

Defending a Vulnerable yet Resilient Democracy: Civil Society Activism in Jokowi's Indonesia

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Abstract

For the first two decades after the end of the authoritarian New Order regime, Indonesian civil society was widely hailed as a bulwark against elite attempts to roll back the country's democratic achievements. More recent assessments, however, have highlighted how polarisation, socio-religious conservatism and growing state repression have increasingly restricted civil society's ability to defend Indonesian democracy against further backsliding. In the face of these growing pressures, political activists have nonetheless demonstrated adaptability, resourcefulness and resilience, and, despite the narrowing space for dissent and protest, occasionally succeeded in halting and even reversing anti-democratic trends. In this article, we focus on two segments of civil society – women's rights groups and environmental activists – to illustrate under what circumstances progressive political activism in contemporary Indonesia can still be effective in upholding diagonal accountability and defending human rights.

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civil society, diagonal accountability, environmental activism, women's rights activism, Indonesia

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Introduction

For the first two decades after the end of the authoritarian New Order regime, Indonesian civil society was widely hailed as a bulwark against elite attempts to roll back the country's democratic achievements. Despite grappling with fragmentation, competition over donor funds and challenges from 'uncivil society' (Beitinger-Lee, 2009), progressive civil society organisations played crucial roles in defending democratic institutions and ideas, especially during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014). This was evident in successful campaigns to protect the embattled Anti-Corruption Commission, maintain the neutrality of the general election commission and ensure that direct elections for local executives would not be abolished (Aspinall et al., 2015). Civil society organisations also had significant input into the formulation of legislation, for instance, the 2009 Environmental Law or the Disability Law, which was passed only in 2016, but prepared with extensive community input during the late Yudhoyono era.

More recently, however, progressive civil society activists have found it increasingly difficult to influence policymaking and exercise diagonal accountability, defined here as "the ability of civil society actors and the media to constrain governments" (Laebens and Lührmann, 2021: 912). Under current President Jokowi, the once powerful narrative of democratic reform has lost its appeal (Setiawan and Tomsa, 2022) while oligarchs, military and police figures have tightened their grip over key cabinet portfolios and associated policy areas. As the quality of democracy began to decline from 2016/17 onwards, deepening polarisation, rising religious conservatism and growing state repression created a political atmosphere in which more and more people have become fearful of arbitrary detention and generally afraid to discuss political issues (SMRC, 2021).

In the face of these growing pressures on political freedoms and civil liberties, political activists have nonetheless demonstrated adaptability, resourcefulness and resilience, and, despite the narrowing space for dissent and protest, occasionally succeeded in halting and even reversing anti-democratic trends. In this article, we focus on two segments of civil society – women's rights groups and environmental activists – to illustrate broader patterns in progressive political activism in Indonesia today. We chose the women's rights movement and the environmental movement as case studies because they are not only directly affected by the general contraction of public space but also by two distinct undercurrents in Indonesia's democratic decline: the women's movement by the rise of Islamic conservatism and religious polarisation, the environmental movement by the consolidation and expansion of oligarchic power under Jokowi's "new developmentalism" (Warburton, 2016). Yet, despite the different kinds of pressures experienced by the two movements, both women's rights groups and environmental activists have continued to push for diagonal accountability, even though the windows of opportunity are clearly narrowing and success for civil society organisations appears to be increasingly dependent on support from international advocacy networks and/or segments of the political elite – support many civil society groups do not have access to.

We develop our argument in three main sections. Following this introduction, we first provide a brief overview of Indonesia's democratic decline and how it has generally

affected civil society. In the next section, we focus on the women's rights movement as a part of civil society that has come under enormous pressure in recent years yet has had some remarkable success in lobbying the government. We then move on to discuss the role of the environmental movement in contemporary Indonesia, demonstrating not only how democratic decline has impacted environmental activism but also how the movement has responded to the changing circumstances and what successes they have achieved.

Democratic Decline and Civil Society in Indonesia

For nearly two decades now, the quality of democracy around the world has been in decline (Freedom House, 2023). This global democratic recession – also known as ‘democratic backsliding’ (Bermeo, 2016), ‘democratic regression’ (Gerschewski, 2021) or ‘autocratisation’ (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) – has triggered renewed interest in the role of civil society. As autocrats and populists around the globe continue to undermine the institutional and ideational foundations of democracy, civil society has once again emerged as a bastion of hope in the struggle to defend civil liberties and political rights. In the academic literature, the renewed prominence of civil society is reflected, for example, in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project which has created novel civil society indices (Bernhard et al., 2017) which in turn have informed new models of measuring diagonal accountability (Lührmann et al., 2020: 813). In contrast to vertical and horizontal accountability, which refer to the role of elections and parties on the one hand and state institutions other than the executive on the other hand, diagonal accountability represents the extent to which civil society organisations, an independent media and engaged citizens hold a government accountable, for example through mass protests, public awareness campaigns or investigative journalism (Laebens and Lührmann, 2021).

