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Alienation of Students' Voices in Indonesia

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Abstract

This research explores the influence of government priorities, oligarchic interests, and other factors that may hinder the translation of activism into concrete policy changes within the alienation framework. The study employs a qualitative approach utilizing an unobtrusive data collection method, explicitly focusing on documentary analysis through news reports and related academic literature. The findings suggest a collective expression of discontent through social movements led by Indonesian student activists, encompassing various aspects of their lives. However, student voices are repeatedly silenced. One of the constraints is the need for more partnerships between activists and the media, which results from media conglomeration. In addition to media conglomeration, the regime's prioritization of economic development has relegated student voices to mere echoes, demonstrating that alienation occurs from multiple directions.

Keywords: *activism, alienation, media conglomeration, oligarchy, student protest*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi prioritas pemerintah, kepentingan oligarki, dan faktor-faktor lain yang menghambat penerjemahan aktivisme menjadi perubahan kebijakan konkret dalam kerangka alienasi. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang memanfaatkan metode pengumpulan data secara unobtrusive, dengan secara eksplisit berfokus pada analisis dokumentasi laporan berita dan kajian literatur akademis. Temuan-temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan adanya ekspresi ketidakpuasan kolektif

melalui gerakan-gerakan sosial yang dipimpin oleh aktivis mahasiswa Indonesia. Akan tetapi tidak diterjemahkannya ekspresi ketidakpuasan itu, serta bagaimana mahasiswa memperoleh represi saat aksi menjadi indikasi alienasi suara mahasiswa. Salah satu kendala adalah ketidakselarasan antara agenda media dan aktivis yang diakibatkan oleh konglomerasi media. Selain konglomerasi media, prioritas rezim terhadap pembangunan ekonomi menjadikan suara mahasiswa diasingkan karena tidak sejalan dengan kepentingan ekonomi tersebut, yang menunjukkan bahwa alienasi terjadi dari berbagai arah.

Kata Kunci: aktivisme, alienasi, konglomerasi media, oligarki, protes mahasiswa

A. Introduction

Alienation in Indonesian student activism emerges as a complex phenomenon that challenges the historical narrative of students as transformative social agents. Rooted in a historical context where students played a pivotal role in the 1998 democratic revolution (Lee, 2011; Slater, 2023). Contemporary student activists are increasingly disconnected from meaningful political change. The disconnect manifests through systemic barriers, where an impressive number of protests—2,353 rallies in Jakarta in 2023 (BPS, 2024)—paradoxically yield minimal policy reforms (Gultom & Fauzi, 2021; Naswah, 2022), creating a profound sense of institutional estrangement.

This alienation is further compounded by a communication breakdown between protesters and policymakers, which undermines democratic participation and erodes trust in political processes (Mudhoffir, 2022). The transition from direct, physical activism to online platforms introduces another layer of alienation, as social media algorithms and personalized digital engagement fragment the coherence and collective energy that once characterized student movements. The neoliberal governmental structure systematically marginalizes student voices, creating an ideological gap that renders their activist identity increasingly symbolic rather than substantive. Despite students still being recognized for their unique social perspectives and potential for societal transformation (Akbar, 2016; Fadilah, 2020; Najamuddin et al., 2023), they are experiencing a gradual but significant detachment from the political mechanisms they seek to influence. This alienation represents more than a mere methodological shift; it signals a more profound crisis of political representation and the challenges of maintaining collective agency in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

A detailed exploration is required to understand the internal dynamics and specific socioeconomic and political factors driving the alienation of students' voices in their activism. The method includes how these changes impact student activists' strategies, effectiveness, and overall role within the Indonesian political system. There remains a profound gap in understanding the disparity between high levels of protest activity and the lack of substantial policy change. Further research is needed to explore how government priorities, oligarchic interests, and other factors may hinder the translation of activism into meaningful policy reforms.

Alienation

In Karl Marx's philosophical and economic writings, alienation is a pivotal theoretical concept he developed and refined throughout his career. From his early works like the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to his middle-period manuscripts such as *Grundrisse* and his later seminal text *Capital*, Marx consistently explored alienation as a fundamental category within Marxist humanist thought. His initial explicit engagement with the term emerged in his 1843 essay "The Jewish Question," published in early 1844, where he provocatively articulated the concept through economic relations. In this foundational text, Marx argues that money represents an "estranged essence" of human labor and existence, suggesting that economic systems create an external power that dominates individuals, transforming them into passive worshippers of an alien force that fundamentally disconnects them from their own creative potential and authentic human experience (Fuchs, 2021).

