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The Limits of Globalization:

Injustice, Inequality and the
Progressive Response





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By: Andina Dwifatma

Shrinking Civic Space

How Threats to Democracy Affect Civil Society and the Media

The trend of shrinking civic space for civil society organizations (CSOs), media, and academics has been occurring even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than improving, civil society is experiencing tougher circumstances to play its role as one of the pillars of democracy. Civil society in its broadest definition consists of the public working collaboratively for democracy and the protection of public rights (Ghaus-Pasha 2005). Thus, as a result of the deterioration of civil society, the state and the market are becoming stronger.

Civil society groups from different parts of the world have been experiencing worsening shortages of resources to do their work. They face the problems of public distrust and uncertainty regarding their relevance and legitimacy, legislative and administrative measures by governments to limit civil society's action, and reliance on donor funding, particularly for civil society in the Global South (VanDyck 2017). There are also CSOs that are funded by political parties and elites, which muddies the precise definition of a civil society organization and may alter the public's perception of them.

The Indonesian government enacted a new Penal Code (KUHP) in December 2022,¹ its most recent legislative initiative. Articles such as “Contempt of the President and State Institutions” in the new

“Civil society groups from different parts of the world have been experiencing worsening shortages of resources to do their work.”

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¹ KUHP stands for *Kitab Undang-undang Hukum Pidana*, which literally means Law Book of Penal Code—the editor.

penal code could be detrimental to the people's freedom of expression, which is essential for the role of civil society as government watchdogs and ensure the system of checks-and-balance. Contempt may be difficult to define, and government criticism may fall within this category. With so many regulations in the KUHP aimed at preventing people from criticizing those in power, the new code has the potential to harm democracy by preventing individuals and groups from voicing their opinions on crucial issues (Komnas HAM Republik Indonesia 2022).

The same holds true for the media. Even though there are specific laws for journalists (“UU Pers”), those in power have a tendency to use other laws, such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (“UU ITE”), to imprison journalists. The new Penal Code will only facilitate this for those in authority.

There is also the issue of financial sustainability for media. The majority of media outlets continue to rely on click-based advertising for revenue (Este and Cassimaly 2016). Consequently, they must produce sensational and click-worthy news regardless of the significance of the issue. News about those without a voice and left behind is often overlooked because it is not clickable. Journalists are also frequently underpaid and susceptible to *doxxing* (the act of revealing someone's personal information online) as well as cyber and offline attacks. Currently, they rely on solidarity among themselves by supporting each other in the face of crisis.

The Bali Civil Society and Media Forum (BCSMF) 2022 discussed how it is pertinent and timely for civil society, media, academics and business to be in the same platform to keep democracies alive. One way is to do more research-based, cross-sectoral collaboration among civil society to promote democracy. Also, since CSOs and journalists are the channels that democracy needs to engage the grassroots, it is only sensible for government representatives to negotiate and provide a sustained platform for civil society and media to generate networks and knowledge.

To form what is known as participatory democracy (della Porta 2019), civil society must come together. We must stop reducing 'democracy' to events such as elections; rather, democracy should be understood as an ongoing process in which individuals are granted the right to voice their concerns and hold those in power accountable. CSOs and academics must collaborate on specific issues in order to encourage the government to create better policies.



Image: www.iseas.edu.sg

“Collaboration is also a central concept in the media industry. Recent research indicates that collaborative or participatory journalism may be the future of the media industry.

Collaboration is also a central concept in the media industry. Recent research indicates that collaborative or participatory journalism may be the future of the media industry (Heikka and Carayannis 2019; Lawrence et al. 2018; van der Haak et al. 2012) because it bolsters the journalistic values of public service. By involving the public in every aspect of the news workflow, from choosing the news topic to reporting and even co-writing with the press, there will be a sense that news is a public good, something that is done for the benefit of all.

Similar initiatives, such as Project Multatuli, currently exist in the Indonesian media industry. Their membership program entails inviting members (“Kawan M”) to editorial meetings where they can submit news ideas and contribute to a reader-specific column. This strategy was also employed by older media such as *Tempo* magazine. They auction off news topics for readers to vote on and link the poll to the crowdfunding website kitabisa.com, where readers can fund the reporting. Then, *Tempo* invites some readers to co-report alongside the journalists and provide financial reports on the funds collected.

Global democratic backsliding (Wunsch and Blanchard 2022), which occurs when the government subtly erodes democratic safeguards until the public suddenly realizes they have been dismantled entirely, is a phenomenon of our time. Now is the time for the public to collaborate and put up a good fight against the state and market in order to ensure the survival of democracy. ■

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