The renewed focus on civil society as a catalyst for accountability is reminiscent of the optimism that surrounded the initial heyday of civil society during the third wave of democratisation when people power revolutions in the streets and academic debates about pathways to democratic consolidation prompted many scholars to regard civil society as “the domain that made democracy work” (Weiss, 2021: 13). While the focus in the 1990s was on civil society's contribution to democratic consolidation, the recent debate centres around the prospects for civil society to halt democratic erosion. Laebens and Lührmann (2021: 920) are among those who emphasise the enormous potential for civil society to safeguard democracy against executive power abuse, although they also caution that civil society mobilisation alone is not enough to achieve accountability: “while protests and civil society pressures are by themselves not sufficient to halt democratic erosion, they might be necessary for other accountability mechanisms to be effective.”

What underpins assessments like this is a highly normative understanding of civil society as inherently pro-democratic. Yet, while it is true that many civil society organisations – including those at the heart of the analysis of this article – do indeed struggle for democratic ideas and values, such a narrow conceptualisation overlooks that civil society can often be a very contested space in which progressive and liberal ideas and organisations compete with conservative, reactionary and at times outright authoritarian counterparts. To define civil

society, we, therefore, follow scholars like Rodan (2022: 8) or Hansson and Weiss (2023: 4) and understand civil society simply as a specific form of political space that is occupied and used by movements and activists who seek to influence the exercise of state power through a diverse range of mobilisation tactics and strategies. This definition makes no judgment about the political orientation of civil society organisations, thus encompassing both progressive pro-democratic movements and activists as well as organisations sometimes dubbed “uncivil society” (Beitinger-Lee, 2009; Kopecky and Mudde, 2003). Capturing both ends of the spectrum is important not least because the latter have gained significant momentum during the current democratic recession, often augmenting elite-driven efforts to undermine civil liberties and political rights (Bünthe and Weiss, 2023).

Indonesia is one of many examples that illustrates the need for a nuanced view of civil society well. When the country democratised in 1998, political reforms and the incorporation of civil and political rights in the country’s legal framework initially provided a fertile environment for the development of a lively and predominantly progressive civil society. Some observers estimated that between 1998 and 2000 alone, the number of NGOs grew to about 70,000 including many environmental organisations and women’s rights groups (Beitinger-Lee, 2009). The rapid expansion of political space and the noteworthy successes of some civil society organisations in shaping democratic reforms, particularly regarding labour rights (Caraway and Ford, 2019) and the fight against corruption (Schütte, 2013), contributed to the multitude of positive assessments on the state of Indonesian democracy in the early 2000s.

Arguably though, these positive assessments glossed over some significant challenges for progressive civil society groups in Indonesia, and many of these remain relevant today. Leftist ideas and organisations, for instance, are still weakly developed and marginalized as communism remains legally banned and socially stigmatised. As a result of the New Order legacy of oppression and depoliticisation, most civil society groups in Indonesia have modest goals and do not seek to radically alter the state or social order (Aspinall, 2004: 86). Another challenge that also has its roots in the New Order legacy is fragmentation. Given the sheer number of civil society organisations, this may seem almost inevitable, but fragmentation also refers to internal tensions and differences within certain segments of civil society, for example the human rights movement (McGregor and Setiawan, 2019). Even sectors that claim larger followings such as farmers and workers generally lack coherent umbrella bodies, which prevents the formation of effective coalitions and limits the ability to push for progressive change. Fragmentation is further exacerbated by competition for funding. Many civil society organisations are highly dependent on foreign donors or governments and are therefore constantly competing with one another for income (Aspinall, 2013). This has prevented organisations to work together on similar goals and has created dependencies between them, while “civil society elites” (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020) that have had repeated success in obtaining funding tend to have more influence in pro-democracy circles, sometimes leading to internal tensions (Aspinall, 2019).

Nevertheless, even when Indonesia’s democratic development began to stagnate from 2010 onwards, civil society resilience was still hailed as vitally important for preventing a democratic recession (Mietzner, 2012). Just a few years later, however, Indonesia did

slide into democratic recession (Power and Warburton, 2020) and civil society was not only unable to prevent this slide, but certain elements of it were in fact complicit in driving this development. Islamist vigilante (*preman*) groups, for instance, contributed to Indonesia's democratic decline through their frequent attacks on liberal civil society organisations, women's rights activists, religious and sexual minorities, and the small band of leftist groups at the margins of Indonesia's contested public sphere. Significantly, security forces often either stood idly by or actively encouraged these attacks (Jaffrey, 2020). The rise of Islamism, especially in the wake of the 2016 mass mobilisation against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (then better known as Ahok), also had the side effect of sharpening polarisation in Indonesia, with debilitating consequences for civil society's capacity to defend democracy as pluralist groups frequently targeted by Islamists began to condone the government's increasing executive illiberalism (Mietzner, 2021).

This increasing illiberalism has become manifest in multiple forms in recent years. President Jokowi and his government have, for instance, actively intervened in the internal affairs of opposition parties, crafted and used new legal tools to ban NGOs without prior judicial process, and criminalised numerous opposition figures under the pretext of fighting disinformation and hate speech (Mietzner, 2020). Moreover, the government has shown an increased willingness to use heavy-handed approaches when confronting demonstrations, as was evident during student protests in 2019 and 2020 where the security apparatus used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds. Students were also threatened to be expelled from university, should they participate in further protests.

