CHAPTER 7

Lost in Transition? The Internet and Reformasi in Indonesia

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Introduction

The advent of the Internet as a global communications technology has opened historically unprecedented opportunities for the flow and cross-fertilization of ideas within and across territorial boundaries, bringing promises of empowering people by giving civil society greater voice vis-à-vis the state, political elites, and private economic interests. From this optimistic view, the Internet advances freedom and democracy by opening the public sphere to their voice and cyberparticipation in political affairs. Examples of widespread political reform in East and Southeast Asia that are found to be greatly facilitated by Internet-based flows of information provide evidence for this view. An extreme case of this democracy-Internet connection is South Korea, which along with its fundamental political reforms at the end of the twentieth century began to identify its civil society as being composed of “Netizens”—Internet citizens (Cho 2002).
Contrary views are manifold. Some see the Internet as a threat to democracy through its potential to create Orwellian modes of state surveillance over individual and group behavior. In a somewhat related manner, others take the view that to the extent that it can be said to exist, civil society itself is controlled by elites through manipulation of sociocultural processes of identity formation. Graham (2000), for example, shows how telecommunications are customized to the needs of powerful users and their spaces, casting the Internet as a technology that widens gaps between the powerful and the powerless. Still others document “communes of resistance” rising from civil society to appropriate cybertechnology and its informational flows for organizing violent responses to perceived injustice under global capitalist hegemony (Castells 1997). Still others point to the ways in which capitalism as a process of global accumulation is killing the Internet itself through invasions of unsolicited commercial messages and unrelenting attempts to commodify all cyberflows of information.

The debate over the Internet as a revolutionary facilitator of democracy or as a growing menace to civil society and democracy has no resolution in the abstract. Insights into these issues can only be drawn from historical experiences rooted in specific local contexts. Flows of information, images, and symbolic representations over the Internet are invariably mediated through local constellations of power, including both political/class structures and cultural practices, in ways that transform electronic signals into potent social meanings that can only then become part of contestations to reshape the political landscape. The discussion that follows looks at this localization process and its outcomes, focusing on the civic space dimension of the Internet as it interplays with the rise of civil society in Indonesia during two historical episodes: first, the May 1998 Indonesian students movement (reformasi) and, second, the emergence of the Jihad Troopers in the early post-Suharto era. Leading into the first episode in the mid 1990s, nongovernment Internet providers began to create a new kind of civic space—a cybercivic space—that soon allowed Indonesian people to collectively mobilize for political reform. Yet, as the second case illustrates, the Internet also allows for other less civil elements of society to rise to destabilize both civil society and the nation-state.

**Civil Society, Civic Spaces, and Identity**

In much of the world, localizing the Internet in tandem with political reform has had three interwoven dynamics: the rise of civil society, the creation of civic spaces—both physical and cyberspaces—for the political engagement of civil society, and social mobilization around the formation of collective identity. Although the concept of civil society has been
developed from the earlier writings of John Locke (1690) and G. W. F. Hegel (1677), the use here emphasizes Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1969) idea of voluntary association and Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) separation of civil society from both the state and economy (market) in the public realm. As argued by Friedmann (1998), the key to the existence of civil society is its degree of autonomy from state and corporate economy.

In this sense, the idea of “voluntary” association is taken in the narrow understanding of not being overtly controlled by the state or economy. It does not mean that manipulation of identity or pressures to join certain forms of association are not prevalent. Indeed, whether the tendency is toward hegemony under certain religious or cultural identities or, in the opposite direction, the fragmentation of society into myriad opposing forms of association, the constant turmoil of association within civil society is its hallmark. However, to attribute this voluntary process to an involuntary function of class structure is reductionist and certainly does not fit the case of Indonesia where, for example, neither a large urban middle class nor a proletarianized labor force predominates or subsumes socioeconomic divisions and where capitalist relations are as yet not as fully developed as in the West. In the Indonesian case, at least, association within civil society cannot be solely seen as the manifestation of hegemony under a single economic class. In an archipelago composed of more than thirteen thousand islands and extant precapitalist societies linked with a capitalist world system, shifting modes of association are imbedded in religious, cultural, racial, and class differences that are highly complex. As the discussion below shows, the dissolution of an authoritarian regime thus unleashes this complexity and results in significantly diverse forms of contestations within civil society that take the form of attempts to capture a weakened state apparatus.

