



Playing Politics: Power, Memory, and Agency in the Making of the Indonesian Student Movement

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Summary – Playing Politics

The student movement is among the most mythologised figures in Indonesian history, in which the role of students as the ‘vanguard in the national struggle’ has long been exalted. Yet, the student movement is among the least understood political actors, as persistent myths about the student movement as ‘agent of history’ and a ‘moral force’ disconnect it from the social and political processes of student activism, and reduces it to an ahistoric icon of historic events. Thus viewed as a separate category, the student movement has been largely neglected in the scholarship on Indonesian politics, civil society, and social movements, a neglect that is further exacerbated by the elite bias in this field of study. Meanwhile, apart from specific case studies of student protests, theories of student activism have hardly evolved beyond the literature of the late 1960s and 1970s, which produced its own persistent myths about ‘young radicals’ and ‘students in revolt’ as a figure fraught with connotations of possibility and risk, again detached from political history and culture.

In this study I have sought to recontextualise the student movement in political history and culture and to re-embed it in the collective and personal experiences of its actors. I have attempted to deconstruct the myths surrounding the notion of student struggle by tracing their genealogy and political uses in Indonesian history, from the colonial era up to the recent era of reform, while examining their effects on the student movement’s dynamics of mobilisation and styles of action. In analysing these dynamics I have built on identity approaches in social movement theory; in particular, I have highlighted the role of narrative in the construction of the student movement as part of a political culture in the ongoing process of reconstruction, including the interplay between historical memories and cultural repertoires of struggle and activists’ sense of self and agency. Further, I have introduced the concept of playing politics, to highlight underlying dynamics of student protest as a process of (self-) actualisation, evolving at that interplay of political culture and subjective agency.

First, playing politics refers to the process of acquiring activist dispositions and a ‘feel for the game’ of activism through play – including the discovery of political selves through encounters with others, growing comfortable with the role of activist by playing at being one, learning politics through initiation, imitation, and trial-and-error, as well as the pleasure and excitement of collective action, as captured in the oft-mentioned ‘spirit of struggle’. Second, playing politics refers to the performative aspects of student protest – including the dramatic theatrical-

ity, scripts, and rhetoric, as well as cheekiness and playfulness characterising the style of student movements – which involves a mimicry as well as mockery of political roles and repertoires, whereby these roles and repertoires are both reproduced and reconstructed. Finally, playing politics refers to the ‘play realm’ of student protest in Indonesia, where the student movement – due to its historical mythologisation – has acquired a ‘special license’ to protest not granted to other actors. But, this license comes with a limit, which is established through ‘wars of representation’, or the symbolic battles that the student movement engages in with the state and other opponents – not only over its protest targets but also over the representation and control of the student movement’s identity and agency as a legitimate political subject, including its power to act and its space to move.

This study, then, is a historically extended ethnography of the narrative construction of the student movement, the symbolic battles it engages in, and its dynamics of playing politics. It is based on twenty months of participant observation across the movement’s networks in Jakarta – including thirty-two life-story interviews with (former) student activists from different cohorts and organisations – and discourse analysis of (Indonesian-language) historical texts and other sources. The fourteen chapters of this study are divided into five parts. In Part One I discuss the theoretical framework and methodology of my research, including a critical discussion of classical theories of Indonesian politics and student activism as well as the dominant strategy paradigm in social movement theory, arguing that they have contributed to circumscribing the definitions of student political identity and agency. As an alternative approach, I then highlight the role of narrative and play in protest, which also formed the basis of my methodology.

In Part Two, I trace the genealogy of the narrative of students’ ‘historical agency’, as it evolved through changing regimes – from colonial rule, to the Japanese occupation and the national revolution, to Sukarno’s Guided Democracy, and the first decade of Suharto’s New Order. I show how the experiences and battles of each era congealed into a specific set of narrative themes, which then set the parameters for the political identity and agency of future student generations. These include the theme of radical, progressive, uncompromising youth as a distinct political character; the theme of struggle as populist, militant action; the theme of students as the carriers of the banner of unity; and especially the theme of a determined spirit of struggle, which became the core of the identity of activist students and has since lived on through performed memory as the spirit of ‘making history through struggle’. Based on these narrative themes, Indonesian students found their ‘national duty’ as ‘history-making beings’. However, this also created paradoxes in students’ political identity that have kept student movements contained in a separate sphere of struggle for generations to come – including the tension between ‘national duty’ and ‘playful spirit’, between the

elitist exclusivity of political vanguardism and the populist identification with the people, and between the ideals of ‘unity’ and ‘autonomy’ of struggle and the reality of political partisanship and mutual rivalry.