In sum, there is no doubt that space for dissent in Indonesia has contracted and that civil society's capacity to exercise diagonal accountability has declined due to the concurrent rise in executive illiberalism and religious polarisation. Significantly, both progressive pro-democracy forces and reactionary Islamist groups have felt the effects of the state's tightening grip. In addition, the Jokowi presidency has also seen a further consolidation of oligarchic power in the top ranks of government, with more oligarchs represented in cabinet in Jokowi's second term than in his first term or during the Yudhoyono years. The oligarchy's increasing control over state institutions was particularly evident in the passing of several controversial laws in recent years, especially the highly contentious Omnibus Law on Job Creation that was passed in 2020 despite mass protests from students and civil society organisations (Strangio, 2020). The law includes many passages deemed beneficial for big business while curtailing labour rights and environmental protections.

And yet, progressive politics in Indonesia is far from defeated (Dibley and Ford, 2019). As we demonstrate in the following sections, political activists have shown remarkable resilience over the years, adapting to the growing pressures through new strategies and occasionally succeeding in exercising diagonal accountability. In the next part of this article, we will trace the women's rights movement's struggle to achieve better protections for victims of sexual violence to illustrate how civil society is responding

to Indonesia's democratic decline and what achievements can still be made in the face of significant opposition from an increasingly illiberal state.

Civil Society and Women's Rights: Coalition-Building Against Religious Conservatism

Throughout Indonesia's long history of women's political organisation and participation, patriarchal norms have constrained women's activism (Blackburn, 2004). Especially during the presidency of Suharto (1966–1998), the state entrenched patriarchal gender norms through policy that promoted nuclear families and confined women's roles to motherhood and the household (Suryakusuma, 1987). Nonetheless, from the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s more women became involved in broader movements and networks which drew extensively on the global human rights movement and feminist ideas that sought to counter the regime (Blackburn, 2004), although this also led to the women's movement being labelled as the tool of “foreign agents”.

The end of the New Order in 1998 was amongst others characterised by gendered violence: as the authoritarian government attempted to blame the economic crisis on Chinese Indonesians, violence against this group erupted in many Indonesian cities. This included the assault and rape of Chinese Indonesian women under the orders of the security forces and vigilante groups backed by them (Purdey, 2006). In response to the violence that accompanied the collapse of the New Order, the government established the National Commission on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) in October 1998. The creation of Komnas Perempuan merely five months after the resignation of Suharto has been widely regarded as a milestone for Indonesia's women's movement.

The *reformasi* period was marked by a significant shift in gender politics at the government level. The Ministry of Women, which had been established in 1975 in response to international demands, was renamed the Ministry for Women's Empowerment and became more outspoken on policies related to gender equality. The government's increased engagement on gender issues paved the way for the establishment of numerous new women's groups, networks and unions, while existing state corporatist organisations which under the New Order were mandated to support the state's gender ideology adjusted to allow for more participation. Since then, civil society organisations concerned with women's rights have been active in issues such as gendered violence, labour rights, reproductive health, women's education, women's access to social protection programs and support of female-headed households. The strategies of these organisations include lobbying for legislative and policy change, enhancing women's knowledge (i.e., through informal women's schools), their abilities and confidence to participate in decision-making in their communities through organising training in various skills (i.e., public speaking), as well as lifting women's economic capacity (Diprose et al., 2020).

At the national level, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in political parties and government. To a large extent, this is the result of government policy introduced in response to lobbying by women's rights activists with the aim of addressing

gender imbalances in political participation. Throughout the early 2000s, women's groups campaigned for a gender quota and in 2008 such a quota was finally introduced, making it compulsory for parties to adhere to a 30 percent minimum of female candidates (Bessell, 2010). In addition, a so-called zipper system meant that for every three candidates on a party list, there should be at least one female nominee. These changes had considerable success: in the 2019 elections, over 40 percent of candidates were women and 20 percent of seats were won by women, up from only 7 percent in 1999 (Prihatini, 2020).

Despite these advancements, gender ideologies have not been reversed or significantly shifted. In fact, gender ideology remains relevant and patriarchal norms are still deeply embedded in society, which poses a tremendous challenge to women's political participation and gender equality advocacy. In addition, the rise of political Islam in the post-1998 period has posed a particular challenge for women's activism as conservative Islamic groups built alliances with political parties and government representatives to promote more religiously conservative ideas and policies. This has meant that gender equality has been highly contested in the post-authoritarian period, illustrated by the fact that advances are often cancelled out by subsequent regressions.

For instance, when the Law on Human Rights was passed with several specific provisions on women's rights in 1999, first steps were already taken to introduce the so-called Anti-Pornography Bill, which was eventually passed in 2008 and which contains provisions like a more conservative dress code for women. Meanwhile, at the local level, a range of regulations based on Islamic law (so-called *Perda Sharia*) placed restrictions on women's dress, sexuality, and movement (Buehler, 2016). As religious polarisation increased in the aftermath of the Islamist mass protests against former Jakarta governor Ahok, the Jokowi government sought to send a signal against religious conservatism when it decreed that women and girls could choose whether to wear a jilbab at state schools, but in 2021 the Supreme Court cancelled the regulation, effectively making the head covering mandatory (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In a similar vein, there has been a worrying increase of discrimination and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Indonesians, while the new Criminal Code that was passed in 2022 also poses significant restrictions on women's rights. All these developments show that while there have been some noteworthy improvements in women's formal electoral participation and representation, the civil liberties of women and sexual minorities have been heavily affected by the broader contours of Indonesia's democratic decline.