Over the past several decades, the rise of civil society has become a singularly prominent political phenomenon as people around the world, including in Indonesia, have joined in movements to gain autonomy from oppressive states through democratic reforms (Douglass and Friedmann 1998). Although globalization plays a key role in the broader political economy of the rise of civil society through, for example, access to information beyond the nation-state, the struggles in the rise of civil society are highly differentiated through varied historical processes of development of localized sociopolitical institutions.

Despite such positive trends, however, authoritarian regimes continue to successfully resist civil society movements in many parts of the world. Equally daunting is the appearance of sectarian organizations from within civil society that seek to dominate or even eliminate nonbelievers or perceived outsiders. In addition, the erosion of both the state and civil society
organizations through the expanding influence on the political, economic, and social life of nondemocratic institutions such as the World Trade Organization that make decisions on global-local relations in favor of a global corporate agenda.

Whatever the outcome, the rise of civil society is interdependent with a second but often neglected facet of localization—namely, the creation of civic spaces. The term *civic space* is used here instead of *public space* to clarify the need for spaces in which civil society can engage in its daily practices. When seen from a political perspective, the availability of civic spaces is a basic requirement for democratic practices to flourish in any society (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi 2002). Following from the insights of Michel Foucault (1979) and Henri Lefebvre (1991), instead of simply a pre-existing given or a backdrop for social action, the production of space—particularly civic space—is an active dimension of social life and change. In this context, the Internet can be seen as a potential civic space in which civil society can flourish independently from the state and the corporate economy and can also engage in political action.

Society-technology-space relations revolve around a third dynamic, that of identity formation. Creating identities is a universal human experience and fundamental source of meaning and social power. Collective identity formation—identities shared among individuals—is a primary driving force in contemporary world history (Castells 1997). They are the sources of resistance to globalization and the rise of network society, which in the current era is manifested by the spread of information technologies, in particular the Internet. According to Manuel Castells (1997, 8), collective identities take three principal forms:

1. *Legitimizing identities* are created by dominant institutions of society—notably, political regimes in control of the state apparatus and their followers—to extend and rationalize their rule.
2. *Resistance identities* are generated by those who are being devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination.
3. *Project identities* go beyond resistance to attempt to actively redefine positions in society and, by so doing, transform relations of power in the prevailing social structure.

Resistance identities play a critical role in fostering the rise of civil society against oppressive states and the hegemonic tendencies of global corporate capitalism. These identities become the moral fabric uniting people into communities of “collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression” (Castells 1997, 9). They can also further develop into projects that seek to change the course of history by using collective identities as a
power base, for example, to overthrow existing regimes or create alternative communes at the margins of society and territorial spaces.

Although often arising from resistance identities against the state, the sustenance of civil society ultimately requires the regulatory powers of the state. In this sense, resistance or project identities must transform into legitimizing identities of a new status quo that can bring together the “apparatuses” that are deeply rooted among people and prolong the routines of state-civil society relations. As the Indonesian case will show, the Internet played a crucial role in creating resistance identities that galvanized civil society to overthrow the New Order Government of President Suharto. In the aftermath, however, continued resistance has created identity projects that are not necessarily leading to a new period of national legitimation, but are instead threatening the vitality of civil society and the state.

Suharto’s Panopticon: State Control and Surveillance
Suharto, whose reign of power as New Order president of the Republic of Indonesia lasted from 1966 to 1998, built a “panopticon” of constant surveillance over national territorial space. In constructing a national system of surveillance, the Suharto regime magnified its control through fear of its capacity to identify anyone complicit with antigovernment actions, and it did so in a manner that was greater than its actual capacity physically to enforce its rule. This fear of government was accomplished and sustained through written, verbal, and hidden rules to control all physical spaces as well as the spaces of the human mind. Wherever people went, whatever they thought, they felt that they were under the eye of the state. Although many public parks, civic centers, plazas, and city squares were created during Suharto’s New Order government, they were all beleaguered by the purpose of creating spaces for activities symbolically in support of his regime. Uses of these spaces were restricted to state approved functions. By staging events in these spaces to extol the New Order government as a source of Indonesian identity and progress, potential civic spaces were used instead to manipulate people and control the people.

