Digital Activism and Protest Movements in Indonesia, Analysis of Collective Action 2014-2024

Dodi Abdulrohim[1], Budiharjo[1], Pandji Sukmana[1], T. Herry Rachmatsyah[1]
[1]Public Administration Doctoral Studies, Universitas Prof. Dr. Moestopo (Beragama), Indonesia
Corresponding Author: Dodi Abdulrohim; Email: dodi.rohim23@student.moestopo.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examines protest dynamics in Indonesia from 2014 to 2024, analyzing patterns of collective action across five distinct actor categories: political parties, societal groups, labor unions, civil society organizations, and students. Drawing on comprehensive protest data from the Indonesian National Police, we identify key temporal patterns, triggering events, and actor-specific mobilization trends. Our findings reveal three significant protest waves (2014, 2016-2017, and 2020) corresponding to electoral cycles, economic reforms, and contentious legislation. Analysis demonstrates that different actor groups respond to distinct mobilizing factors: political parties to electoral opportunities, labor unions to economic reforms, students to democratic concerns, and civil society to governance issues. The study contributes to social movement theory by providing empirical evidence of how political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and frame alignment manifest in an emerging democratic context. These findings enhance understanding of contentious politics in Indonesia and offer insights into the evolving nature of democratic participation in Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Protest movements have long played a significant role in shaping political and social life across the world. In many countries, they function as key arenas where citizens articulate grievances, negotiate power, and imagine alternative futures. In Indonesia, civil society has become an important force in influencing political decision-making, especially in moments of economic uncertainty, political unrest, and social reform. Since the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998, protest actions have emerged as a routine though uneven feature of democratic life. Over the past decade in particular, Indonesia has witnessed a notable increase in protest activity involving diverse actor groups such as political parties, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups. These protests have focused on a wide range of issues, including labor rights, economic inequality, environmental conflicts, identity politics, and controversial legislation such as the Omnibus Law.

The concept of social movements is central to understanding these protest dynamics. Tarrow

(2011) defines social movements as collective challenges to elites, authorities, or cultural beliefs mounted by people who are often excluded from mainstream political processes. In Indonesia, such movements are frequently catalyzed by economic inequalities, corruption, perceived democratic backsliding, and political dissatisfaction. Research on claim-makers and hashtag activism in Indonesia (Vandenberg, 2021; Vandenberg & Zuryani, 2020) shows how diverse actors use both street protests and digital platforms to contest policies, challenge authorities, and construct alternative visions of justice and citizenship. Building on this, Boudreaus (2004) analysis of repression and resistance in Southeast Asia and Tilly's (2004) work on contentious politics provide a broader regional and theoretical context for how protests emerge, intensify, and are managed by political regimes.

Indonesia offers a particularly compelling case for studying protest in a context of democratic transition and consolidation. Following Reformasi, the country has experienced competitive elections, expanded civil liberties, and greater political

participation. At the same time, these formal democratic gains coexist with persistent economic inequality, patronage politics, and tensions between progressive and conservative forces (Mietzner, 2020). Huntington (1991) notion of democratic waves and Linz and Stepans (1996) framework of democratic consolidation help situate Indonesia as a polity where democratic institutions exist but remain contested. In this setting, protest becomes a crucial mechanism of societal feedback on governance and policy direction, but also reveals deeper structural problems: limited inclusion in decision-making, uneven protection of civil liberties, and recurrent efforts to restrict or delegitimize dissent.

The complexity of Indonesia's protest landscape is further illustrated by the intersection of religion, politics, and social transformation. Van Bruinessens (2002) genealogical analysis of Islamic radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia underscores how religious identity and political mobilization have become tightly intertwined. Protests are thus not only about economic or institutional issues, but also about moral orders, identity, and competing visions of the nation. Boudreau (2004) similarly shows how repression and resistance in Southeast Asia are shaped by historically specific interactions between state institutions and civil society, which remain highly relevant for contemporary Indonesia.