Fuchs underlined that alienation.

“...denotes conditions of society where humans cannot control the conditions of their existence. Alienation means that there is a difference in the potentials and actualities of humans and society. In alienated societies, humans and society cannot realize their potential. Humans are alienated from what they could be, hindering them from developing and realizing their full potential. (p.2)

There is a pervasive sense of alienation in modern society, where individuals feel disconnected from political and economic systems, leading to sporadic but powerful eruptions of collective discontent (Harvey, 2018). The riots in London, Stockholm, and Paris, and significant urban protests in Turkey (Gezi Park) and Brazil, expressed widespread alienation across daily life. The protest triggers range from specific local issues (like park development or transport fares) to broader systemic grievances about democracy and social organization. The movements typically face violent police repression and institutional indifference. Unfortunately, capitalist systems often redirect widespread frustration by providing scapegoats like racial minorities, immigrants, and women (Idem, 2018).

Fuchs further explained that alienation can happen in the form of communication. In this sense, communication is not limited to explicit verbal or written exchanges. It can also manifest how social structures, power relations, and dominant ideologies shape marginalised individuals' and communities' experiences and self-perceptions. The privileged groups, such as politicians, those who see themselves as culturally or biologically superior, use these systemic forms of communication to assert their dominance and cement the subordinate status of alienated groups. Below is a table to explain the type of alienation in communication (Fuchs, 2021).

Table 1. Type of alienated communication

Type of alienated communication(s)	Alienated communication	Alienated means of communication (= communications)
Alienated economic communication(s)	exploitation of communication workers; humans are economically disabled from or limited in producing, disseminating, or consuming information	private ownership of the means of communication
Alienated political communication(s)	exclusion of humans and their voices from political communication that	dictatorial governance of the means of communication

	influences political decisions	
Alienated cultural communication(s)	the production and dissemination of ideology and the (re)production of asymmetries of attention and visibility of communication	ideological means of communication that advance malrecognition

B. Method

The study employs a qualitative approach utilizing an unobtrusive data collection method, explicitly focusing on documentary analysis through news reports and related academic literature. The study includes reports of protests from 2021 to 2023.

The literature we review is limited to sources retrieved using the keyword “student protest in Indonesia” through Google Scholar. This methodological strategy allows for a comprehensive examination of student activism in Indonesia while minimizing direct researcher intervention that might introduce bias. The unobtrusive method is particularly advantageous in studying social phenomena like activism, as it enables researchers to analyze existing documents and sources without disrupting the natural context of the social processes being investigated.

The central research question is: How do socioeconomic and political factors shape the relationship between high levels of protest activity and the limited policy changes in Indonesian student activism?

The study aims to provide a comprehensive, contextualized understanding of alienation in Indonesian student activism through an unobtrusive qualitative approach. It draws from multiple documentary sources to construct a rigorous and insightful analysis.

C. Results and Discussion

Social movement as a form of collective discontent

Harvey (2018) pointed out a pervasive sense of alienation in modern society, where individuals feel disconnected from political and economic systems, leading to sporadic but powerful eruptions of collective discontent, as seen in various social movements to express widespread alienation across different aspects of daily life.

The year 2013 was a year when large-scale protests occurred in Indonesia. Among the largest ones were related to the government's decision to increase fuel prices. The protests resulted in the government reversing its decision to reinstate fuel subsidies and led to the resignation of the country's energy minister (Basyit, 2021; Lesmana, 2013). A study concluded that the year 2013 was the last year before large-scale student mobilizations declined (Damarjati, 2019). The decline coincided with the rise of social media, which offers a new way to express political opinion, particularly among younger members of society.

The peer impact of social media implies that teenagers can be easily influenced by their peers regarding their interests in a specific issue (Winarno, 2019). Social media has also made it easier for individuals to access a wider variety

of news sources, leading to a decrease in traditional media consumption and a greater reliance on digital platforms for news consumption among the younger generation (Lindawati, 2018), and this has been studied to have an impact on direct political participation (Yusuf et al., 2023). Thus, social media holds great potential for the younger generation to become a tool for political education and activism.

Online forms of activism have complemented direct activism, and experts have created a new category for this participation as 'online participation' or 'online activism' (Lim, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Online activism can take various forms, such as amplifying an issue on social media through trending hashtags, communicating directly with public officials via their social media accounts, and creating petitions to support or oppose government policies, which are then circulated and signed electronically (Lim, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). The liberation aspect and the disruption of information direction made this mode of participation more prevalent among Indonesian youth, serving as an alternative form of involvement, as found by a previous study (Ida et al., 2020).

