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Young Voters and the Future of Democracy Post-2024 Indonesian Elections

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KEY MESSAGES

- Young voters will determine the outcome of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election – 60 per cent of voters are millennials (born 1981-1996) and generation Z (born 1997-2012)
- Despite making up a large portion of Indonesia's population, young Indonesians have little political representation
- Fed up with corruption and a lack of government accountability, young Indonesians are taking to social media (particularly TikTok) to vent their dissatisfaction
- Social media is proving to be an important tool for young Indonesians to push back against government corruption and hold leaders accountable





Indonesians will soon head to the polls to elect a new leader in February 2024. As current President Jokowi Widodo (Jokowi) is unable to seek re-election after two terms in office, the world's fourth largest democracy will decide who will rule the country for the next five years. With a growing youthful population that makes up more than half of Indonesia's voter base, the outcome of the election will be determined by how candidates appeal to the country's younger demographic.

Young voters dominate the Indonesian electorate. This trend has increased over time – in the 2014 presidential election, those aged 17-30 made up 30 per cent of all voters¹. In the 2019 election, this same age group (17-35) accounted for one-third of all votes².

In 2024, Indonesia will see an unprecedented number of young people participate in the presidential election –60 per cent of voters are forecast to be millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012)³.

The large number of young voters is a direct result of Indonesia's demographic dividend. Indonesia is currently experiencing a bulge in its youthful population, which is expected to peak between 2020 and 2030.

But despite making up a significant portion of the population, young people remain underrepresented and less active in the political realm.



Indonesia's leaders are not representative of its population

One major factor inhibiting young people's political engagement is a political system dominated by older parliamentarians (MPs). In general, political office tends to be held by older people – the world average for the proportion of parliamentarians aged 40 and younger is 18.44 per cent⁴. But Asia has the lowest rate of younger MPs at 11.48 per cent – well below America, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa, which all have rates exceeding 20 per cent. In Australia, the share of MPs under 40 sits at 14.29 per cent, and in New Zealand it is 27.5 per cent.

In comparison to its regional neighbours, Indonesia ranks third in Southeast Asia for its share of young MPs at 14.96 per cent (see Table 1). Indonesia's current House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat/DPR) is dominated by substantially older politicians, with an average age of 52. This is unrepresentative of the broader Indonesian population.

Indonesia's median age in 2020⁵ was 29.2 years, yet MPs from this age group made up less than 4 per cent of the total.

TABLE 1. PROPORTION OF YOUNG MPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Country	Chamber	Average age	% of MPs under 30	% of MPs under 40
Philippines	House of Representatives	51	6.43	20.26
Singapore	Parliament	48.3	1.05	15.79
Indonesia	House of Representatives	51.62	3.83	14.96
Malaysia	House of Representatives	N/A	0.9	12.61
Vietnam	National Assembly	49.77	1.6	10.42
Brunei Darussalam	Legislative Council	59.17	0	5.88
Cambodia	National Assembly	64.3	0	4
Laos	National Assembly	53.4	0	2.44
Thailand	House of Representatives	N/A	N/A	N/A
Timor-Leste	National Parliament	N/A	N/A	N/A

