

## Protection or Silencing? Student Participation in Protest and The Future of Civil Society

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### ABSTRACT

The wave of demonstrations involving massive student participation has raised a fundamental dilemma between child protection and the participation right. This research analyzes the paradox of government policies that disguise the prohibition on student demonstrations under the guise of child protection, despite the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizing both protection and participation rights as equally binding obligation of the state. This research looks at what the government's doing and how it affects students. It uses information from documents, laws and science journals. The research found three things. First the government is being too harsh. It does not understand what students need. It thinks that keeping students quiet is the same as keeping them safe. Second, look at what happened in Soweto in 1976 and with the Fridays for Future movement we can see that student movements can bring about changes. The Soweto movement helped end the treatment of students during Apartheid and Fridays for Future changed the way people think about climate change. These movements are similar to student movement in Indonesia. They are facing resistance from institutions but they are working together and making a difference. Third, the governments harsh policies are not stopping student movements. Instead these policies might be hurting the countrys ability to pass on values to the next generation. If the government does not start letting students participate and learn about being citizens in a safe way it could hurt the countrys ability to have a strong civil society.

**Keywords:** student participation, demonstration, activism, civil society

### ABSTRAK

Gelombang demonstrasi di mana para pelajar berpartisipasi secara besar-besaran memunculkan dilema klasik antara perlindungan terhadap anak dan remaja, serta partisipasi sosial dan politik. Studi ini menelaah paradoks kebijakan di mana perlindungan terhadap demonstrasi siswa oleh pemerintah pada akhirnya menutupi upaya perlindungan anak, tidak sedikit mengingat bahwa baik hak atas perlindungan maupun partisipasi merupakan kewajiban yang sama-sama mengikat yang dibebankan kepada negara-negara berdasarkan Konvensi Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa tentang Hak-Hak Anak (1989). Studi ini, yang menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur deskriptif-analitis berdasarkan data dari dokumen kebijakan dan instrumen hukum internasional; jurnal ilmiah dan studi kasus historis, menghasilkan tiga temuan penting: (1) Melarang pelajar demonstrasi justru memperlihatkan bahwa negara belum benar-benar memahami apa yang menjadi hak pelajar. Larangan tersebut sejatinya bukan bentuk perlindungan, tetapi bentuk nyata pembungkaman. 2) belajar dari sejarah,

gerakan Soweto dan Fridays for Future adalah dua contoh nyata bahwa pelajar bisa menggerakkan perubahan besar. Soweto mengguncang sistem pendidikan diskriminatif di era Apartheid. Fridays for Future memaksa dunia menoleh serius ke arah krisis iklim. Pola serupa sedang terjadi di Indonesia pelajar ditekan dari berbagai arah, tapi justru di situlah solidaritas mereka tumbuh dan dampaknya mulai terasa. 3) Satu hal yang terus berulang dari berbagai negara: represi tidak pernah benar-benar berhasil. Gerakan tidak padam, tapi yang hilang adalah kesempatan negara untuk mewariskan nilai-nilai demokrasi kepada generasi mudanya. Jika ruang partisipasi pelajar terus disempitkan, yang dipertaruhkan ialah keberlangsungan gerakan masyarakat sipil yang dapat melemah.

**Kata kunci:** *partisipasi pelajar, demonstrasi, aktivisme, masyarakat sipil*

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## A. INTRODUCTION

A wave of protests happened at the end of August 2025 in many areas in Indonesia. Workers, pressure groups and students both from universities and high schools attended these protests. Students joining in these demonstrations brings up a question. It's about keeping child safe versus their right to express their views as citizens. This right is mentioned in the 1989 UN Convention, on the Rights of the Child. The government responded specifically to the involvement of student in these demonstrations by issuing Circular Letter No. 13 Of 2025 through The Minister Primary and Secondary Education, Abdul Mu'ti. The circular implicitly instructed students not to participate in any demonstrations and instead to channel their aspiration without leaving school. The government also used Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection as the basis for restricting student involvement in protests. Article 15 states that every child has the right to be protected from the misuse of political activities, riots, and events involving violence.

