

# Beyond the rhetoric: youth and anti-corruption efforts in Indonesia

by Garry Rosario da Gama

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College students during an Indonesia Gelap protest in Jakarta

Photo Credit: [Unsplash/Harry Angiola](#)

If Indonesia's President Joko Widodo was known for his Nawacita (nine goals), his successor Prabowo Subianto is introducing Astacita — an approach centred on eight strategic agendas, one of which focuses on eliminating corruption. However, tackling corruption cannot be achieved through national policy alone. As a PhD student researching local governance, I believe that civil society actors, particularly young people, play a crucial role at the local level.

The 1998 Reformasi movement marks a pivotal chapter in Indonesia's history, demonstrating the power of collective action. The fall of President Suharto on 21 May 1998, after 32 years of leadership, was preceded by large-scale, student-led demonstrations, including the notable occupation of the parliament building. While the immediate spark for unrest was the economic crisis of 1997, the deeper source of dissatisfaction stemmed from widespread concerns over corruption, nepotism and state violence.

The Reformasi movement introduced six crucial political demands: the prosecution of Suharto; constitutional amendments; regional autonomy; dismantling the military's dual function of overseeing both security and administrative affairs; eradicating corruption, collusion and nepotism (known as KKN); and reinforcing the rule of law. This movement saw youth, previously marginalised under Suharto's regime, step forward as dynamic agents of change.

This legacy remains hugely relevant today. The Reformasi generation showcased the potential of young people to reshape political landscapes. However, the persistence of corruption in various forms underscores the necessity for ongoing vigilance. Today, the focus must shift to the local level, where corruption is agile, making youth engagement more essential than ever in fostering transparency and accountability.

Since Reformasi, young people have expanded their role as watchdogs —

monitoring budgets, criticising policies and advocating for transparency. The legal framework supports their involvement, with protections established by Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Law No. 31 of 1999 and the Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 113 of 2014 on village financial management. Additionally, since 2011, anti-corruption education has been integrated into all levels of the education system, from early childhood to universities, laying a foundation for future engagement.

While the implementation of these initiatives can be inconsistent, there is a growing recognition among young people of the importance of integrity and accountability. Many perceive anti-corruption education as merely symbolic, especially when the education system itself sometimes grapples with corrupt practices. However, there is a positive energy emerging among the youth. They are leveraging online platforms to raise awareness, expose misuse of funds and engage in meaningful public policy discussions.

An inspiring example can be seen in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). In May 2024, Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), in partnership with the local NGO Bengkel APPeK NTT, and supported by USAID, launched an innovative Anti-Corruption Academy. This initiative brought together participants from diverse backgrounds, including youth organisations, regionally-owned enterprises and local government agencies.

NTT was chosen for this initiative due to its ranking as the third most corruption-prone province in Indonesia, according to ICW's 2022 data. The Academy's goal was to enhance local capacity, improve oversight of public procurement and instill values of integrity within the community.