In parallel, the last decade has seen the rapid expansion of digital activism and online political engagement. Bennett & Segerbergs (2012) theory of connective action explains how digital platforms enable more individualized, horizontal forms of mobilization that can bypass traditional organizations. In Indonesia, social media has become a central tool for coordination, narrative-building, and visibility (Lim, 2017; Vandenberg, 2021). Hashtags and viral content not only spread information but also construct shared frames of injustice, link local grievances to global causes (such as Palestinian solidarity), and amplify campaigns around domestic issues like labor rights and economic reforms (Gordon et al., 2022). This digital dimension is especially significant for youth and student activism, where online and offline repertoires are tightly intertwined.

Resource mobilization theory adds another layer to this picture by emphasizing how movements acquire and deploy material, organizational, and symbolic resources to sustain collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Recent work on contentious politics in Indonesia's natural resource sectors (McNamara et al., 2021) demonstrates how specific economic and environmental contexts shape protest strategies and alliances. Different actor groups, such as political parties, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups, operate with distinct resource bases, networks, and constraints. Political parties may combine formal institutional access with street mobilization; unions draw on workplace organization and strike capacity; NGOs and community organizations mobilize expertise, advocacy networks, and local legitimacy; students contribute numbers, moral authority, and digital fluency. Yet we still know relatively little about how these different actors themselves interpret their participation in protests, especially across multiple protest waves over time.

Despite a growing body of research, several gaps remain. Many studies focus on particular episodes such as Islamist mobilization, specific policy protests, or sectoral conflicts, or on macro-level patterns like protest frequency, regime responses, or democratic quality. Others emphasize either "offline" contentious politics or "online" digital activism, without fully integrating the two. As a result, we lack a comprehensive, qualitative, actor-centered understanding of how diverse groups in Indonesia frame, narrate, and justify their involvement in protests across a decade of political and economic change. There is also limited analysis of how political opportunity structures, resource configurations, and digital platforms interact to shape alliances, repertoires of action, and visions of democracy.

Against this backdrop, the novelty of this article lies in its integration of social movement theory, digital activism, and democratic transition perspectives to examine protest dynamics in Indonesia between 2014 and 2024. Rather than counting events or measuring protest size, the study adopts a qualitative approach that focuses on meanings and narratives. Drawing on protest documentation, media reports, organizational statements, and digital artifacts (such as hashtags, campaign posters, and online calls to action), the article analyzes how different actor groups political parties, societal groups, labor unions, civil society

organizations, and students construct grievances, identify adversaries, articulate demands, and make sense of both risks and possibilities of collective action.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how different actor groups in Indonesia interpret and narrate their participation in protest movements between 2014 and 2024. Rather than treating protests primarily as numerical events, the research approaches protest records, policy documents, media reports, and academic analyses as texts that embody particular meanings, frames, and narratives. The study is grounded in qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing us to move from descriptive patterns of protest occurrence toward a deeper understanding of how collective action is constructed, justified, and contested in discourse.

Data Sources and Case Selection

The empirical material consists of protest records compiled from official government documents, primarily reports from the Indonesian National Police, complemented by academic publications, reputable media coverage, and secondary datasets on protest episodes. The official records were used not as a basis for statistical modeling, but as a sampling frame to identify key protest waves and episodes across the period 2014-2024.

Each recorded protest was initially classified into one of five broad actor categories to structure the analysis: political parties, referring to demonstrations organized or prominently supported by parties or electoral coalitions; the general public, encompassing mass mobilizations driven by broad socio-political grievances among ordinary citizens; labor unions, covering protests led by worker organizations focusing on wages, employment security, and economic justice; civil society organizations, including actions initiated by non-governmental organizations, mass organizations, professional associations, or community groups around issues such as human rights, anti-corruption, or environmental protection; and student groups, denoting youth-led protests that emphasize democratic reform, accountability, and future-oriented political claims.

Based on this mapping, several major protest peaks, for example, around electoral cycles, the Omnibus Law, fuel price increases, and high-profile rights controversies were purposively selected as qualitative case episodes. For each episode, we gathered a corpus of materials including: official statements from unions, parties, and NGOs; press releases; protest posters and flyers; online campaign content (such as hashtags and social media posts); and journalistic and academic accounts. These documents allowed us to reconstruct how different actor groups framed their grievances, allies, adversaries, and desired outcomes during key moments of contention.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, protest records and accompanying documents were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the material and to identify initial points of interest related to actor roles, narratives of injustice, and interpretations of political opportunities. Second, an initial coding scheme was developed, combining theory-driven codes (for example, political opportunity, repression, coalition-building, framing of rights, references to democracy) with inductive codes emerging from the data (such as specific slogans, moral vocabularies, references to global causes, or appeals to youth identity).