These paradoxes were deepened during Guided Democracy and the first decade of the New Order, when students became enmeshed in the power struggles of national elites, while the narrative of student struggle was institutionalised as a national myth that was used as an ideological tool by those in power – from Sukarno’s manipulation of the 1928 Youth Pledge to attack his opponents, to Suharto’s manipulation of the Angkatan 66 myth as a legitimising narrative of his rise to power and to mark the end point of the role of students in the history of national struggle. Moreover, during Sukarno’s battles with the 1966 student movement and all the more during Suharto’s battles with the student movements of the 1970s, new disciplinary patterns were established to keep student protest in check, as the state began combining the strategy of narrative attacks – with allegations of ‘extremism’, ‘deviance from national values’, and ‘manipulation by hidden actors’ systematically thrown at student protesters – with military repression when students crossed the invisible boundaries of their ‘special license’. Since the 1974 Malari riots, these boundaries were set at campus gates, precluding students’ potential unification with the ‘dangerous masses’ on the streets. And since the 1978 crackdown on campuses, the ‘special license’ to protest even on campus was revoked, marking the start of two decades of systematic depoliticisation.

By then, however, students had developed a strong sense of political self and political sensibilities of their own, and a unique feel for the game of oppositional politics, over which the state had little control. These sensibilities were passed on through the stock of collective memories of struggle that reached students through alternative narrative channels – including poems, published diaries, critical articles, defence speeches of students on trial, and student-to-student socialisation. As I show in Part Three, these stories helped to politicise students even as they were subjected to the depoliticising socialisation programs of the New Order. However, I also show that the process of politicisation in this ‘era of stability’ started long before entering university, and need to be traced to the everyday experiences of disorder and discrepancy that confronted young people growing up in this climate from an early age. It was through these experiences that initial ‘no’s’ and ‘why’s’ cropped up in young people’s minds, and that oppositional subjectivities were gradually shaped before political awareness was formed. Once entering the university, these subjectivities combined with the oppositional narratives that were passed on from cohort to cohort in the ‘free spaces’ that activists created for themselves on and around campus – from study clubs, to the ‘night’ versions of (semi-) formal student bodies, to campus mosque associations. I show

how these ‘free spaces’ were linked with formal campus politics as well as off-campus movements, and that it was through these intricate ties and networks that students developed new activist identities and practices – including a penchant for radical populism – not through simple recruitment but in a playful process of discovery and improvisation, in which one activity and encounter led to another, each step strengthening their activist sense of self.

In Part Four, I show how these activist sensibilities further developed as new student movements rose onto the public stage under rapidly shifting political conditions – from the ‘student movement revival’ in the late 1980s to mid-1990s in the period of ‘openness’, to the repression following the July 1996 riots, to the dramatic rise of the 1998 student movement in a context of crisis, and finally the continued struggle for ‘total reform’ under three rapidly succeeding presidents. I show how, in each of these periods, the student movement and the state waged aggressive wars of representation to delegitimise the other – in which the state revived the old spectre of communism, while students attacked the core foundations of New Order power – but that it was real violence (the ‘foul play’ of abrogating the ‘play frame’ of symbolic battle) that ultimately determined the battles, whether in favour of the state or the student movement, although neither ended up as absolute ‘winners’ or ‘losers’ in such events. While violence often galvanised the activist spirit to fight back and further exposed the weak foundations of a cornered regime, it could also interrupt activist agendas, exacerbate existing conflicts within the student movement, and preclude unification with non-student groups, in particular ‘the people’. Moreover, as I argue in Part Five, once violence is made invisible and its memory is erased, or is domesticated in archival records, it also no longer raises the spirit. At the end of the story, then, as the era of reform came to an end and the state reconsolidated its power, the student movement also seemed to disappear into the past.

However, the experience of student movement participation was not in vain. As I show throughout this study, in each phase and in any circumstance, playing politics was a valuable learning experience that taught young activists more about the field and game of politics, and about themselves as political beings. In the end, the battles that young activists engage in are narrative battles for historicity, in which the political and personal meanings of historicity are intertwined. From ‘historical actors’ engaged in a battle to redefine their society, to political characters with spirited futures, the story of their political existence continues.