Suharto’s success in creating these identities was manifested in the general unawareness among people that they were being controlled or manipulated. For more than three decades people believed that the plazas, squares and parks were places for only having national ceremonies (e.g., a flag ceremony on Monday morning) or for doing regimented national physical exercise (senam kesegaran jasmani) on Friday morning and mass jogging on Sunday morning. Those engaged in the exercise programs would wear the same athletic clothing—not unlike prisoners in an exercise yard—as
symbolic evidence of loyalty to the nation and ruling regime, while the
government created the image that it really took care of its people by pro-
viding such spaces. Participating in weekly state-sponsored athletic events
was a way for people to thank the state for delivering economic progress
and its generosity.

The “Authorized Party”

For more than thirty years the government was able to legitimate itself
through such identity promotion in public spaces. There was no space that
was “civic” in the sense of being available to civil society at arm’s length
from the state. Instead, all activities happening in all kind of spaces—pri-
ivate as well as public—in Indonesia were required to be known and permit-
ted by the state. To hold social occasions, religious meetings, sport events,
and cultural and art events, let alone political debates, required getting
a stamped letter stating that the activity is permitted by the “authorized
party.” The terminology of *pihak yang berwajib* (the “authorized party”)
used by the government did not specifically identify who this party or
person was. Like the invisible guard at the panopticon, this party could
be in any space and time, thus making people engage in self-censorship
and self-discipline with the knowledge that the “ghost of Suharto” or “the
authorized party” just might be observing their actions.

A particularly ominous form of the use of the term *authorized party*
was the posting in every neighborhood, street, and alley of small sign-
boards with the phrase, “All guests who stay more than 24 hours should
be reported [to the authorized party]” (*Tamu 1x24 jam wajib lapor*; see Fg.
1). This plain signboard is much more powerful that it appears to be. Much
simpler and cheaper than the surveillance cameras mounted by many
Western governments, this signboard successfully controlled people with-
out giving any overt feeling of being controlled. Although people might
not have actually reported their guests—especially since it was not clear to
whom they should be reported—they accepted the idea that government
had the right to ask them to do so and that it was the right thing to do. They
were also encouraged by such signage to feel suspicious of “strangers” in
their neighborhood.

Far above these small neighborhood signs soared an even more power-
ful eye of the New Order panopticon. It was the “Palapa” satellite (see Fg.
2), images of which were used from elementary school upward (mainly on
1977 and 1984 curricula), to symbolize the unification of Indonesia under
the all-seeing communications satellite. When Suharto pushed the but-
ton to launch this satellite in July 1976, he declared that day as the day
of national unity and made an explicit parallel between the satellite and himself as the unifier of the 13,677 islands by Palapa.

Followed by the Televisi Masuk Desa (government controlled national television entering the villages) program, Palapa was much more than just technological prestige. It was a provocative symbol of national identity and cultural integration that allowed the government to more emphatically reach and mark the perimeters of national cultural space, to link the boundaries of the far-flung archipelago to the center, and to enable Indonesians throughout the nation to more effectively “imagine their community” (Kitley 1994, 104). By filling the minds of people with the image of unification, the state actually had been “panopticonizing” society by identifying the image of a satellite having surveillance capabilities with nationhood and national identity.

Another key element of the panopticon apparatus of the New Order that is still applied today is the Rukun Tetangga (RT) system. In this system, which was taken directly from the Japanese method of organizing neighbors to spy on each other introduced in Indonesia during the Japanese
occupation in World War II, the state puts a Ketua RT (leader) for every neighborhood block, a Ketua RW (Rukun Warga) for several RT, a Lurah (chair of the village) for several RW, and so on, up to the top level. Within this system, no one can say where the state stops because it is composed of layers of organizations that are not officially state functions but nonetheless reports to the state, right down to the neighborhood block level.

Like the guards watching the prisoners in Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, through its “authorized parties,” Tamu 1x24 jam wajib lapor signboards, and the image of unification under Palapa and the RT system, Suharto’s New Order regime could effectively control society’s spaces and, in so doing, provided no real civic spaces at all. This led to a suffocation of civil society, which was furthered by direct action against potential sources of mobilized dissent.

