



Policy Brief

Rethinking Citizen's Election Monitoring: A Means for Public Engagement in Political Processes and Civic Education in Indonesia

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1. Independent Committee for Election Monitoring (*Komite Independen Pemantau Pemilu* - KIPP): Civil society and election monitoring

After entering the Reformation Era, Indonesia started to be recognized as a democratic country. The public interest was then shifted from citizen's election monitoring to other issues such as civic education and other human rights issues. The work of organizing and overseeing the elections have been mostly left to the General Election Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Agency (BAWASLU) and the Election Organizers Ethnic Council (DKPP). The citizens' engagement like that of the Independent Committee for Election Monitoring (KIPP) during the late 1990s in a checks and balances system has been taken for granted. The short-term vision of foreign donors also contributed to the downfall of election monitoring groups. Moreover, from the international donor's perspective, the fact that election monitoring in itself could also be a long-term civic education and an opportunity to build democratic practices and institutions was overlooked (Bjornlund, 2004: 256-278). So, should we rethink about the role of civil society in creating broad civic engagement in political processes?

Since 1996, KIPP has been established to monitor the military regime's controlled elections under Soeharto's government and raising question to the legitimacy of the government to continue its power. The network of KIPP sprung up countrywide with the robust participation of activists and citizens from the broad political spectrum, including students and issue-based activists, such as human rights activists, peasant movement activists, journalists, and some religious leaders, despite various forms of intimidation from the military government to its activists.

Under a democratic ruling system, active citizens and a vibrant civil society play a vital role to fulfill the state's shortcomings and act in the areas that the government cannot reach out (Scalet and Schmidtz: 2002, 26-27). However, the state and civil society should counterbalance each other. If the government is too powerful, the civil society tends to be weakened, and vice versa (Post and Resemblum: 2002, 11). In the case of Indonesia, the civil movement was one of the key factors that turned the country from over 30 years of authoritarian regime to a democratic country, as well as being actively engaged in political and law reform. But after the political reform, the civil society tends to encounter a downfall and their activities have been weakening.

After the Reformation era, many KIPP activists continued their contribution to the country's democratization by becoming political experts, policy makers and members in various bodies including KPU, BAWASLU, parliament members at national and local levels, and in political parties. At the same time, KIPP started to struggle with other challenges such as lacking internal capacity to sustain its network due to the shift of its members to higher levels of the political platform, the split of members who wanted to work on different strategies, insufficient financial support to run effective broad-base programs, and the incapability of recruiting active members due to the change of public interest. Despite these challenges, the study found that apart from KIPP at the national level, KIPP's local chapters in a few provinces were still active and operated independently in an individual capacity with donations from its former members and public fundraising such as in North Sumatera and East Java. But their works were limited to making political comments on media and seasonal trainings and recruitment of volunteers, especially around the election time.

2. Is democracy declining in Indonesia?

Despite being perceived as a democratic country, the consolidation of Indonesian democracy is still being questioned. During the recent years, the Indonesian government started to put restrictions on civil rights and freedom. Some observers, such as Edward Aspinall, expressed that Indonesia fell in the global transition, either “at the start of the worldwide retreat of democracy or already near the turning of the authoritarian tide”, as the government started to put restrictions on civil rights and freedom, and when the rise of religious movement and the return of military influence at some government levels could be witnessed.¹

Although the electoral system has been much improved by the work of the above-mentioned bodies, the policy makers should not ignore the engagement of the people from the bottom-up approach. The lack of direct public engagement of the citizens in checks and balances system such as election monitoring and continuous active civic-education programs can result in the backsliding of democracy and political power being concentrated at certain institutions such as the political parties or religious organizations. As the 2018 democracy index by the Economist Intelligence Unit has shown, Indonesia is moving from flawed democracy towards hybrid regime, slightly dropping

¹ See “Twenty years of Indonesia democracy - how many more?”, <https://www.newmandala.org/20-years-reformasi/>. Access on 10 August 2018.

to 6.39 while the political participation and political culture was rated 6.67 and 5.63 respectively.² At the same time, the concerns on a few major issues such as identity politics, money politics, and religious politics are also rising.

In reality, active civic engagement in politics and elections is one of the key foundations of democratic rights and citizenry rights. Even though the EMBs have tried to increase public participation and civic education, such as BAWASLU's program named "One Million Election Monitoring Volunteers Movement" (*Gerekan Sejuta Relawan Pengawas Pemilu*) during 2014 Election, it failed to recruit sufficient number of volunteers to oversee all the polling stations (Gunawan Suswanto, 2015: 91-99). If the government and the civil society organizations are impotent to address the issue and strengthen and maintain the public engagement and civic culture, the possibility of the further decline of democracy could be witnessed in the coming years.

3. Ways forward

- The government, the EMBs, as well as international donors should reconsider efforts or measures to support and strengthen the civil society organizations, as well as addressing the needs of the public to actively engage in politics and elections not only as informed voters but also in the process of monitoring the electoral processes as a form of a long-term civic education.
- Effective civic education and voter education should be treated as a continuing program by all political stakeholders, not only limited to the EMBs or any certain institutions. It should also be carried out for citizens at all ages including the under-aged.
- The role of citizen's election monitors should become mainstream and recognized as a usual and common practice by voters. This may ease the burden of seasonal recruitment occurring only at the election period.
- KIPP should consider reforming its organizational and network structure to involve more active members especially young people at the decision-making level, strengthen its local chapters, reconsider its strategies, and rebuild its public trust and recognition.

² See "The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy", http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2018.pdf&mode=wp&campaigned=Democracy2018 . Access on 15 May 2019.

- KIPP should make an effort to increase its local volunteers and presence at provincial levels to be a focal point for advocating the checks and balances system by citizens, as well as increase public engagement at the grass-root level on a voluntary basis.
- KIPP should consider increasing the variety of its activities and programs while continuing its coordination with the government and EMBs.

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