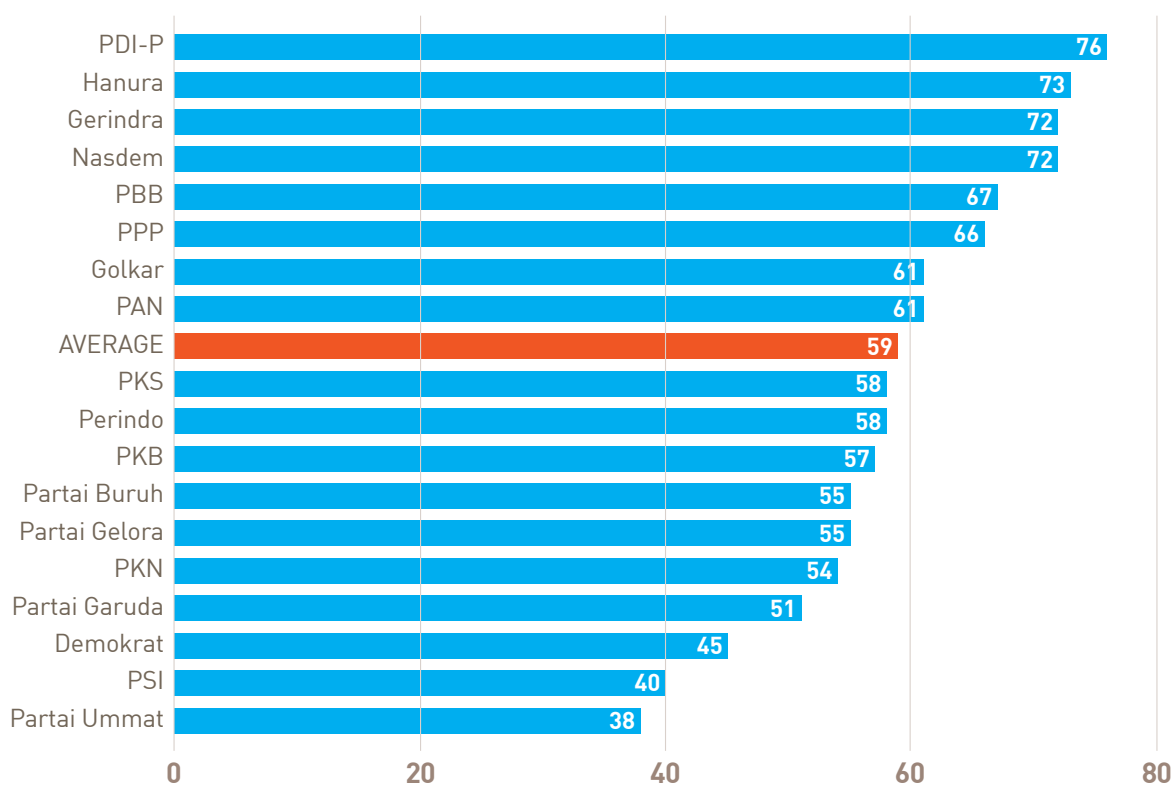
Source: IPU, 2023⁶

Indonesia's political parties are dominated by older leaders

Gerontocracy – where a political system is dominated by leaders older than the majority of the population – is the norm in many of Indonesia's political parties. This is largely due to a reluctance by older leaders to make room for younger ones⁷. Leaders tend to maintain their position as long as possible, making party regeneration almost impossible. This is a systemic issue that continues to inhibit political participation by younger generations.

Only two out of the 18 parties running in the elections next year—Partai Ummat and Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI) —are led by politicians under the age of 40 (see Figure 1). The average age of party leaders is 59 years old. The current ruling party, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDI-P), has the oldest leader with chairwoman Megawati Sukarnoputri aged 76 years old.

FIGURE 1: AGE OF INDONESIAN POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS IN 2023



Source: IPU, 2023

Indonesia's most visible political leaders are all over the age of 50 – current President Jokowi is 62. This is unlikely to change with next year's election. Out of the top three contenders, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Purnomo are the youngest candidates, both aged 54. Prabowo Subianto – who is also the current defence minister – is the oldest candidate at 71.

The practice of capitalising on familial ties is popular throughout Indonesia, and many young MPs come from families with strong political backgrounds. These political dynasties appear to help younger candidates and women enter parliament – half of MPs under 35 years old and 44 per cent of women MPs come from political families⁸. Jokowi's eldest son (35) and son-in-law (31) were both elected Mayor of Solo and Mayor of Medan, respectively. His youngest son Kaesang Pangrap (28) is also running for Mayor of Depok, with heavy backing from Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI).

PSI brands itself as a party for Indonesian youth pushing back against gerontocracy. However, the party actually has close ties to the ruling PDI-P and is heavily influenced by the ruling class⁹. In fact, studies have shown that political dynasties are susceptible to corruption and nepotism¹⁰. This often comes in the form of politicians using government resources – such as money, government facilities and programs – to support a relative's election campaign.

Regions led by political dynasties tend to perform poorly in overcoming poverty and corruption. And corruption in Indonesia has become worse in recent years – its score in the Corruption Perception Index has dropped from 40/100 in 2019 to 34/100 in 2022¹¹.