**Containing Islam and Universities**

In authoritarian states there are generally only two major sources of social movements for political reform that can be sustained. One is religion, especially the dominant religions of a nation that the state does not dare try to destroy; the other is the university, where disaffected intellectuals gather and radicals find sanctuary (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi 2002). Concerning
religion, as with his predecessor, President Sukarno, President Suharto viewed Islam as a principal source of identity projects that could effectively challenge his rule, and much of the political effort of the New Order was aimed at containing Islam and capturing its identity for state purposes. Following the practices of Sukarno, Suharto kept the existence of the Ministry of Religious Affairs mainly to control Islam, to create an allegedly “modern, tolerant, and apolitical” Indonesian Islam, by publishing Islamic da’wah (educational and legal literature acceptable to the state), governing the development of Islamic discourse produced by Muslim subjects and institutions, and establishing the so-called legal Islamic institutions, all of which were based on the state Pancasila ideology of unity with diversity (not Islam’s shari’a). The Ministry of Religious Affairs also published an official translation and commentary on the Koran and watched over non-official ones. Another form of marginalization was to force Muslim parties to be united under one party, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, which for decades gave support only to the rule of Suharto.

In addition to religious quarters, universities, especially the main national public universities such as the University of Indonesia (UI) and the Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB), had been the major sources of political movements in Indonesia since Dutch colonial days. To preemptively quash such activities, Suharto’s regime began strategically to diminish the political involvement of students to gather for political mobilization by not only filling university leadership positions with his personnel, but also by redesigning the organization of spaces through campus renovation projects. By locating faculties in UI far apart from each other, so it was almost impossible to walk from one faculty to another, his intentions succeeded as the energy to engage crowds of student and faculty members in multidisciplinary gatherings was effectively dissipated. At the ITB the old student centers, where all student activists used to gather to talk, were torn down. Meanwhile, by consenting to allow periodic police and military sweeps of protestors on campus in both universities via the Bakorstranasda (Regional National Strategic Coordination Board), the state claimed the right to control university campus spaces at will. The disappearance of civic spaces on campus had the direct impact of diminishing the political engagement of universities in national politics.

In sum, through its control of potential civic spaces, the state orchestrated the production and manipulation of images, symbols, and ideas. Nominal civic spaces were captured and transformed into a state theater of choreographed identity formation. Through its propaganda, the state tried to build and sustain what Castells calls a “legitimizing identity” needed by Suharto to remain in power over a vast archipelago of great diversity and always-potential opposition to the regime’s hegemonic designs.
The Advent of the Internet

For more than three decades, the Suharto regime enjoyed nearly absolute control over physical spaces, media spaces, and information/communications spaces. The coming of the Internet was highly instrumental in ending this era (Hill and Sen 2000; Lim 2003a, 2003c; Marcus 1998). Initially, at the time the Internet started to develop in Indonesia in the mid-1990s, the state started trying to control the technology, as it had with older media. However, attempts to control failed as the Indonesian economy plummeted with the coming of the Asian financial crisis in 1997–98. In this critical period, corporate attempts to dominate the Internet business also failed. With some help from international funding organizations, civil society groups—especially those from universities and educational institutions—started to build the Internet infrastructure on campuses and from there successfully captured the development of the Internet in Indonesia (Lim 2000b). One outstanding example was the Computer Network Research Group (CNRG) at the ITB, which bypassed the state-owned telecommunications company’s domination and successfully hooked into the global Internet by accessing the Internet through a Japanese satellite (Lim 2003b: 237–38). The Internet in Indonesia started in education and research institutions as early as 1993, and had became much more popular after 1996 with the availability of Internet cafés (warnet) throughout the archipelago (Lim 2000c).

The Internet itself represents a revolutionary change in the space-time relations of communications. The technologies of cyberspace use space-time relations in a way that severely reduces the effects of borders and defies simple linearity in communications pathways (Derrida 1974). In seeming to annihilate space with time, cybertechnology allows communications through the Internet to appear instantaneously upon demand at multiple points in an ever shifting network of connectivity. In contrast to the printed word or even television and radio, the Internet radically expands the reach of communications and, in so doing, allows for the appearance of vast, previously unimaginable cyberterrains in which ordinary people can engage in exchanges of ideas and construct shared identities.

