

Civil Society and Political Participation in Democratic Indonesia: New Trends, Old Challenges

The presence of a robust, complex and plural civil society is one factor that shapes processes of democratic transition and consolidation in a country. As evidence from Indonesia since 1998 suggests, civil society actors cannot stand alone. The position and role of civil society is influenced by relations with other political actors, the alliances and deals made between formal and informal power brokers, political parties, as well as the complex structural opportunities and constraints that exist. Democratic consolidation may require a 'free and lively civil society' that is inherently unpredictable, at times complementing national development efforts and strategies, and at other times challenging the status quo. In the Indonesian context, the legacy of Suharto's relatively strong authoritarian regime, as well as the internal dynamics of deeply entrenched ideological divisions in civil society, have led to the emergence of a complex and expansive civil society in need of constant reappraisal.

This panel revisits the political challenges facing civil society in the second decade of Indonesian democratisation. We invite papers that undertake current assessments of civil society and political participation, based on new empirical evidence or the reconceptualization of civil society. Indonesia today represents a contentious arena for those who are competing for power, giving rise of new political identities and interests, as well as old rivalries and challenges. Civil society can be a force for good, helping to mobilise the public and creating pressure for political change, and it can also be a force that is appropriated and manipulated to serve more nefarious purposes.

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