However, the 1989 UN Convention, on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides both protection and participation in children's rights. Articles 12 through 15 define a child's right to be heard and to express his/her views, and therefore, defines a child as an active rights holder. Under the CRC, participation and protection are not contradictory; they are two sides to the same coin that require a proper equilibrium. The CRC also stipulates that children's rights be recognized as developing and that children are progressively empowered to make autonomous decisions (Fox & Lattimer, 2025). Saputri et al., (2025) similarly argue that the government's duty to prevent children's exposure to disorder should not restrict their right to express aspirations.

Student participation in political demonstrations is not new in Indonesia. From the independence era and the 1998 reform movement (Nugroho et al., 2022) to the #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw movements (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024) student activism has a deep historical and democratic basis. The existence of civil society is crucial in a democracy, fostering communication between citizens and the state, enabling feedback mechanisms, and serving as a counterbalance to state power (Zimbico, 2020). This is especially pressing in Indonesia, where scholars have noted democratic regression

and the narrowing of civil liberties (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019), making the cultivation of future civil society activists among students all the more critical (Mietzner, 2021).

The main problem with current government policy is that it uses the narrative of protection to justify the silencing of student aspirations. This paper analyzes the paradox between policies that restrict student demonstrations and the CRC's dual mandate of protection and participation, and examines the implications for civil society regeneration in Indonesia.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is grounded in a qualitative, descriptive-analytical framework. Following the principles outlined by (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), the research focuses on understanding phenomena through the lens of meaning and contextual patterns. To achieve this, a systematic literature review was implemented as the core methodological instrument. Snyder (2019) defines this as a rigorous process of identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarly works to construct a comprehensive understanding of a given research problem.

The analytical units consist entirely of written sources relevant to the research themes: children's participation rights, critical pedagogy, social movement theory, and civil society regeneration. Drawing on Sugiyono's (2013) classification of data sources, this study organizes data into three analytical layers. In this study, primary sources include the legal and policy documents that form the backbone of the analysis, specifically the Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Law No. 35 of 2014 pertaining to Child Protection, Circular Letter of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education No. 13 of 2025, and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Secondary sources consist of journal articles, books, and other scholarly writings on child protection rights, youth political activism, critical pedagogy, and social movement theory. Tertiary sources consist of institutional reports from UNICEF and other international organizations, as well as news media documentation of the August 2025 student demonstration wave, which serve as contextual references to situate the policy analysis within concrete empirical phenomena.

Data were collected through library research, which involves the systematic identification, selection, and critical review of relevant written materials (Moleong, 2018). These materials were then organized into three source categories in this study. The primary instrument employed in this process is a documentation and thematic mapping sheet, used to systematically record, classify, and trace relationships among theoretical concepts, policy provisions, and historical case study evidence. Source selection was guided by two criteria: relevance to the central research question and credibility of publication, with priority given to works from indexed academic journals and reputable publishers, particularly those published within the last decade.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through a descriptive-analytical method combined with a comparative approach. As outlined by Krippendorff (2018)

descriptive analysis of documentary sources involves the systematic interpretation of textual content to identify substantive meaning, internal logic, and ideological orientation. In this study, descriptive analysis was applied to map the normative content of relevant policies particularly Circular Letter Number 13 of 2025 and to trace their consistency or contradiction with international standards on children's rights, especially the dual mandate of protection and participation enshrined in the CRC. Comparative analysis was subsequently employed to examine two international student movement case studies the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and the Fridays for Future movement drawing on the comparative literature review approach described by (Snyder, 2019) as a means of identifying structural patterns across different historical and geographical contexts. The findings from this comparison were then systematically linked to the Indonesian context to build a theoretical argument about the relationship between student demonstrations and the intergenerational regeneration of civil society.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### 1. Childrens' Rights and State Response to Student Political Participation

The rapid involvement of students in a series of demonstration across Indonesia in August 2025 drew a swift institutional response from The Minister of Primary and Secondary Education. Through the issuance of Circular Letter No.13 of 2025, minister directed heads of provincial and district-level education offices to ensure that student within their respective jurisdictions expressed their aspiration through channels that were safe, respectful and grounded in a sense of civic responsibility.