The Internet’s revolutionary technology also allows an unusually high potential for users to bypass, finesse, and otherwise resist attempts by the state to control its uses. The potential for massive increases in abundance of information, points of connectivity, and the spatial scope of communications reaching far beyond the nation-state adds to the difficulty any government or regulatory body faces in monitoring and controlling Internet content. Such limitations on state surveillance and censorship imbedded in the technology create the opportunity for spaces that give substantial
autonomy to people not only to share information but to also form collective associations, to create identities of resistance, and to create identity projects seeking fundamental political change. In other words, the technology allows for the creation of what can be termed “cyberg civic” spaces that facilitate the rise of civil society in places such as Indonesia.

Yet despite this potential imbedded in the technology, cyberspace is less “virtual” or open to the world than it appears to be. First, it requires physical technology to capture its signals; such technology is not ubiquitous; on a global scale it is, in fact, still rare. It also involves other physical infrastructure, ranging from satellites to telephone or cable networks and Internet cafés to shelter hardware and provide space for real-world users. In addition, all system elements must be managed by real people at real geographical sites. On a global scale, networks of “wired” cities that are centers of local control, management and access to the Internet are the spatial template of cyberspace and, by extension, cyberg civic space. In this new geography of the world system, each node is still dependent upon the local production of space.

More specifically, the actualization of cyberspace as a new form of civic space is contingent upon the changing ways in which the localization of global cybernetworks occurs. In Indonesia, the warnet—a small commercial establishment equipped with several computers hooked to the Internet—provides a clear example of how civil society has been able to develop cyberg civic spaces within the context of an authoritarian political regime. Since its birth in the mid-1990s, the warnet system has provided the major entry for Indonesians, especially those of the younger generation, into cyberspace. Without the warnet, the Internet would have remained beyond the economic and physical reach of most of the people who now use it. Currently, approximately 60 percent of Internet users in Indonesia access it from the warnet.

Accessing the Internet from warnet (the term may be either singular or plural in construction), unlike connecting from home, office, or public library, is a direct form of social engagement (Lim 2003c). The students and youngsters who sit in front of the computers in the warnet do much more than just surf the Web; they also interact with each other within the physical space of the warnet. While some choose to sit in a partitioned space for privacy, many others who want to enjoy accessing the Internet together with friends create within the warnet a group lounge with several computers (Lim 2003c). For these users, physical space matters as much as cyberspace. Cyberspace reaches into the physical space of the warnet, with the users coexisting in both.

Since its birth, the warnet has been characterized as a “free space.” It was born independently, without the intervention of the state or corpora-
tions. While who actually founded the warnet remains vague, it started to be very popular in 1996. At that moment the young staff (Onno Purbo and friends), recent graduates, and students of the ITB, through the CNRG—which was actually not formally within the structure of ITB—worked together to build a company, Pointer, whose main task was to build as many warnet as possible in Bandung and Jakarta. They also popularized the concept of warnet by giving free seminars throughout the country (Lim 2003b).

Like all good civic spaces, the warnet provides privacy from both state intrusion and consumer identities while offering a place for meeting others and exchanging ideas and information flowing into cyberspace that connects with other warnet, potentially linking thousands of existing social communities and organizations with each other. Many communities are created virtually but then become face-to-face communities or even legal institutions. This interplay between the virtual and real physical space of the Internet sometimes extends beyond the realm of chatting and e-mailing for friendship. As cybercivic spaces they can transform electronic messages into political action, as was the case in the late 1990s in Indonesia.

The Internet and the Rise of Civil Society in Indonesia

As the most pervasive provider of access to Internet in Indonesia, the warnet gained greater prominence in the late 1990s during the economic and political crisis that undermined both the state's and the corporate economy's ability to maintain their power over access to the Internet. The late 1997 crisis sweeping through Pacific Asia hit Indonesia politically and economically, causing the collapse of both the New Order regime and the nation's export economy. Many state-linked corporate Internet service providers that emerged in 1996 simply collapsed in 1997 due to the combined political and economic crisis, resulting in the failure of the state and its corporate cronies to monopolize the Indonesian Internet. At the same time, the state entered into an identity crisis as people lost the trust they previously had in the New Order. During this crisis, warnet grew in numbers in Indonesia, especially on Java, and rapidly emerged as network points for political activation of civil society via cyberspace.