Online activism can bring real change, as seen in the "Cicak vs Buaya" metaphoric conversation on Facebook, which resulted in the government dropping charges for anticorruption ex-deputies, and the social movement for the Prita Mulyasari case, which was able to raise money for her court fines through a social media campaign (Lim, 2013). Following the success of the "Cicak vs Buaya" movement and protest, online activism increased in 2015, recurrently to preserve the integrity of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) as one vital sign of democracy in Indonesia. This campaign, characterized by the hashtag #SaveKPK, effectively utilized social media to escalate awareness and mobilize the population (Suwana, 2020).

As the use of online activism increases, its impact on policy reform diminishes. There are subsequent examples of the decline in the effectiveness of online-to-offline activism. Several studies analyzed the failure of this hybrid activism to defend the integrity of the KPK through a series of protests in the past years. The action utilized social media for the consolidation and mobilization of the masses, and with the awareness of the importance of spreading the issue, activists framed the action with hashtags on social media and uploaded it to become a central topic of discussion. Nevertheless, the action did not reform policy (Naswah, 2022).

Another recent student social movement is the omnibus law protest that spread on social media in 2020. The hashtag #TolakOmnibusLaw was spread horizontally on social media and encouraged students to take to the streets, similarly to the 2019 demonstrations, primarily led by university and high school students and several labor organizations. Despite the pandemic's peak, this demonstration mobilized up to 15,000 people and over 40 cities to participate. In an attempt to prevent the spread of disease, and under military dispersal, on 11 October, a national press conference called "Konferensi Pers Gerakan Rakyat" was held via ZOOM and supported by 13 associations from cities across the country. With spokespeople from several organizations speaking, this may have been the first online conference of the "people's movement." However, the president and his Staff rejected the criticism of the omnibus law and saw it as a false claim or a plot by those with a vested interest (Lane, 2020; Najamuddin et al., 2023).

The aforementioned examples underline how the dictatorial government has actively banished collective discontent through social movements. The government excludes student activists and their voices from political communication that influences political decisions.

Media conglomeration and alienation of student voices

Media plays a significant role as an agent in shaping societal perceptions of governance and the policies it generates (Easton, 1957; Nimmo, 1989). Particular emphasis placed by these outlets can shape the perceived importance or neglect of specific issues (McCombs et al., 2014). This results in a linear flow of information where media agendas are transformed into people's agendas and eventually become policy agendas

Traditionally, society has been exposed to news coverage by mainstream media outlets, where in times of Soeharto, the central government fully controlled the media that conveyed news to the public through a mandatory requirement for media organizations to own Surat Izin Usaha Penerbitan Pers (SIUPP) or press publishing business license (Lesmana, 2013; Slater, 2023). Following the reformation era in 1998, the requirement for mass media organizations or companies to have SIUPP has been abolished. The abolishment has led to the emergence of various types of media, including print, electronic, local, and national media. The contemporary media have evolved and have a critical role in guarding the power transition in Indonesia and keeping the liberal democracy in check (Slater, 2023).

The private ownership of media outlets can be viewed as a form of alienation in the Marxist framework. This concentration of media ownership under the control of a few powerful entities can be viewed as a form of alienation. The means of mass communication - a crucial tool for shaping public discourse and political agendas - are no longer accessible or controlled by the general population. Instead, they are dominated by a small group of private interests, which can use their influence to advance their ideological and political agendas at the expense of diverse and representative public discourse (Fuchs, 2021).

A free market liberal economy results in wealthy and politically powerful oligarchs who have pushed for a deregulated market to allow them to build more giant conglomerates, leading to a significant increase in the consolidation of media ownership in the country and a smaller number of media corporations controlling a larger share of the country's media outlets (Tapsell, 2017), which may save the struggling smaller media, but brought another systemic impact to the sociopolitical landscape (Aziz, 2020).

As discussed earlier, the rapid advancement of the internet and communication technology may have changed activism, mainly how activism shifted to online means. Technology convergence has changed the media landscape in Indonesia and can encourage more involvement and participation (Tapsell, 2014). On the other hand, this change is detrimental to small media outlets, and ultimately, media moguls embrace them and make drastic changes in the media structure, or, in other words, media conglomeration (Sari, 2020).

