A mere 17% of respondents agree, with an additional 6% indicating a significant level of agreement. The abovementioned proportion reflects the respondent's perception of the significance of student movements in national and local contexts.

Ultimately, most participants, specifically 53%, expressed a strong inclination towards the belief that student movements serve as crucial instruments for effecting social transformation and maintaining accountability. Additionally, 45% of respondents indicated agreement with this perspective. There was no indication of dissent among the responders. The data illustrates that participants maintain a robust conviction regarding the potential of student movements to serve as a mechanism for effecting policy change, assuming significant negotiating power vis-à-vis the ruling regime and acting as adversaries to established authority.

The contemporary landscape of student activism presents greater challenges than the Indonesian student movement in 1998. The existing process of elite circulation has been operating democratically. Moreover, the momentum for significant action is not yet available. Nevertheless, upon examining student's behaviors in certain instances, notable parallels may be drawn to the

activity seen throughout the New Order era. The actions undertaken by students in advocating for the community in land disputes, such as the opposition to a mining project in Kendeng and the construction of a dam in Wadas, Central Java, exhibit a similar pattern to the role played by student advocacy in the Kedung Ombo case of 1995, as well as other advocacy efforts conducted by students during the New Order era.

Our survey reveals strong student confidence in their role as societal watchdogs, with activism perceived as impactful at both national and local levels. Notably, students consider their movement equally vital to labor, agrarian, and NGO struggles – demonstrated through sustained intersectional alliances. Empirical evidence includes joint worker-student protests against fuel price hikes, the Omnibus Law, and the Job Creation Bill, as well as NGO collaborations in environmental and agrarian advocacy campaigns.

### **Political Narratives: From Middle-Class to Anti-Oligarchy Issues**

Around 1980s to 1990s, Indonesia's student movement coalesced around a clear, unifying adversary: the authoritarian Suharto regime. The primary concerns raised encompassed the topics of regime alteration and political liberties, including but not limited to freedom of speech and association. Public dissatisfaction with the practices of corruption, collusion, nepotism (*korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme/KKN*), authoritarianism, power concentration, and militarism became a general concern of the student movement since the 1980s. However, the 1997 and 1998 financial crises dramatically intensified public discontent, transforming these long-standing grievances into a mass mobilization that ultimately toppled the regime.

Since 1999, the topics that have been addressed in student activism have exhibited a growing complexity and diversity. Student activism tends to make finding commonalities or interests that can unite all student groups more difficult. Their adversaries are numerous and varied, including their seniors from fellow alumni or organizational backgrounds who currently hold strategic positions in political parties and various state institutions. Additionally, decentralization and regional autonomy policies have shifted activism's focus toward national concerns and local-level actors.

However, the focus on national issues remains dominant. The proliferation of activist

movements across different geographical areas necessitates establishing a shared framework to facilitate collective mobilization. Despite regional polarization, there are examples of collaborative student initiatives addressing government policies and key national concerns.

The progression of student attention can be discerned by examining the notable student demonstrations and their demands from 1999 to 2021. The table below outlines the key forms of activism and primary issues in nationwide student protests after 1998.