The Law on Sexual Violence

And yet, amidst the overall context of democratic regression, in April 2022 the People's Representative Council (DPR) almost unanimously passed Law 12/2022 on the Crime of Sexual Violence (*Undang Undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual*, hereafter the Law on Sexual Violence). The Law has been hailed as a major milestone for women's rights as it criminalises nine forms of sexual violence that are not covered in existing laws, such as physical and non-physical sexual abuse, forced marriage, sexual slavery and online sexual violence. Importantly, the Law also establishes a victim-centred approach to the

handling of sexual violence cases, which among others means that police, prosecutors and judges who handle cases of sexual violence must participate in specialised gender training. The Law also explicitly states that cases of sexual violence cannot be resolved through alternative mechanisms or restorative justice approaches (Prawesti and Mann, 2022). Through its provision of basic human rights protections, the Law constitutes a hard-fought win for Indonesian human rights advocates and women's activists who had been working towards such a law for more than a decade. In other words, the Law illustrates the importance of civil society activism in ensuring diagonal accountability in an increasingly illiberal environment of democratic decline.

A key element of civil society advocacy for the Law on Sexual Violence has been the development of a broad civil society coalition supportive of the initial draft legislation. Over time, more than 300 organisations joined the campaign to pass the Bill into Law. An important role in bringing this coalition together was played by Komnas Perempuan which back in 2010 had raised the need for such a law in order to better respond to increased reports of cases of sexual violence against women. In 2014, the Commission prepared a draft of the law, which was initially called the Bill on the Elimination of Sexual Violence. Two years later, the Bill was included in the list of legislative priorities and President Jokowi openly expressed his support for the Bill (Komnas Perempuan, 2016).

Nonetheless, opposition against the Bill from conservative groups and Islamist political parties was substantial. For instance, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) alleged that because the bill did not criminalise sex outside of marriage, it would promote so-called 'deviant' behaviours. So strong was this opposition, that there were delays to the discussion of the Bill in parliament as more moderate parties such as the Democratic Party (PD) feared an Islamist backlash and thus were unwilling to support the bill. As a result, in 2020 the Bill was removed from the list of legislative priorities, and discussions were put on hold until the following year. When deliberations restarted, the name of the Bill was changed to 'Crime of Sexual Violence' (*tindak pidana kekerasan seksual*), while several forms of sexual violence were excluded, including rape and sexual torture (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

Due to this considerable opposition, it was extremely important for civil society activists to generate support for the Bill not only at the level of the political elites but also the general public. Members of the coalition for the enactment of the Bill simultaneously used strategies aimed at the legislative process, for example by holding meetings with the DPR's legislative body, and public discussions with various stakeholders. They also used the data they collected individually and collectively to provide evidence for sexual violence crimes. To generate more public support, activists used a "bottom-up" approach and initiated several campaigns, including on social media, and public demonstrations, for instance coinciding with Human Rights Day in 2018.

Advocacy Meets Political Expediency

As momentum for the Bill was building, the coalition of organisations to support the passage of the Bill began to extend beyond civil society organisations, with a number

of businesses also lending their support. For instance, in 2020, the Body Shop Indonesia, a major cosmetics and skin care brand, asked its customers to monitor the legislative process and collected over half a million signatures to support the passage of the bill (Antara, 2022). A year later, another beauty brand, L’Oreal Paris Indonesia similarly joined the campaign. This also followed developments globally where there was heightened awareness and discussion of sexual abuse in the context of the #MeToo movement (Tirto, 2021). Indonesian activists were thus able to tap into wider advocacy networks and connect the issue to developments beyond national borders. Other crucially important allies emerged in the form of Indonesia’s largest Islamic mass organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Machmudi, 2020). With an estimated combined membership of more than 100 million Muslims, these organisations carry enormous influence, both at the grassroots as well as the corridors of power in Jakarta. Taken together, the extension of the coalition from its core of progressive women’s rights organisations to mainstream Muslim groups and major businesses resulted in heightened awareness of and support for the Bill across various segments of the political elites and societal groups. Importantly, this approach over time changed perceptions of sexual violence from being largely considered a morality issue to one of human rights and gender (Yentriyani, 2022).

At the same time, however, support for the Bill cannot be separated from political expediency and in particular the Jokowi government’s efforts to crack down on Islamism. Following the 2016 mass demonstrations against the then governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (‘Ahok’), tensions between Islamists and moderate pluralists became more pronounced, and the Jokowi government began to see Islamic conservatives as a major political threat. One way in which the government responded to this perceived threat was to bring charges against leaders of the anti-Ahok mobilisation: FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab, for instance, was investigated for several crimes including the alleged spreading of pornographic images and texts (Mietzner, 2018: 275–6). At the same time, the government sought to gain the support of Islamic moderates and those who had been part of the mobilisation against Ahok but were deemed less radical. This translated into increased political patronage for the traditionalist Islamic mass organisation NU, including the nomination of its senior cleric—ironically, also known for his conservatism—Ma’ruf Amin as vice-presidential candidate alongside Jokowi in the 2019 election. After Jokowi’s re-election, the government continued its campaign against Islamist groups, including through the screening of civil servants and the certification of preachers. In addition, managers in higher education, state-owned enterprises and private businesses were instructed to monitor their students and employees (Nuraniyah, 2020).