Coding was applied across the corpus of documents for each major protest episode and actor category, and in the next stage these codes were organized into broader themes, including how actors interpreted policy reforms and economic changes, how they constructed images of "the people" and "the enemy," how they narrated risk, sacrifice, and claims to legitimacy, how they depicted the interplay between street protest and digital activism, and how they portrayed patterns of alliance and tension among political parties, the general public, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups.

Throughout the process, themes were compared across actor categories and across time, asking how narratives shifted between different protest waves and how digital platforms shaped framing and coalition-building. Although basic descriptive counts of events and actor involvement were used to situate these episodes in time, the

primary emphasis of the analysis remained on interpretive depth rather than statistical modeling.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was carried out by cross-checking official protest records with academic studies, government statistics, and reputable media reports, particularly for highly politicized events. This helped to mitigate potential biases in any single source, especially state-generated data. Second, source triangulation within each episode, comparing, for example, union statements, student communiqués, and media coverage, allowed us to identify convergent and divergent narratives across actor groups.

Third, an audit trail of coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos was maintained to ensure transparency of the analytical process. Provisional interpretations were revisited in light of new data or alternative readings, consistent with a reflexive approach to thematic analysis. Rather than claiming a single definitive account, the analysis foregrounds patterns that are robust across multiple sources and acknowledges areas where interpretations remain contested.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on official protest records means that the dataset primarily captures public, physical demonstrations recorded by state authorities, particularly in major urban centers where police monitoring is systematic. Smaller-scale local actions, spontaneous community mobilizations, and some forms of online-only activism are likely underrepresented.

Second, although the five actor categories provide a useful heuristic, they necessarily simplify complex identities and coalitions. Many protests involved multiple actor types; for analytical purposes, a primary category was assigned based on the most prominent organizer or framing, which may not fully capture internal diversity.

Third, as a qualitative study based on documents and secondary data, the research does not include first-hand interview material with protesters or organizers. This limits the ability to access individual experiences and motivations beyond what is publicly articulated in texts and media. Future research could deepen and challenge the findings presented here through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or participatory methods with activists from different groups and regions.

Despite these limitations, the combination of official records, secondary analyses, and a systematic qualitative reading of protest-related texts offers a robust basis for examining how protests in Indonesia have been framed, narrated, and contested across a decade of political and economic change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Overall Protest Dynamics (2014-2024)

Across 2014-2024, the protest record reveals not a steady rise or decline, but a sequence of waves linked to elections, economic reforms, and major policy controversies. From a political opportunity structures perspective (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2004), these waves reflect shifting openings and constraints in Indonesia's political system: electoral contests, reform packages, and high-stakes legislation created windows in which protest became thinkable, legitimate, and sometimes urgent for different actor groups.

Five types of actors recur throughout the material: political parties, the general public, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups. Their presence varies across time and issues, but together they constitute a relational field of contention, in which each group reads and responds to opportunities, threats, and the actions of others.

Actor roles across key protest waves: political parties and electoral opportunities

Political parties appear most prominently around the 2014 and 2019 election cycles, when they organized or heavily supported street mobilizations. In line with political opportunity structures theory, elections functioned as institutionalized opportunities that lowered the costs and raised the potential gains of protest. Party-led actions framed electoral competition as a struggle over the "true" popular mandate and the integrity of democratic procedures.

Outside these cycles, party-led protests thinned out, suggesting that parties use the street instrumentally, as an extension of campaigning rather than as a stable channel for policy advocacy. This selective engagement underscores the difference between party-based contention and more continuous social movement activity.

General public, labor unions, and socio-economic grievances

The general public and labor unions became most visible during the 2016—2017 economic reform wave and the lead-up to the 2020 Omnibus Law. Here, the dominant narratives centered on economic insecurity, distributive injustice, and everyday survival. Protests contested fuel price increases, labor law revisions, and reforms perceived as privileging capital over workers and low-income citizens.