There are several issues with the media conglomerates in Indonesia. First, the principle of freedom is eventually compromised when the media is owned by

individuals who are also politicians. Media conglomerates will limit the public's right to access diverse information, news, and opinions. Furthermore, the existence of media conglomerates does not significantly contribute to the well-being and protection of media workers (Sari, 2020). Furthermore, with media conglomerates, the media still needs to establish a free public sphere due to media owners' high influence over citizens. Their interests must be considered because they often involve significant financial investments. As a result, the media is structured to align with these interests and maximize profits. The second issue is that the media is reduced to being a mere commercial commodity that seeks to generate substantial profits. This issue is further compounded by the close connections between media owners and politics, rendering the media incapable of performing as a watchdog over government policies. Media owners also involved in politics prioritize their interests over balanced reporting. The third is that conglomerates with ties to politics dominate the media industry. These media owners wield significant power over the dissemination of information and use their media outlets to shape public opinion according to their interests. The subjectivity often results in the presentation of heavily biased information, and there is a need for more impartiality (Aziz, 2020).

Due to media conglomerates, social movements in Indonesia are encountering a novel array of challenges. The growing vulgarity of media conglomerates has caused students to become skeptical of mainstream media and choose to employ their methods to bring issues to the attention of decision-makers; the skepticism resonates with the theory of mass society in terms of individuals, the role of media, and the nature of social change. A proposition posited by a study (Susilo, 2017) suggests that the media can potentially undermine established norms and values, posing a threat to social order. This influence extends to shaping individuals' perspectives and perpetuating lasting harm to individuals and society. Moreover, detachment from traditional institutions renders individuals susceptible to manipulation by mass media. Consequently, the resultant societal upheaval may precipitate the emergence of a totalitarian regime and signal a decline in civilization.

How will these changes in the Indonesian mediascape affect the demand facilitated by activism or social movement? First, we must comprehend several hypotheses about the relationship between social movements and media. Social movements with a good structure, network, organization, professionalism, and strategic planning are more likely to get comprehensive media coverage, and the media coverage aligns with the social movements' framing of events (Lim, 2013). The ties between social movement actors and the media can also impact the likelihood of the media accommodating the activities and frames of the social movements. Social movements that align with adopted cultural values are more likely to receive sympathy from the public. In contrast, the presence of media elites propagating social movements can increase the effectiveness of their framing strategies. Social movements that adjust to news or journalistic values will receive more media attention, and those that present issues with nuance, color, drama, and conflicts are more attractive for the media to cover (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

A study emphasizes that issues brought by activists can be accelerated when they meet the compatibility of mass media framing, which sometimes includes sensationalism (Lim, 2013). Furthermore, another study analyzed the social

movements to save KPK in two movements and showed that the public, social movement actors, and media are interlinked. Social movements shape public views on KPK. Not only that, but the media also influences it through reporting, and at the same time, public perceptions of KPK also influence media reporting. Therefore, society is also actively constructing framings about KPK (Jamil, 2018).

In conclusion, when a study suggested that mass media is critical to social movements or activism in advancing policy agendas, the consistency of mass media in raising issues in conjunction with social movements has been disrupted by economic factors exacerbated by media conglomeration. Additionally, these media conglomerates often have political affiliations, which may result in them promoting their interests through their media and obscuring important information from the public. This dynamic exemplifies the Marxist notion of alienation, where the means of communication, a vital societal resource, are appropriated and controlled by a privileged class, limiting the ability of marginalized groups to participate in and shape the public sphere. Consolidating media ownership represents a structural barrier to democratic participation and the free flow of information, undermining the principles of an open and inclusive society.

Oligarchs' proliferation in Indonesia

We observe how the stability of the New Order in Indonesia was maintained for decades due to sufficient support for the system to operate—the primary policy in the New Order centered around economic development. When the 1998 financial crisis hit the country, this order retreated due to mass pressure and the inability to sustain a further loss in times of global and national uncertainty (Slater, 2023). However, the sources of support for the New Order did not entirely disappear; instead, they receded temporarily to regroup, and most became what are known as oligarchs (Putra, 2018). Oligarchs can be defined as one of the few actors who rule with distinguished material wealth (Winters, 2011). The democratization process has changed Indonesia's political landscape, but has not eradicated oligarchic rule (Ford & Pepinsky, 2014).

The presence of Jokowi as a leader not associated with the New Order brings hope to tackle corruption and human rights violations (Muhtadi, 2015). Nonetheless, after two periods of leadership, the outcomes contradict these hopes as the administration has prioritized economic development, leading to an increased reliance on oligarchs and investors as essential sources of support, thereby reinforcing their power within the political system. The subjective regime prioritized development and the economy over democracy, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country.