The government’s positioning against Islamic conservatism was also noticeable in the second half of 2021 when several senior government officials took up the issue publicly following increased reports of sexual violence at university campuses. The Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, for instance declared a “critical emergency” and issued a Ministerial Regulation on the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence in Higher Education. The Regulation was met with strong criticism from Islamist organisations

and parties, who argued that this would contribute to sexual deviancy, but other government officials—most notably the Minister of Religious Affairs, who is also a former leader of the youth wing of NU—lent their support for the Regulation. The growing support given to the Bill by NU significantly sped up the deliberation process in parliament (*Antara*, 2021).

Support for the Bill intensified further when in early 2022, increased reports of sexual abuse at Islamic educational institutions emerged. In some cases, it was evident that Islamic organisations played a role in the cover up of these cases, allowing perpetrators to continue their abuse of students. This attracted significant public outcry and condemnation, which in turn facilitated another slight change in perception of the Bill. Increasingly, it was now seen as a necessity to protect women—a matter that transcended religious divides. Willy Aditya, the chairperson of the DPR’s legislative body, stated that the Bill was a “reflection of civilisation, a solution to the problems the community faces” (DPR, 2022). President Jokowi once again came out in strong support for the Bill, arguing that the protection of victims of sexual violence should be a “common concern” (Lai and Janti, 2022). It is in this context, that the Bill was eventually passed. Only the PKS did not vote in favour.

The passage of the Law on Sexual Violence is an important step forward for the protection of human rights, and particularly women’s rights in Indonesia. Significantly, civil society advocacy played a crucial role in getting the law over the line. The success of civil society was influenced by the leadership from Komnas Perempuan and the movement’s overall cohesiveness, contrasting with the general challenge of fragmentation of civil society we identified earlier in this article. In addition, the commitment of civil society groups and their ability to use a wide range of strategies translated into strong support for the enactment of the Law, both among political elites and public opinion. At the same time, however, the passage of the Law cannot be separated from political interests: political elites’ support for the Law was ultimately informed by the government’s push back on Islamism and provided an opportunity for senior government officials to highlight the dangers of ‘radical’ Islam. Paradoxically then, it was the broader context of executive illiberalism, which had initially emerged in response to the rise of Islamism and subsequently suppressed so much public debate, that facilitated one of Indonesia’s most noteworthy human rights reforms. The passage of the law should therefore not necessarily be seen as a reversal of the broader trend of democratic decline. Rather, it illustrates that this trend is not entirely linear and that opportunities for progressive civil society to push back against autocratisation and enforce diagonal accountability continue to exist, even if the windows of opportunity have narrowed considerably. The fact that it took nearly ten years for the women’s movement to eventually secure passage of this law shows just how difficult it has become to seize these opportunities.

Civil Society and the Environment: Collaboration and Confrontation in the Face of Democratic Decline

Like the women’s rights movement, Indonesian environmentalists have at times been accused of being agents of Western interests, but their main adversaries in their political

struggle have been somewhat different. Whereas women's rights activists have had to contend mainly with entrenched structures of patriarchy and an increasingly conservative religious morality, civil society groups dedicated to conservation, sustainability and climate action have waged their battles primarily against the political and economic interests of Indonesia's powerful oligarchy (Hadiz and Robison, 2013). Such tensions between political economy and ecology are of course neither new nor unique to Indonesia, but during the presidency of Jokowi they have gained renewed prominence as infrastructure development and the expansion of the palm oil industry became cornerstones of economic policy. Beyond the struggle against these "material realities" (Maxton-Lee, 2018), another persistent challenge for Indonesia's environmental movement has been a widespread lack of awareness of environmental problems and threats, as has been documented in a number of surveys and studies (Fagan and Huang, 2019, Parker and Prabawa-Sear, 2020).

Combatting this lack of awareness and knowledge is therefore one of the most important activities many environmental groups are engaged in. Equally diverse and fragmented as other parts of Indonesian civil society, the movement comprises a vast network of organisations working on issues ranging from climate change and green energy over deforestation, habitat restoration and biodiversity conservation to wildlife trafficking, pollution and waste management. Often, their work overlaps with that of human rights and land rights organisations fighting against land grabs and dispossession by mining, timber and palm oil companies (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Many environmental NGOs operate within small, confined areas at the local level and are driven entirely by volunteers whereas at the other end of the spectrum, globally connected "civil society elites" (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020) like Greenpeace or the World Wildlife Fund for Nature control much larger resources that allow them to run donor-funded conservation projects and public awareness campaigns aimed at escalating local issues to an international audience.