Although the letter formally acknowledged freedom of expression as a constitutional right of citizens, the government simultaneously positioned students as individuals who are still in the process of growth and development, thereby requiring supervision and protection when expressing their views. This circular did not directly prohibit student to join demonstrations. However, the message that students should not be involved was made clear and firm to schools and their principals. The principal and teachers in school receive that message through official letters, verbal directives, and posters distributed on the official websites and social media. The West Java Provincial Education Office offered a particularly concrete illustration of this pattern. On August 28, 2025, the office posted on its official Instagram account @diskidjabar (2025), calling on students to refrain from joining demonstrations outside of school.



Source: Instagram account @diskidjabar, posted on August 28, 2025

Figure 1. Screenshot captured from Instagram account @diskidjabar

Analyzed in light of the 1989 UN CRC, the government's prohibition is framed as part of the state's protective role. Article 6 mandates that the state ensure the survival and optimal development of children. However, Articles 12 through 15 of the Convention address the participatory dimension of children's rights. Article 12 recognizes the child's right to express their own views, Article 13 guarantees access and impart information, Article 14 freedom of thought, and Article 15 affirms the right to peaceful assembly. Taken together, these four provisions make clear that the CRC place a dual mandate on the state, on that extends beyond the protection of children to encompass equally binding obligation to respect and uphold their participation rights.

The conflict between protection and participation rights must be integrated rather than treated as contradictory. The Convention addresses this tension directly through the principle of *evolving capacities*, recognizing children's gradual development toward greater autonomy (Fox & Lattimer, 2025). On this basis, participation rights must be recognized in accordance with maturity. Julin & Harrikari (2025) states that for students to feel involved, there must be no violence or exploitation, demonstrating that safety and participation are neither contradictory nor supportive of each other. Similarly, Quarles Van Ufford (2023) provides evidence for the "Protection Paradox" in child welfare systems. This shows that the paradox of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which states that people in this age group have a right to protection and right to participate, and which therefore cannot be seen as mutually exclusive, has resulted in either participation for children and complete lack of protection, or protection and complete removal of participation. To remove the paradox, a complete overhaul of the rationale behind protection policies is required.

Translating the balance between protection and participation from principle into practice demands concrete state action. Governments must do more than formally recognize students' right to political expression — they are obligated to actively construct protected spaces where that right can be exercised free from coercion, exploitation, and violence. Concretely, this could take the form of institutionalized free speech forums or designated demonstration schedules, organized independently from general public assemblies to reduce exposure to harm. Relevant government bodies — including the Regional Education Office and the Office for Women and Child Empowerment — are well-positioned to host and facilitate such activities, provided they uphold the conditions necessary for genuine freedom of thought and expression. In line with this perspective, Massons-ribas et al (2021) and Herbowo (2025) argue for a shift from a protectionist approach toward an empowering approach, where children are recognized as active participants in their own protection.

Conveniently disguising the discouragement for students to participate as child protection is unconscionable and serves no purpose but to allowing the suppression of children. Instead of discouraging child participation in protests, governments have the duty to encouraging children in expressing their view in safe and secure manner. This position finds additional grounding in Indonesia's own educational framework. According to Law

No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System and the Minister of Elementary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 10 of 2025 on eight graduate profiles jointly mandate that education be oriented toward developing students into democratic and responsible citizens. Among the competencies enshrined in these graduate profiles, critical reasoning, creativity, collaboration, and independence stand out as capacities that student demonstrations are well-positioned to cultivate, provided such actions are carried out in an orderly, peaceful, and ethically grounded manner. It follows, therefore, that demonstrations should not be reduced to mere acts of political expression; rather, they represent a tangible and experiential project of democratic learning for students (Kieess, 2022).