From a resource mobilization perspective (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), labor unions functioned as organizational anchors that could transform diffuse economic grievances into coordinated strikes, marches, and national action days. Consistent with work on contentious politics in Indonesia's resource and labor sectors (McNamara et al., 2021), unions provided leadership, infrastructure, and repertoires of action, while public participants supplied numerical strength and moral weight by foregrounding everyday hardship.

Civil society organizations and rights-based advocacy

Civil society organizations (NGO), professional associations, and advocacy groups featured prominently in protests around human rights, anti-corruption, and environmental protection, especially during the Omnibus Law episode. Their statements and briefing documents linked specific legal provisions to broader concerns about the rule of law, environmental sustainability, and democratic accountability.

In framing terms (Snow et al., 2007), these actors operated as frame entrepreneurs, producing diagnostic frames (what is wrong), prognostic frames (what should be done), and motivational frames (why people should act). Their ability to translate complex legal issues into accessible narratives helped shape how the wider public, students, and unions understood the stakes of reform.

Student groups and democratic futures

Student groups reappear in the material as moral and generational protagonists, particularly during the 2014 elections, the 2016-2017 protests, and the 2019-2020 Omnibus Law mobilizations. Their discourse is marked by references to democracy, the future, and national responsibility, positioning students as defenders of both present rights and future generations.

In the context of democratic transition and consolidation (Huntington, 1991; Linz & Stepan, 1996), student protests can be read as recurring attempts to guard the quality of democracy in the face of perceived backsliding, elite collusion, or technocratic reforms that sideline public deliberation.

Key Protest Waves as Turning Points

Three protest waves stand out as interpretive turning points in Indonesia's post-Reformasi trajectory. The 2014 electoral wave exemplifies how elections serve as political opportunity structures, triggering party-driven mobilizations and, in some cases, citizen and student actions concerned with electoral fairness and fears of authoritarian regression.

The 2016-2017 economic reform wave highlights the centrality of material grievances and labor organization. Economic reforms and price hikes were interpreted as unjust burdens on workers and low-income households, drawing labor unions and segments of the general public into contention.

The 2020 Omnibus Law wave represents the most cross-cutting coalition, bringing together unions, civil society organizations, and student movements. While official protest counts in that year are affected by pandemic constraints, the breadth of geographic spread, intensity of framing work, and sustained digital and offline actions point to an episode of unusually dense contentious politics.

From the angle of democratic development, these waves can be read as moments when institutional politics and street politics converged, forcing public debate on the direction of economic reform, labor protection, environmental governance, and executive power echoing Boudreaus (2004) and van Bruinessens (2002) observations on how contention shapes political trajectories in Southeast Asia.

Digital activism and hybrid repertoires

Digital activism becomes particularly salient in the Omnibus Law protests, where social media platforms served as key spaces for coordination, education, and visibility. Student groups and youth-led networks used hashtags, infographics, and live streams to explain legal issues, call for

demonstrations, and share experiences from the streets.

This pattern aligns with Bennett & Segerbergs (2012) notion of connective action: participation is often personalized and networked rather than strictly channeled through formal organizations, yet it remains deeply entangled with organizational campaigns by unions and NGOs. Digital infrastructures lowered coordination costs, broadened the reach of protest frames, and allowed participants to continue contestation even when physical gatherings were restricted by the pandemic.

Rather than replacing street protest, digital tools contributed to a hybrid repertoire of contention in which online and offline tactics mutually reinforced each other, consistent with Indonesian scholarship on social media and activism (Lim, 2017; Vandenberg, 2021).

Coalition dynamics and frame alignment

Across these waves, the findings reveal evolving coalition dynamics among labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups. While each actor brought distinct histories, constituencies, and priorities, they were able in certain moments, especially in 2020, to construct overlapping frames of injustice.

Drawing on Snow et al.s (2007) concept of frame alignment, student concerns about precarious futures, union grievances about immediate working conditions, and civil society fears about legal and environmental degradation were woven into broader master frames of economic justice and democratic accountability. These shared frames facilitated joint actions, mutual support, and the construction of a common adversary in the form of "elite interests" and "unaccountable government". At the same time, coalitions were fragile and contingent. Political parties were sometimes viewed with suspicion, and some alliances dissolved after specific policy battles or electoral cycles. This fragility underscores that coalition building is a dynamic process, constantly renegotiated as opportunities, risks, and narratives shift.