Like other sectors of civil society, Indonesia's environmentalists pursue their struggle through a mix of community engagement, lobbying, legal challenges, contentious politics and non-violent everyday resistance. In addition, many of the larger NGOs committed to ecological modernisation and the United Nations' sustainable development goals run their own conservation projects and seek to influence environmental policy through direct collaboration with the state, especially the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. Indonesia therefore stands representative of broader trends in Southeast Asia where environmental civil society "has become a contested terrain of hegemonic, 'green growth' strategies on the one hand, and social-ecological transformation strategies on the other" (Pye, 2023: 331). Significantly though, civil society organisations from both sides of this contested terrain have become entangled in Indonesia's democratic decline as they find it increasingly challenging to navigate the growing pressures that have resulted from the combined effects of criminalisation, surveillance and censorship.

How Democratic Decline Has Affected Environmental Activism

Indonesia's democratic decline has had multiple effects on environmental politics. According to Tomsa and Bax (2023), three developments have been particularly

concerning. First, the rising tide of nationalist populism and the “new developmentalism” (Warburton, 2016) that have characterised the Jokowi presidency have reversed his predecessor’s cautious pro-Green discourse and once again bolstered the notion that the environment is not to be preserved but to be exploited for economic development. Second, controversial new legislation such as the 2019 amendments to the KPK law, the 2020 Mining Law or the 2020 Job Creation Law, recently backed up by a government regulation in lieu of law (Perppu) issued by Jokowi, have systematically weakened legal environmental protections. Third, environmental activists have been caught up in the concerted state campaign to curb dissent, especially when trying to challenge government narratives about deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, palm oil or the negative effects of infrastructure projects on the environment.

Attempts to silence critical voices have taken many forms. In the most extreme cases, activists have faced direct threats to life and property, like, for example, the WALHI activist in East Nusa Tenggara whose house was targeted in an arson attack in 2019. In the same year, another activist from the same organisation died under mysterious circumstances in a traffic accident in North Sumatra after he had challenged a range of provincial elites in court. Well-aware of the political climate in which these incidents occurred, WALHI’s executive director subsequently pointed the finger at the lacklustre police investigations, bemoaning that the Indonesian state makes insufficient efforts to protect environmental activists (Nugraha, 2020).

More common though is the threat of criminalisation of activists, especially through the use of the notorious Information and Electronic Transaction (ITE) Law. In their research on NGO involvement in land conflicts over palm oil, Berenschot et al. (2023: 514) found that hundreds of community leaders were arrested for their role in protests. Similarly, WALHI documented 723 cases of criminalisation of environmental activists during Jokowi’s first term alone (Islah, 2021), including many allegations of insulting state officials and the state ideology Pancasila. Activists were also reported to police for allegedly spreading communist ideology after hammer and sickle symbols had mysteriously appeared in their neighbourhoods, while others were charged with spurious treason allegations for hanging national flags upside down. Many of these cases occur in remote locations at the local level where communities oppose land reclamation and road extensions or the incursion of mining and palm oil operations onto their land.

Supporting these local struggles are often larger organisations with a national institutional infrastructure such as WALHI. As is evident from the abovementioned attacks in East Nusa Tenggara and North Sumatra, however, these activists are by no means immune from the constant threat of intimidation and harassment. Even some of the larger organisations that focus less on direct community engagement and more on raising public awareness have been caught up in the deteriorating climate. In the run-up to the G20 Summit in Bali, for example, activists from Greenpeace who sought to put the spotlight on Indonesia’s lack of climate action by cycling from Jakarta to Denpasar were reportedly harassed and attacked by police and thugs (Amnesty International, 2021). Later that month, two prominent activists from the same organisation were reported to police for their criticism of Jokowi’s speech at the COP26 in

Glasgow, even though that report was quickly withdrawn after a public outcry (Nurita, 2021).

Another NGO that encountered the government's wrath is the Yayasan WWF Indonesia. This local offshoot of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature had long been at the forefront of the sustainability-focused partnership approach, but in January 2020, the Ministry for the Environment and Forestry accused the foundation of violating the terms of its long-existing collaboration arrangement and a lack of respect for the government (Arumingtyas and Satri, 2020). The Ministry then terminated all existing cooperation via a ministerial decree, thus ending a more than 20-year-old partnership (Permana, 2020) and sending a clear message to other conservation groups not to challenge the government's interests when it comes to environmental issues. Significantly, in the wake of the WWF case, the ministry's surveillance of conservation projects and the pressure to align project outcomes and publications with the government's agenda apparently intensified, while journalists have reported growing difficulties to gain access to sensitive government data on deforestation or numbers of threatened flagship species like orang-utans or tigers.

How Activists and Communities Are Responding

The changing political landscape has prompted environmentalists to consider a range of adaptations to the ways in which they pursue their goals. While the tried-and-tested strategies of raising awareness, lobbying, litigation and mobilisation still form the core of the movement's activities, several new nuances can be detected within this repertoire of strategies. In February 2021, for example, some activists from the radical end of the spectrum sought to revive the dormant Indonesian Green Party (*Partai Hijau Indonesia*, PHI), which had been formed in 2012 but never actually conducted any activities, by holding PHI's first-ever national congress (Van Klinken and Permana, 2022). Though largely seen as a symbolic move reminiscent of the creation of the People's Democratic Party (*Partai Rakyat Demokratik*, PRD) during the New Order – Indonesia's notoriously tight registration requirements for political parties to compete in elections make it virtually impossible for a party like PHI to achieve accreditation from the General Election Commission – activists hoped to send a signal that progressive politics in Indonesia is ready to enter a new phase.