**Table 1. Key Issues in Indonesian Student Activism and Movement (2000-2022)**

Month and Year	Form of Action	Student-Identified Issues and Claims
April 2000	Several major student protests occurred during this period. For example, on April 13, 2000, groups such as the Keluarga Besar YAI, Forum Bersama, Komite Aksi Mahasiswa (KAM), Front Aksi Mahasiswa untuk Reformasi dan Demokrasi (Famred), and Forum Kota (Forkot) mobilized around 1,000 students. The demonstration escalated into prolonged clashes.	Students are demanding the prosecution of former President Suharto for his past offenses.
October 2000	Student demonstrations took place in several major cities in Indonesia. The protest was held ahead of the Indonesian Army's (Tentara Nasional Indonesia/TNI) anniversary.	Students demanded the abolition of the dual military function (Dwi Fungsi TNI) and military territoriality.
February 2005	Demonstration by the BEM of Semarang Universities took place in front of the legislative building of Central Java.	Students refused to increase fuel prices.
October 2005	Student demonstrations have been observed in various Indonesian cities, including Jakarta, Solo, and Palembang.	Students evaluated Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono-Jusuf Kalla's one-year performance. One of the main points of evaluation is the increase in fuel prices.
May, 2008	A substantial number of individuals, estimated to be at least 6,000 students and other large gatherings, assembled close to the parliament building and the state palace.	Students demanded the Seven Lawsuits of the People (Tujuh Gugatan Rakyat/Tugu Rakyat), which contained demands: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Nationalization of the nation's strategic assets;</li> <li>2. Realize affordable health education and services for the community;</li> <li>3. Complete the Bank of Indonesia Liquidity Assistance (Bantuan Likuiditas Bank Indonesia/BLBI) case, corruption by Suharto and his cronies;</li> <li>4. Guarantee the availability and affordability of people's basic needs;</li> <li>5. Save the environment and solve the Lapindo case;</li> <li>6. Restore national sovereignty in the food, economic, and energy sectors;</li> <li>7. Complete bureaucratic reform and eradicate the judicial mafia;</li> </ol>
June 2008	Hundreds of students demonstrated in front of the Parliament Building during the parliamentary plenary session, where parliament approved the use of the right of inquiry or the right of investigation on the policy of increasing fuel prices.	Students rejected the increase in fuel prices and criticized the government for not being pro-people.
March 2012	The engagement of students in various urban areas. Numerous incidents culminated in disorder and inflicted harm upon public infrastructure, namely in the cities of Medan and Purwokerto.	Students rejected the increase in fuel prices.
September 2019	The occurrence of extensive student-led protests, characterized by various acts aimed at advocating for the cause of #ReformasiDiKorupsi. The event occurred on foot, commencing from MH Thamrin Road and concluding at the horse statue on Medan Merdeka Barat Road in Central Jakarta. Students from other universities in the Jabodetabek area attended the event.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. a. Revoke and review the RKUHP, the Mineral and Coal Mining Bill, the Land Bill, the Penitentiary Bill, the Labor Bill, and the Water Resources Bill;</li> <li>b. Issue Government Regulation in lieu of the Law of Corruption Eradication Commission (Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi/Perppu KPK);</li> <li>c. Pass the elimination of sexual violence bill and domestic workers bill;</li> <li>2. Cancel the leadership of the KPK with problems with parliamentary choices;</li> <li>3. Reject the military and police from occupying civilian positions;</li> <li>4. Stop militarism in Papua and other areas, immediately release Papuan political prisoners and open access for journalists in Papua;</li> <li>5. Stop criminalizing activists and journalists;</li> <li>6. Stop forest fires in Indonesia that corporations carry out, penalize corporations for forest fires, and revoke their permits;</li> <li>7. Resolve human rights violations and bring human rights criminals to justice, including those in power circles, and immediately restore victim's rights;</li> <li>+1. The government must take responsibility for the injured and dead victims of the mass action on September 23-30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and for pro-democracy activists who were criminalized by forming an independent investigation team under the auspices of the National Commission on Human Rights.</li> </ol>

Oktober 2020	Student demonstrations have been observed in multiple cities across Indonesia, including Lampung, South Sumatra, West Sumatra, Jambi, Banten, Central Java, West Java, West Nusa Tenggara, and Southeast Sulawesi. Labor elements participated in demonstrations in several regions.	Protesting the deliberation of the Job Creation Bill (RUU Cipta Kerja)
April 2022	Students in various regions held demonstrations. One of the joint forums is the All-Indonesian Student Executive Body Alliance (BEM Seluruh Indonesia/BEM SI).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Urge and demand that Jokowi be firm in rejecting and providing a statement of attitude towards the postponement of the 2024 elections and his three-term office for betraying the state constitution.</li> <li>2. Demand and urge Jokowi to postpone and review the Law on State Capital (UU Kota Negara/IKN), including the problematic articles and the impacts arising from environmental, legal, social-ecological, and disaster aspects.</li> <li>3. Urge and demand that Jokowi stabilize prices, maintain basic commodities availability in society, and solve other food security problems.</li> <li>4. Urge and demand that Jokowi thoroughly investigate the cooking oil mafia and evaluate the performance of related ministers.</li> <li>5. Urge and demand that Jokowi resolve the agrarian conflicts that occurred in Indonesia.</li> <li>6. Urge and demand that Jokowi-Ma'ruf fully commit to completing campaign promises in the remainder of his term of office.</li> </ol>

Source: processed by the author.

Between 2000 and 2004, the student movements primarily focused on unresolved reform agendas, such as law enforcement, corruption eradication, and abolishing the military's dual function. After 2004, however, the issues championed by students shifted significantly from those of the 1998 era. The evolving priorities and character of student activism are evident in the varied protests documented in Table 1.