Gonzaga College High School's initiative to facilitate its students' petition against the prevailing view that students should not participate in demonstrations is a form of protection and empowerment of children's rights. While most schools issued warnings and prohibitions, Gonzaga went against the grain by providing students the opportunity to assert that demonstrations are part of their constitutional rights under Article 28E paragraph (3). This bold stance stems from the school's Jesuit educational tradition, which emphasizes forming students into agents of change who fight for human rights, justice, and equality (Witono, 2023).

The contrast between Gonzaga's stance as a private institution and state educational institutions that comply with government directives raises serious concerns for the climate of democratization in Indonesian schools. To date, teachers serving as civil servants (ASN) in public schools are also often prohibited from expressing criticism in public spaces (Muhammad, 2024). Yet according to Giroux (in Siswadi, 2023), every school is an autonomous institution and teachers must become agents of social change, not merely subjects of authority. The suppression and constraining of teachers' voices through bureaucratic structural pressures can undermine their capacity to cultivate critical thinking among students (Martin-sanchez & Flores-rodriguez, 2018).

## **2. Student Activism as a Force for Change: Insights from Soweto and Fridays for Future**

The student movements across the globe have a historical tendency to bring about immense and justified social liberalization, the most notable one being the Play of the Soweto Student Uprising of 1976 to the racist policies in South Africa and specially the policy to have all students schooled in the racist Afrikaner dominant. This policy further deepened the burden of discrimination already endured by Black students, ultimately driving them toward organized resistance (Ndlovu, 2017).

The demonstrations culminated on June 16, 1976, when approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Black Students in Soweto peacefully marched to Orlando Stadium. Although the demonstration ended tragically with hundreds of students killed by police, this monumental action influenced global awareness of the resistance against apartheid

(Ndlovu, 2017). The South African government designated June 16 as Youth Day to commemorate this event and recognize the crucial role of youth in political transformation.

In the contemporary context, the Fridays for Future movement, initiated by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, represents another landmark case. Beginning in August 2018 when Greta was 16 and in high school, she stood alone outside the Swedish Parliament with a sign reading "Skolstrejk för klimatet" (School strike for the climate). Despite resistance, her consistent action was followed by millions of students worldwide. For her pioneering work, Greta was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year and one of Forbes Magazine's 100 Most Influential Women in the World in 2019.

The Fridays for Future movement produced measurable impact on public behavior. One example of social movements positively shifting the engagement and willingness of population regarding the environment is the case of the Soweto Movement and Fridays for Future. An example of this is the research done by (Fritz et al., 2023), in which it is stated that the population of the Swiss had a reduction of the use of plastic, conservation of electricity, and decreased use of automobiles in favor of public transportation and cycling. The Soweto Movement encountered vicious reactions from the apartheid government, while Fridays for Future met opposition from US President Donald Trump (Stracqualursi, 2019). Both social movements overcome the opposition from the powerful and are now legally recognized.

Resistance from, and the persisting of, social movements is also evident in Indonesia. Student movements, especially, have relied on digital technology to organize and have stretched, and in some instances, strengthened, their attempts to overcome State repression (Abdulrohim et al., 2025). The scientific community also recognized, in 2019, that the world was in a climate emergency, and they explicitly supported the concerns of Greta and other climate advocates (Hagedorn et al., 2019). The efforts of leading scientists provides legitimacy to social movements as Greta and the Fridays for Future Movement.