The major contribution of the Internet to Indonesian society during the crisis is that it provided spaces for people to commingle without overt control of the state and, by extension, the vast business world linked to it. During the 1996–98 period just before and during the peak of the crisis, cyberspace became the principal space through which people could discuss and criticize Suharto's New Order. Among some Internet applications, mailing lists were the most effective tool for political discussion.
and disseminating political information. Websites were also used to disseminate information; however, since Internet connection at that point was still slow (due to low bandwidth), e-mail-based applications like mailing lists were more accessible. Among some important mailing lists were the first and the most famous Indonesian political list, Apakabar (How do you do? or, What’s up?). In the mid-1990s it became a space for political discussions for a wide range of views. For Indonesians, as stated by one of Indonesia’s Netizens, Apakabar was a list that accepted opposed opinions (against Suharto’s regime); here was “the place for Indonesian activists to freely spill out all kinds of complaints, grumbles or even angriens about the government.” Some other mailing lists created by Indonesian students abroad, such as Janus (Indonesians@janus.berkeley.edu), ParokiNet (paroki@uiuc.edu), and IsNet (islam@isnet.org), and several other student mailing lists created in North America, Europe and Australia, also contributed in providing space for political discussions.

Through the Internet, people could gain and share information that previously was controlled by the state and its infamous Ministry of Information—especially forbidden information about such scandals as the massive wealth of Suharto’s family and his role in the attempt to take over the government in the “G30S affair” of 1965—as well as left-wing materials. The banned, small, prolabor student party, the Democratic People’s Party (PRD in Indonesian), launched their website freely on the Internet without fear of being cracked down by the government. The deeply censored articles of a leftist author Pramoedya Ananta Toer were published on the Internet. Meanwhile, George Aditjondro, a Suharto critic who sought political asylum in Australia, freely posted his report on the corruption of Suharto’s family and political cronies in many Indonesian mailing lists.

For the first time, the Indonesian people finally had their own civic spaces, and the warnet became a favorite spot to explore cyberspace. Unfettered access to information and freedom to talk about many things—from politics to sex—gave a color of excitement to warnet all over Indonesia. Among various political information made available, information about the Suharto family’s corrupt practices quickly became the most popular. When people wanted to find a scapegoat, the offenses of the Suharto family were seen as a perfect candidate as the cause of crisis.

Because of the long absence of non-government information-gathering in Indonesia, the ability of the Internet to connect the global and local (Indonesia) was crucial. The Internet not only connected Indonesians at home with Indonesians abroad; it also linked Indonesian society to broader global sources of information and to social movements (e.g., in China and Korea) that could inspire Indonesians to organize their own movements. The connectivity among Indonesian students and among uni-
versities inside and outside Indonesia was exceptionally vital to the rise of civil society in Indonesia. All of these triggered the emergence of collective identities of resistance to effectively challenge the legitimacy of the New Order regime.

The Reformasi: From Cyberspace to the Physical Space

The Internet was crucial, but it was not the sole source of support for political reform (reformasi) in Indonesia (Lim 2003a). Megawati Sukarnoputri, the opposition leader, and her party PDI Perjuangan (Democratic People of Indonesia in Struggle), campaigned in cyberspace by launching a website, but she also had to go into the streets to hold campaigns all over Indonesia to gain support. The PRD still had to hold road shows at universities to obtain votes from students in addition to its intensive online campaigns through Apakabar and other mailing lists.

Activists still had to make Internet based information available to a wider range of society by transforming it into readable printed media. The journey of one piece of information is described in Figure 3, which shows that in order reach the masses, electronic information from the Internet needed to be transformed into printed flyers and information sheets that were given away or sold by newspaper sellers in the streets. For example, an article about Suharto’s wealth from Apakabar was the most popular information available in cyberspace. A student surfing the Internet from a warnet and reading this information would print out the information and fax a copy to a friend, take another to his family, and give additional copies to a news vendor. The friend and family members might also disseminate the information in a similar way, multiplying it exponentially throughout

Figure 7.3 The Internet’s place in Information Paths.
major cities in Indonesia. At the same time, the news vendor might make more copies and sell them on the street. In Bandung, a one-page summary of Suharto's wealth was sold for just 1,000 rupiah (approximately ten U.S. cents), the hourly wage of an unskilled worker at that time. The news vendor might also sell it to his colleagues, who would also sell it, rapidly disseminating the information to a vast audience.