Several observations emerge from students' significant actions during this period, particularly their focus on welfare-related issues. Rising fuel prices—a recurring concern—sparked major demonstrations in 2005, 2008, and 2012, reflecting students' prioritization of economic justice. Beyond fuel costs, their activism also targeted broader societal well-being, including opposition to controversial policies like the Job Creation Law, alongside advocacy for price stability and access to basic necessities in local communities.

Second, although the post-authoritarian era no longer presents a shared adversary, contemporary student activism has found unity in addressing collective concerns. This phenomenon is evident in the simultaneous organization of diverse actions across disparate locations, all advancing identical demands. Since the reform era, student activism has shifted toward localized efforts. Yet, despite this focus, there are clear signs of coordination across regions, as seen in synchronized protests. The key distinction lies in their emphasis on policy issues rather than targeting individuals or governing systems.

Third, it is noteworthy that the reform agenda remains prevalent among students even two decades after its inception. The post-2010 generation may lack strong personal ties to the 1998 movement, yet the reform agenda persists as a primary focus for this demographic. Despite widespread skepticism about contemporary student's connection to past movements, the 1998 agenda continues to be regarded as relevant today.

The #ReformasiDiKorupsi action and its related issues, can be seen as a continuation of the events of 1998. However, in the current context, demonstrations with this theme also articulate anti-oligarchy sentiments. Students widespread use of the term “oligarchy” to describe the underlying power dynamics demonstrates this perspective (Savirani, 2019; Ridha, 2020). Key grievances include opposition to: the dominant elite's control over mining and natural resources, environmental degradation, power monopolies, corruption, and socio-economic inequality.

Fourth, it is worth noting that activism and student movements—despite their fragmented nature—have the potential to coalesce into unified alliances. Post-reform alliances have been facilitated by two key organizations: BEM Nusantara (established in 2005) and BEM SI (established in 2007). Their presence has expanded the repertoire of student activism beyond pre-existing forums like the Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia (KAMI, Indonesian Student Action Union) and the Cipayung group, which served as platforms for extra-campus activism in earlier eras.

Fifth, amid the extensive identity-driven populist movements that have emerged since 2014 in national and local elections, the student movement has remained largely detached from identity-based issues. The primary concerns of the post-authoritarian student movement revolve around middle-class issues and democracy. Regarding the 212 and 411 actions in Jakarta in 2016, our observations showed no collaborative statements from major student alliances—a reflection of their historical tendency to avoid fragmentation along identity lines.

Through our same research, we find that post-reform students exhibit distinctive characteristics (Aminuddin & Ramadhan, 2022). Contemporary students demonstrate a strong preoccupation with issues of democracy and human rights. Their predominantly apolitical stance toward electoral processes stems from a deliberate effort to distance themselves from the vested interests of pragmatic political actors – particularly political parties and electoral candidates.

While the student protests of 1966 and 1998 directly influenced political change, the post-authoritarian student movement no longer prioritized regime overthrow as its primary objective. The stability of a regime without a clear ideological narrative depends on several factors: the absence of major corruption scandals, the continuation of prolonged authoritarian governance, the government's commitment to protecting civil liberties, and a functional electoral system that ensures peaceful power transitions.

## CONCLUSION

After the end of authoritarianism under Indonesia's New Order regime, the number of universities and students increased substantially. However, the implementation of neoliberal principles in higher education policies has posed challenges for contemporary student activism. Despite this, students remain strongly inclined to participate in organizations, activities, and networks. Movement alliances frequently bridge intra- and extra-campus groups, mobilizing joint demonstrations. For this generation, student organizations, social media, and street protests serve as the primary platforms for activism.

Amid a more diverse landscape of movements, students maintain an optimistic view of their activism's relevance. They regard student movements as just as significant as other social movements, such as labor unions, farmer groups, and NGOs. This is evident in the intersectionality of their alliances,

which underscores the distinct role and impact of student activism in Indonesia's broader socio-political context.

An analysis of post-authoritarian student narratives reveals a focus on middle-class issues—welfare, justice, and freedom—alongside growing anti-oligarchic rhetoric. This reflects the persistent unresolved agenda of reforms, which has gained momentum over the past decade. Notably, it contrasts with the identity-based populist movements that dominate mass demonstrations in contemporary Indonesia.

## GRATITUDE

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