## Discussion

### 1. Policy Paradox Reanalyzed: Protection as Silencing and Its Implications for Democratic Education

Students in Indonesia need space to engage in social movements such as demonstrations. As well as being critical to understanding democracy, student initiated social movements can aid in the revitalization of civil society activism, as student stickiness to a social cause can continue moving social movements (UNICEF, 2024). The opportunity to share opinions increases students' sense of agency and self-worth, assists them in honing their ideas, and empowers students to interact and converse with others (Valente & Gama, 2023). The ability to share opinions and ideas creates a bridge to active involvement in democracy. As stated by Giroux, the goal of education is to realize social justice and equality through democracy, as each person, be it a student or teacher, has the responsibility to act and transform society through opposition and advocacy of new policies (Siswadi, 2023). In

this view, schools that create space for student voice are not simply nurturing individual confidence, but actively cultivating citizens capable of engaging critically with the world around them.

The process of student regeneration as successors to civil society activism must begin in schools. Developing democracy from a young age through education is a crucial part of being politically active and engaged, and active participation in civic education can enhance the political engagement of students. Practicing civic participation education through social and political actions can strengthen the roots of civic engagement and activism (Pontes et al., 2019). Within school-based student activism, institutionalised activism organized by staff represents the most formal kind of young people's political engagement. It is characterised by the design of school policies and regular school practices (Barrance & Muddiman, 2023). By channelling student political aspirations through deliberate institutional spaces rather than suppressing them, schools demonstrate that students can employ a broad range of activist actions to voice concerns about issues that matter to them.

In this framework, the case of using online petitions as a mode of civic engagement is particularly pertinent. Addiputra et al (2020) argue that online petitions for young Indonesians are viewed as participatory and effective tools to engage in political advocacy, which help to bridge digital activism and civic participation. Further, Lundberg (2024) argues that participation of youth in civic extracurricular activities which include protest and advocacy is one of the better predictors of political participation in adulthood. This points to the importance of participatory experiences we give to students and their lasting benefits.

Schools are also important for teaching students the meaning of democratic cohabitation and civic, active, social participation (García-Raga et al., 2022). Unlike institutional participation, which is limited to political party members, non-institutional participation such as petitioning and demonstrating is possible for adolescents, including students (Alscher & Jana, 2025). Furthermore, students' direct experience in democratic learning can enhance their understanding and participation in democratic life (Rizal, 2024).

The process of transmitting political values to children and adolescents aged 10 to 16, known as the intergenerational transmission of political interest, is heavily influenced by the family and school environments (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024). Although political socialization is generally vertical, from parent to child, it can be disrupted by structural factors. In the Indonesian context, the government's ban on student demonstrations can be understood as a form of disrupted socialization, where state policies hinder the transmission of democratic values between generations and weaken the regeneration of civil society (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024). Furthermore, student participation in a movement is crucial not only for fulfilling their personal right to be intellectuals but also for perpetuating social movements over time (UNICEF, 2024).

Democratic learning experiences enable students to be even more civically and politically active, turn out to vote, and advocate for social justice and equity (Reichert & Print, 2018). Bearing this in mind, the government has no right to view student movements as a threat. The impact of social media movements in the mass protests demonstrates students' risk of being victims and/or perpetrators of violence can be minimized. This is where the importance of valuing the work of the present day civil society actors as activists is crucial. The students, as the most upcoming generation, supply the most dynamic and innovative skill sets for all types of mass movements, such as digital activism (UNICEF, 2024)(UNICEF, 2024). Politics become more participatory when the general public can use social media and digital mass communication as methods of expressing their opinion on a given public concern in a creative and/or a critical way, going against the legacy and/or the established systems of governance (Lee, 2018; Middaugh et al., 2025). Suwana (2020) demonstrates how the Save KPK digital movement successfully mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens through online petitions and social media campaigns. This youth-led movement provided critical guidance to the adult actors, showcasing the students' ability to leverage digital resources for social activism.

The presence of civil society is critical to the sustainability of the student movements. It is observed that youth leaders feel that they are not understood by the adult leaders, and that the adult leaders have a poor understanding of the direction taken by the youth leaders, and what sort of scaffolding is to be provided in order to sustain the youth movements (Liou & Literat, 2020). Therefore, in order to sustain the student movements, the inter-civil society-student movements from a cultural and value point of view is critical.