At the less radical end of the movement, the nationalist populism that has underpinned Indonesia's democratic decline has apparently provided a new impetus for some international organisations to consider localising their structures and align themselves with the global decolonisation agenda. Operating as a locally registered NGO rather than an international organisation with local staff not only shields conservationists better against allegations of foreign influence but also provides important options to diversify partnerships. Whereas international organisations operating in Indonesia are required to have just one specific government agency as their partner, national NGOs can build partnerships with a broader range of ministries, making them less vulnerable if communication with one minister breaks down. In 2022, Conservation International became the

latest NGO to localise and continue its operations through a locally registered foundation, Yayasan Konservasi Indonesia.

In terms of lobbying, members of prominent conservation groups at the national level have quietly pointed to the WWF case to illustrate that constructive dialogue with the Ministry of Environment and Forestry over policy and project proposals has become more complicated. In response, some have developed new informal processes of political mapping whereby key figures in the lower echelons of the ministry as well as members of parliament and representatives of local governments are identified and approached in the hope of brokering better environmental outcomes. The importance of political brokerage was also highlighted by Berenschot et al. (2023: 515) as an important strategy for smaller NGOs engaged in land disputes at the local level. Here, the NGOs themselves try to act as the brokers between communities and local politicians with the aim of achieving mediation with the business that is threatening to take away the land. This reliance on informal channels is symptomatic of wider political processes in Indonesia where formal conflict resolution mechanisms are mostly ineffective. However, according to Berenschot et al. (2023), informal brokerage also rarely leads to successful outcomes, partly because businesses use the very same strategies and they do so with more resources than civil society groups.

Where neither legal action nor mobilisation nor brokerage succeed, local communities at times resort to subtle forms of everyday resistance to express their ongoing opposition against environmental destruction and the seemingly overbearing might of the state and its oligarchic allies. Chao (2023) has documented such acts of everyday resistance by the Indigenous Marind communities of rural West Papua, a community threatened by deforestation and palm oil expansion. Having exhausted various formal avenues of advocacy and protest without much success, Marind activists have responded to the encroachment of palm oil plantations on their land with various practices of “multispecies mourning.” Apart from the weaving of sago bags and the creation of songs, perhaps the most potent act of collective resistance has been the transplanting of bamboos from the forest to the boundaries of customary territories, especially near the intersections with oil palm plantations. Through these activities, the Indigenous activists have demonstrated their ongoing agency in the face of the palm oil juggernaut, ‘eschewing resistance to mourning and instead embracing mourning as resistance’ (Chao, 2023: 573).

Environmental Achievements Against the Odds

In Indonesia’s current political climate, prospects for better environmental outcomes appear grim. As Pye (2023: 340) said, “authoritarian rollback is also environmental rollback.” And yet, even though the broader trend in Indonesia confirms this correlation, there have been some silver linings in recent years, showing that neither Indonesia’s democratic decline nor its environmental consequences follow a completely linear trajectory (Tomsa and Bax, 2023). Indeed, just like their fellow activists from the women’s rights movement, environmentalists have at times defied the odds and succeeded in their efforts to enforce diagonal accountability by stopping contentious infrastructure

or land reclamation projects, helping revise important conservation regulations or pushing through mitigation measures to lessen the impact of already approved projects. A few examples will illustrate the broad range of small wins for environmental activists in recent years.

First, activists have continued to use litigation as a means of trying to stop contentious projects or raising awareness, and in doing so, have achieved some important, if perhaps largely symbolic victories in court. An early trendsetter was the high-profile case against PT Kallista Alam, the Indonesian palm oil company which in 2015 was found guilty by the Supreme Court of deliberately using fire to clear peat swamp forests in Aceh and ordered to pay approximately US\$ 26 million in fines and restoration costs. The verdict came after a highly effective campaign by a coalition of NGOs and was hailed as an unprecedented success for environmentalists over the powerful palm oil lobby (Farhan and Hoebink, 2019; Ruyschaert and Hufty, 2020). However, the case also demonstrated the problems with litigation as PT Kallista Alam subsequently blocked all attempts by the government to execute the verdict. By late 2022 the company was yet to pay its fine and restoration costs, even though its formal appeal against the verdict had been rejected (Waspada, 2022).

Not to be deterred, in 2019 a group of 32 activists banded together in the Capital City Coalition and lodged a civil lawsuit against President Jokowi, several government ministers and the Governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, to seek decisive measures to improve air quality in Indonesia's notoriously polluted capital city. In June 2021, the Central Jakarta District Court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs and found the accused guilty of environmental negligence. Even more remarkably, a subsequent appeal by the president was also rejected by the Jakarta High Court just over a year later (Aqil, 2022). Meanwhile, around the same time the president's appeal was rejected, the Bandung State Administrative Court in the capital of West Java revoked a permit for a massive coal-fired power plant in Cirebon, which was estimated to produce more than 200 million metric tons of CO₂ emissions over its 30-year proposed life (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

Second, the successful mobilisation of the ForBALI movement against a planned reclamation project in southern Bali's Benoa Bay demonstrated that large-scale mobilisation can also at times sway government decisions. Led by a seasoned WALHI campaigner and supported by a broad coalition of environmental NGOs, musicians, artists, environmentally concerned citizens, lawyers as well as religious and adat leaders, the ForBALI movement combined a diverse range of protest strategies with innovative protest aesthetics to develop a strong collective identity based on Bali's specific religious and cultural identities (Bräuchler, 2020). Out of humble beginnings, ForBALI grew into a powerful protest movement whose demonstrations, social media campaigns, lawsuits, concerts, film screenings and art exhibitions in 2015 and 2016 prompted the Minister of Environment and Forestry to withhold a required environmental impact assessment (Tans, 2021). Though protests peaked in 2016, the movement was able to maintain the pressure on the government over subsequent years, so that the area around Benoa Bay was eventually declared a maritime conservation area in 2019.