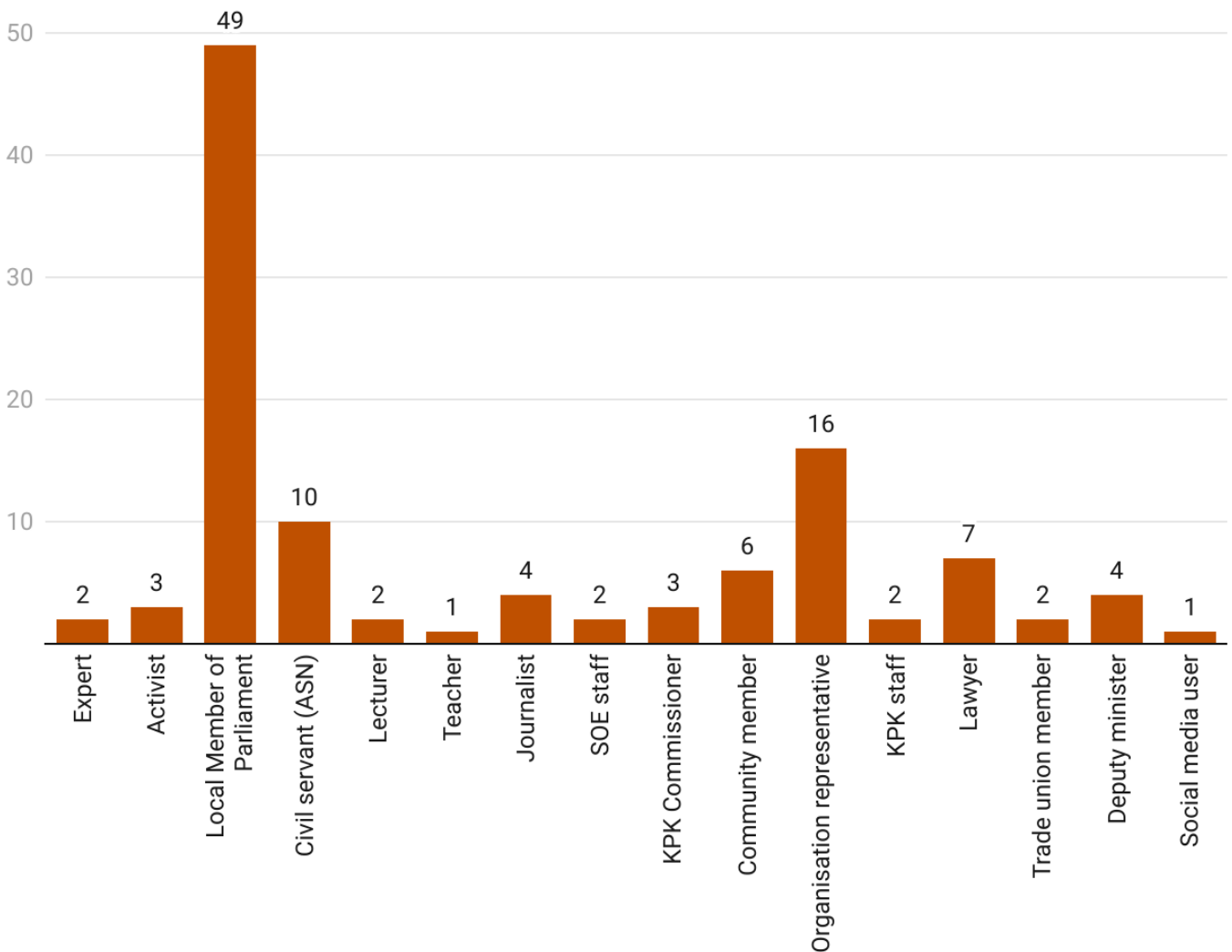
The acting Mayor of Kupang, Fahrensy P. Funay, warmly welcomed the initiative, stating, "After this training, there should be a sense of shame and fear when it comes to committing corruption." ICW emphasised the importance of fostering local ownership of the anti-corruption agenda. APPeK's director, Vincensius Bureni, acknowledged that while some participants were initially hesitant, many left the program feeling inspired and enthusiastic.

This initiative illustrates that meaningful change can indeed begin in smaller cities. With the right support and engagement, youth have the potential to become valuable allies for local governments rather than just critics. Achieving this shift requires long-term commitment and sustained involvement rather than isolated events.

However, such grassroots activism is not without serious risks. Between 1996 and 2019, ICW documented at least 91 attacks against anti-corruption defenders,

including criminalisation, intimidation and physical violence.

**Figure 1: Number of anti-corruption activist victims by profession 1996 - 2019**



Source: Indonesian Corruption Watch • Created with Datawrapper

A particularly alarming case is that of Novel Baswedan, a senior investigator at the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), who suffered an acid attack — serving as a stark reminder of the risks involved. Many such violent acts remain unpunished. According to KontraS, a not-for-profit organisation that advocates for human rights in Indonesia in connection with cases of missing persons and victims of violence, this situation underscores the state’s insufficient commitment to protecting those who dare to speak out. In Kupang, several youth activists reported being summoned by police after participating in peaceful demonstrations, while others faced character attacks in local media or direct threats. If Indonesia is truly committed to fostering a culture of integrity, it must prioritise the protection of those who advocate for transparency.

Not all challenges to anti-corruption efforts arise from external sources. During fieldwork, I uncovered insights regarding the internal dynamics of youth organisations. Many local youth groups in Kupang, initially focused on budget monitoring, encountered resistance from within as they began to voice criticisms of government practices.

Operating under a not-for-profit framework, these organisations relied on donations and partnerships with government projects. When their critiques became more pronounced, some members encouraged leaders to adopt a more diplomatic approach or to seek constructive dialogue with government officials — many of whom were alumni of the groups. Others took on roles as intermediaries between contractors and government offices, navigating the complexities of access and influence.

This situation illustrates the fine line between activism and potential compromise. Over time, as their anti-corruption vision evolved, the organisations found ways to adapt within the system they sought to reform. For me, this points to a vital opportunity: enhancing the financial independence of civil society can strengthen its resilience against co-optation. The challenge for this generation is to embrace integrity while skilfully navigating the difficult compromises that may arise in pursuit of their goals.

For Prabowo's Astacita agenda on corruption to evolve beyond rhetoric, it should actively invest in youth movements. This means committing to long-term funding, establishing legal protections and creating safe spaces for open expression — fostering an environment free from state control or co-optation.

Young people are essential to civil society, which serves as a cornerstone of democracy. By rallying behind them, the state and broader society can become powerful allies in their efforts, empowering a generation eager to drive change.

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