This does not mean that the adult representatives of the civil society should be in a top to bottom relation (dominant) on the young activists and the new leaders of the student movements, but rather, it should be in a mutual learning relation. Therefore, just as the adults, the new leaders of the movements facilitate flow of value and strategies of the student movements, the adults should learn from the youth.

## **2. Student Movements and Civil Society Regeneration: Implications for Indonesian Democracy**

When students in Indonesia practice democracy with demonstrations and discussions, they are not just exercising a right; they are undergoing political socialization. There is research that shows that young activists have an impact on the political awareness of youth and the shaping of critical citizens. This research focuses on the use of civic expression tools by students (Pinandhita et al., 2025). This practice helps develop the social movements and civil society activism of the students in a spatial-temporal democratic context.

Conversely, the transmission of political values between generations can be disrupted when structural conditions hinder effective political socialization (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024). Restrictions on student participation may weaken early processes of political socialization, potentially interrupting the intergenerational continuity of civic engagement. Empirical evidence from broader political contexts supports this concern. In Egypt,

repressive policies under successive regimes have stifled civil society, preventing the emergence of new activist movements (Moisseron & Fazzani, 2020).

The history of Indonesian student movements illustrates the stakes clearly. We can understand this situation worse looking at the student movements in Indonesia from 1999 to 2021. The moves have been focused on the changes in the Indonesian socio political context and were expressed through different forums. These forums include organizing, movements, demonstrations, and public movements (Ramadhan & Aminuddin, 2025). The moves in 2019 and 2020, #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw, have also shown how students are using social media to organize and move their protests (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024). This demonstrates that student participation in political demonstrations has a deep historical basis, and that students have consistently been seen as agents of social change with a significant role.

This approach finds its normative foundation in Indonesia's national education framework. Fulfilling students' right to participate in demonstrations is part of efforts to develop the character of democratic citizens, as mandated by Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Such institutional support for student voice is not merely a pedagogical choice; it is grounded in a broader legal obligation. In line with this, Massons-ribas et al (2021) and Herbowo (2025) indicates that it is critical to consider youth as participants in the protection and not the objects of protection. Finally, it is not possible to isolate student movements from the larger civil society aspirations. In this regard, the advocacy of youth civil movements on the expressions of participant democracy is teaching the students to learn to peacefully advocate for social justice (and the civil movements) and address the (and the civil movements) social injustices and inequalities (Thapan, 2023). Students stand as the future generation of civil society, the very institution that, as (Zimbico, 2020) argues, civil society bridges the communication and interaction of citizens with the state to ensure the existence of a feedback mechanism, enforcement of accountability, and the counterbalancing of the state's authority. Setiawan & Tomsa (2023) further note that the resilience and adaptability of civil society in Indonesia in the face of various challenges depends on the activism of students (manifested in student activism), and therefore the participation of students in civil society is necessary for the sustainable democracy of Indonesia.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The demonstrations in August 2025 bring to light a policy dilemma for the government. It publicly states that to protect children, it prohibits demonstrations. Contradictory to this, the government ignores the child's right to participate, as stated in the Constitution, and in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The study presents three main findings. First, the government's policy of repression as practiced in the 2025 Circular No. 13, ignores the right to participate and the right to protection as a gradual integration. The issues of safety and protection should not silence the right to participate. Second, movements such as the Soweto and Fridays for Future,

encourage evidence to show that student-led movements are capable of radical and constructive change in the face of resistance and repression. Students should not be viewed as passive movement participants, to be protected; rather, they should be policymakers, themselves and in the future. Third, the government policy to silence student movements does not address the fact that student activism reflects the transfer of interest to politics, which is vital for the regeneration of society. Severe social policies not only limit participation, but the intergenerational transfer of values to society, as they leave a wide social and ethical space for future generations to fill policy gaps.

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