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented crisis that has never been seen before, and has unintentionally created a fertile environment for the proliferation of oligarchs in Indonesia. In the aftermath of the crisis, President Jokowi has had to rely more heavily on new investors to fill the state's coffers, create jobs, and spur industrial growth. The government's urgent need for investment and economic recovery has led it to prioritize the interests of these privileged few and powerful oligarchs over the demands and needs of the broader population.

The proliferation of oligarchs in the Indonesian political landscape can be understood as a manifestation of a more profound process of alienation. This

alienation occurs at multiple levels, eroding the democratic foundations of the country. The authorities have been inclined to maintain the support of the oligarchs during and after the pandemic crisis. The oligarchs, therefore, have emerged as crucial funding sources and economic stimulus. This emergence has come at the expense of upholding the whole principles of democracy and attending to the voices of marginalized groups, such as student protesters, whose concerns have been repeatedly overlooked.

This concentration of power alienates most of the population from the political decision-making process. The oligarchs, driven by self-interest, manipulate the democratic system to serve their ends, often at the expense of the common good (Hakim & Jurdi, 2017). This results in a disconnect between the policies implemented and the demands and needs of the people, as exemplified by the authorities' apparent disregard for student protests.

Moreover, the growing influence of oligarchs has also led to the marginalization of critical national ideals, such as Pancasila, which were once the foundation of the country's social and political fabric. As the oligarchs prioritize economic development and their financial interests, the core values meant to guide the nation's progress have become increasingly sidelined (Slater, 2023).

The rise of oligarchic influence has the potential to undermine the foundations of Indonesian democracy severely. These influential individuals and corporations may manipulate the political system to serve their agendas rather than act in the people's best interests. The manipulation can lead to the marginalization of critical national ideals, like Pancasila, as the oligarchs prioritize their financial interests over the nation's collective well-being (Pramono, 2018).

In prioritizing the economy, all parties deemed to hinder economic growth will be fought, even if it undermines liberal democracy in Indonesia (Slater, 2023). That is why many student protests seem to be repeatedly ignored. One of the reasons is that the authorities continue to receive support from other parties that are larger in scope and number than the student protesters, which is enough to keep the system working. Oligarchs were seen as the primary source of support, and maintaining this support is far more critical than preserving three achievements of Indonesian democracy post-reformation era, which include sidelining the military, establishing a direct and robust electoral connection between politicians and voters, and strengthening the KPK to fight corruption (Slater, 2023).

A study emphasized that the emergence of oligarchy in Indonesian political democracy has the potential to undermine the principles and values of democracy itself severely. Oligarchs may manipulate democracy for their benefit and interests rather than acting in the people's best interests. The influence of oligarchy also means that inexperienced and unqualified individuals with limited political experience may rise to positions of power. These individuals may lack the integrity and moral values necessary to serve the people. They may instead use their position to enrich themselves or further the interests of their likes (Hakim & Jurdi, 2017). Furthermore, the impact of neglecting the people's demands in the political system is that the oligarchic power has yet to consider the nation's central ideology, Pancasila. People no longer respect Pancasila as the essence of the country and the source of peace formed by the founding fathers of Indonesia.

D. Conclusion

Alienation in Indonesian student activism emerges as a complex phenomenon that challenges the historical narrative of students as transformative social agents. A detailed exploration is needed to understand the internal dynamics and specific socio-economic and political factors driving the alienation of students' voices in their activism.

As Harvey (2018) pointed out, modern society has a pervasive sense of alienation. Individuals feel disconnected from political and economic systems, leading to sporadic but powerful eruptions of collective discontent, as seen in various social movements expressing widespread alienation across daily life. When students voice collective discontent, the government repeatedly ignores them, actively suppressing collective dissent through social movements. The government excludes the student activists and their voices from political communication, influencing decision-making.

Nevertheless, the alienation does not stop there. The alienation brought by capitalism has also spread to the media, which was previously a partner in activism. Systematic media conglomeration is occurring, further consolidating power in the hands of a few. After the COVID-19 crisis hit the country, the proliferation of oligarchs strengthened the alienation of student voices in Indonesia.

Ultimately, alienation occurs on multiple fronts, silencing student voices and excluding them from decision-making processes. This violates the nation's founding ideology, Pancasila, emphasizing social justice and political participation principles.

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