Protest, Policy, and Democratic Trajectories

Finally, the findings suggest that protest movements have contributed directly and indirectly to policy debates and governance practices in Indonesia between 2014 and 2024. Even when protests did not prevent controversial policies, such

as the Omnibus Law, they helped generate intense public scrutiny, legal challenges, and subsequent implementation debates. This is consistent with Tilly (2004) view of contentious politics as a driver of institutional adaptation, where states respond to repeated challenges by adjusting policies, procedures, or rhetorical justifications.

Protests also functioned as barometers of democratic health: waves of contention often coincided with moments when large segments of society felt excluded from decision-making or threatened by the direction of reforms. In that sense, they can be read as recurring attempts by citizens and organized groups to reinsert public voice into processes perceived as elite-driven or opaque, an interpretation that resonates with broader discussions of democratic consolidation and backsliding.

Overall, the decade-long picture that emerges is not one of linear progress or decline, but of ongoing negotiation. Protest waves mark moments when Indonesia's evolving democracy is publicly contested and reimagined from the streets, campuses, workplaces, and increasingly, from digital platforms.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined protest dynamics in Indonesia between 2014 and 2024 through a qualitative, actor-centred analysis of protest records, organizational statements, media reports, and digital artifacts. By focusing on meanings and narratives rather than only on numerical trends, the study has shown how political parties, the general public, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups interpret and enact collective action in response to shifting political, economic, and legal contexts. In doing so, it has illuminated how protests function as recurring moments in which Indonesia's democratic trajectory is publicly contested and renegotiated.

The findings highlight three key waves of contention around the 2014 elections, the 2016-2017 economic reforms, and the 2020 Omnibus Law as critical junctures where political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and framing processes intersect. Elections opened institutionalized opportunities that parties sought to exploit; economic reforms exposed material vulnerabilities that mobilized workers and segments

of the public; and contentious legislation became a focal point for broad coalitions that cut across sectoral boundaries. Different actor groups responded to different kinds of opportunities and threats: parties to electoral competition, unions to labor and welfare reforms, civil society organizations to governance and rights issues, and students to perceived threats to democratic quality and future prospects.

The study also underscores the growing importance of digital activism and hybrid repertoires of contention. Especially during the Omnibus Law protests, social media platforms enabled connective forms of action that linked dispersed actors, amplified frames, and allowed protest campaigns to continue under pandemic-related constraints. Rather than replacing street protests, digital tools complemented physical demonstrations and helped align frames across labor, environmental, and democratic concerns. This hybrid pattern suggests that future protest waves in Indonesia will likely continue to combine online and offline tactics in flexible and adaptive ways.

Coalition dynamics emerged as another central theme. At particular moments, especially in 2020, labor unions, civil society organizations, and student groups succeeded in aligning their frames around broader narratives of economic justice and democratic accountability, even while retaining distinct priorities. These coalitions were powerful but fragile, reminding us that alliance-building in contentious politics is a contingent and ongoing process. Together, these dynamics contribute to social movement theory by showing how political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and frame alignment operate in an emerging democracy marked by both formal electoral competition and persistent structural inequalities.

In conclusion, the protest movements in Indonesia over the last decade demonstrate the growing importance of civil society activism and collective action in the country's democratic processes. As political, economic, and social issues continue to evolve, it is likely that protests will remain a crucial avenue for public participation, agenda-setting, and accountability. Understanding the trends, actors, and narratives behind these movements can help policymakers anticipate the democratic implications of major reforms and

design more inclusive, deliberative policy processes. At the same time, activists and organizers can draw on these insights to strengthen cross-sector coalitions, refine their framing strategies, and navigate the opportunities and risks of increasingly digitalized contention.

This study is not without limitations: it relies on documented protest events, is biased toward urban and officially recorded actions, and does not include first-hand interviews with participants. Future research could deepen and challenge these findings through ethnographic fieldwork, longitudinal interviews, or comparative studies across regions and countries in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the documentation and analysis of protest patterns presented here offer not only a historical record of Indonesia's contentious politics but also a conceptual framework for understanding how collective action may evolve as the country continues its democratic journey.

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