Indonesia has failed to improve its democratic credentials under President Joko Widodo.

Indonesia is also regressing in world democracy rankings¹². According to a Freedom House study¹³ – which scores countries based on their political rights and civil freedoms – Indonesia ranks as 'partly free', with a score of 58/100. This score has declined from previous years – in 2017 it scored 65/100.

Social media as a tool to counter youth disenfranchisement

Indonesian youth are engaged on the issues that impact them – key among their concerns are high grocery prices, employment shortages, and rising poverty rates¹⁴. Furthermore, they value political transparency and responsible leadership, and aren't afraid to speak up when leaders are falling short.

Given the failure of conventional politics to engage young voters – as evidenced by the PSI experience and the degradation of democracy – Indonesian youth are turning to social media to communicate their political concerns¹⁵.

Student Bima Yudho Saputro (23) attracted national attention in April 2023 when his TikTok video lecture titled "Reasons why Lampung is not moving forward" went viral. The three-and-a-half-minute clip criticises several sectors of Lampung (a province on Sumatra island), including infrastructure, education, a slow and heavily bureaucratic local government, agriculture, and crime rates. He was later sued, but the case was withdrawn amid heated political controversy. Following the incident, President Jokowi visited the province and said that the national government would assume responsibility for road improvement work (previously managed by the provincial government).

FIGURE 2: BIMA YUDHO SAPUTRO CRITICISED THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF LAMPUNG ON TIK TOK

Source: @awbiimaxreborn on Tiktok



A similar incident occurred in the city of Jambi, also on Sumatra Island. A high school student posted four videos criticising the Mayor of Jambi and a private timber processing company for breaking Regional Regulation 4/ 2017 on Road Transport. She expressed her frustration that her grandparents' house had been damaged by the activities of the company's heavy vehicles (not permitted to use village roads under this regional law). The local government reacted by quickly reporting the student to the police. As the videos went viral and political pressure escalated to the national level, the allegation was later dropped.

Social media is an important tool for young Indonesians to push back against government corruption and hold leaders accountable.

Indonesia has one of the highest levels of social media penetration in the world and continued digital activism will be an effective way to bring about social change. However, it is concerning that these two young Indonesians were targeted by political leaders for holding the government to account. Going forward, young Indonesians must be given a larger platform to express their aspirations without fear of clashing with the arrogance of government officials and bureaucracy.

The survival of democracy in Indonesia depends on youth engagement

Indonesia's democratic regression must be reversed, and young people have an important role to play in ensuring a more deliberative and substantive democracy in Indonesia. As parties and politicians use social media to attract support from young people, the digital domain may provide a unique opportunity for Indonesian youth to reverse the continuous democratic backsliding trend.

Understanding the key role of youth in the upcoming elections, all parties claim that they care for young people. But their support needs to be systematic and consistent. Engaging young people should not only happen during campaigns – parties need to overhaul their structures to move away from gerontocracy towards regeneration.

Political parties are responsible for youth political literacy. To substantially improve youth representation, parties need to get young people involved in politics – and these efforts need to be more sincere and direct. Youth concerns must not be treated as a threat to power. Instead, the next government needs to be more inclusive of younger Indonesians.

Indonesia has firsthand experience of the risks of long-term disenfranchised youth that led to student movements in Java and eventually the overthrow of Suharto in 1998 – parties and politicians should be paying attention to this group of the population.

In the current digital era, the litmus test for how well governments are engaging younger people will be social media platforms. Viral hashtags like *#ReformasiDikorupsi* ("reformation has been corrupted,"¹⁶) widely used on Twitter in 2019 as a youth protest against controversial bills that would weaken the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission/KPK), and *#NoViralNoJustice* in 2021 (which satirically criticised the police force), are prime examples of digital activism by Indonesian youth.

Young Indonesians are increasingly turning to social media to criticise the government in how it deals with corruption and law enforcement. As the country's youthful population grows, these views will increasingly represent the attitudes of the general public. Going forward, the government will need to ensure that younger voters are involved in political discourse and decision-making processes. Otherwise, Indonesia risks increased political and social instability driven by a disenfranchised young voter base.



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