Third, organisations involved in direct negotiations with the government over conservation issues also achieved a major milestone in 2018 when the government agreed to update its list of nationally protected plant and animal species for the first time in nearly 20 years. Even though the final outcome was watered down after pressure from Indonesia's powerful birdkeeping lobby, the new list eventually included more than 200 new species which provides a stronger legal basis for protecting wildlife (Gokkon, 2018). Around the same time, a broad coalition of conservation groups also successfully lobbied the Indonesian government to join other Southeast Asian states to support a new National Action Plan and Conservation Strategy to better protect one of the region's rarest birds, the critically endangered Helmeted Hornbill (Jain et al., 2018).

What all these examples have in common is that civil society activists from different backgrounds and organisations joined forces in achieving these outcomes. Advocacy coalitions are important in a heavily fragmented civil society landscape to avoid the kind of atomisation that characterises many environmental struggles. They can also help broaden the focus beyond purely environmental concerns to include religious, cultural and human rights issues, as happened in the ForBALI campaign which in fact only grew into a powerful movement once religious and adat leaders had come on board. Given the low levels of environmental awareness in Indonesia, civil society campaigns focused squarely on the environment face enormous mobilisation hurdles, so linking conservation issues with more tangible community concerns like dispossession or violation of adat rules has proven to be a useful approach.

Finally, the examples provided here add further evidence to findings from other studies that stress the importance of linkages with transnational advocacy networks (Berenschot, Dhiaulhaq and Deviane, 2023; Farhan and Hoebink, 2019: 21). Such linkages can help build momentum for protest campaigns, provide additional scientific and legal expertise and raise the bar for the government to oppose the power of civil society. ForBALI, for instance, took direct inspiration from the Occupy Movement and adopted a range of protest strategies earlier applied by that global movement. The plaintiffs in the legal case against the Cirebon power plant, meanwhile, received scientific expert advice from the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW), whereas the push for new protection guidelines for plants and animals was coordinated between a range of globally active conservation organisations who negotiated directly with government agencies.

Conclusion

In recent years, Indonesia's democratic decline has significantly narrowed the space for civil society actors. Nonetheless, progressive political activists continue to fight against this trend, and as we have shown in this article, sometimes activists have considerable success. By examining environmental and women's rights activism, we have demonstrated that despite challenging circumstances, civil society actors can be effective in upholding diagonal accountability and defending human rights. Important advances in recent years for the environment include a halt to infrastructure and land reclamation

projects as well as revised conservation regulations, while in the context of gender equality, the enactment of the Law on Sexual Violence means that women's rights activists have secured one of the most significant human rights reforms since the end of the New Order regime in 1998.

The experiences of environmental and women's rights activists show that civil society activists use a wide range of approaches to advocate for change. What is crucial for achieving success, however, is that activists create broad coalitions of diverse organisations which in turn are able to engage with, and mobilise, a wide audience. It is through these large-scale mobilisations, as illustrated by the ForBALI movement and the many, and repeated, protests for the Law on Sexual Violence, that pressure continues to be placed on legislators and policy makers. In addition, both the campaigns for environmental and women's rights built coalitions with influential community leaders. In the case of the ForBALI campaign, for instance, religious and *adat* leaders lent their support for the cause, while the campaign for the Law on Sexual Violence was backed by both of Indonesia's mass Islamic organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah.

At the same time, however, there are also differences. For instance, campaigns for environmental rights have drawn significantly on transnational networks, which helped build momentum for the campaign and provided practical support. In contrast, the campaign for the Law on Sexual Violence was primarily driven by Indonesian organisations, with leadership from the widely respected Komnas Perempuan. The environmental movement lacks a comparable counterpart that could coordinate campaigns in a similar fashion, even though Walhi takes an informal leadership role in many campaigns. In addition, while the passage of the Law on Sexual Violence is mostly a result of civil society advocacy, ultimately it cannot be separated from the political context, and especially the fact that the Law aligned with the government's political priorities at the time.

The achievements of both environmental and women's rights activists are significant, considering the broader context of democratic regression and narrowing space for civil society activism. Equally, the successes of civil society actors show that processes of democratic decline are not linear and actors across different sectors are pushing back against this trend, and in doing so also find the support of societal and political actors alike. While the success stories in this article do not mean that civil society's challenges, including fragmentation, executive illiberalism, oligarchic state capture and religious conservatism, will subside, they do provide hope for progressive political movements to continue their efforts to uphold diagonal accountability and defend human rights.

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