Empowered by new information and a new sense of collective opposition, people turned from resistance to a more proactive project of finding the right means and moment to confront the state and bring down Suharto and his New Order. Using different means of communication not overtly controlled by government—telephone, fax, cellular phone, and, particularly, e-mail—students and others mobilized people to move to the streets and to occupy parks, plazas, and the frontage of governmental buildings. The peak moment came in May 1998 when thousands of demonstrators representing manifold civil society groups gathered at and occupied the parliament building in Jakarta, demanding that Suharto “abdicate his throne.” Other spaces that never had a civic function before were turned into spaces of insurgency: among these were the traffic circle at the Hotel Indonesia and the National Monument.

This story shows that the Internet has been vital to political reform in Indonesia. The flow of Internet information helped to galvanize the energies of civil society to confront the state and help create “insurgent spaces” (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi 2002). Cyberspace, indeed, needs physical civic space to mobilize people. From cyberspace to the warnet and streets of Indonesian cities, the overthrow of Suharto succeeded not in virtual space but through actual political activities in appropriated civic spaces.

Jihad in Cyberspace

Just as it can support civil society to accomplish a historical political revolution, the Internet can also assist another side of the contemporary network society—communal resistance, which opposes not just the state but other segments of civil society that do not follow its doctrines. A project identity can be constructed not on the basis of a multicultural civil society but as continuation of communal resistance to a secular society and state (Castells 1997, 11). Communal resistance here refers to groups of people who defend their space or places against perceived antagonistic hegemonic forces. In what Castells calls the “informational” age of today, such communes often “claim historic memory and/or affirm the permanence of their value against the dissolution of history in timeless time and the celebration of the ephemeral in the culture of real virtuality” (Castells 1997, 358).
Religious identities are among the strongest and most important sources of constructing identity (Castells 1997, 12). For Muslims in Indonesia, connectivity to the global network also means connectivity to global Islam. Islamic societies in Egypt, Iran, and other countries become closer and more real through the information and graphic representations available in cyberspace, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East makes a very significant impression on Muslims in Indonesia. Global Islamic fundamentalism began to flourish as Indonesia entered a period of political and economical uncertainty, presenting a ripe situation for Islamic fundamentalism. Interregional conflict and separatist movements in several places in Indonesia provided more space for fundamentalism to establish itself and grow, which reinforced the process of disintegration of political structures in Indonesia. As noted above, Islam had been marginalized for decades. The fall of Suharto provided an unprecedented opportunity for Muslim communities to rise up and step in the political field.

The Jihad Troopers

The jihad movement is one of the strongest and the most radical forms of Islamic fundamentalism. A group led by Ja’far Umar Thalib, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghanistan war who met Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 1987, was among the most prominent factions of the jihad movement in Indonesia. Called the Laskar Jihad (LJ), or Jihad Troopers, in a relatively short period of time it became one of the strongest Islamic communities in Indonesia. The initial organization, FKA WJ, was founded in 1999 and introduced the LJ—the Muslim fighters for Holy War—to the world in April 2000 when its members, along with other groups of Muslims, held a rally in Jakarta calling for a jihad in the Moluccan Islands, where large Christian communities lived. Around 5,000 young people, some armed with swords and daggers and dressed in white robes and turbans, congregated at a sports stadium to mark the Islamic New Year (BBC News 2000). The leader told the crowds that ten thousand youths were ready to fight in a jihad against Christians in the Moluccas. In the following months, two or three thousand LJ members traveled to the Moluccas to fight alongside local Muslims locked in a cycle of communal violence of burning and killing with the region’s Christian population.

While being ultraconservative in its ideology, LJ was ultramodern in its use of technology. The group launched the Laskar Jihad Online (LJO) in June 2000, which has since became the major vehicle to maintain and develop the group’s presence. Well-designed and regularly updated (supported by some information technology experts), the LJO showed how a website of a fundamentalist group could be professionally well maintained.
This was not just a religious fundamentalist group; this was Laskar Jihad computer-savvy youth using Internet skills for recruitment and funding.

The first version of LJO was bilingual (Indonesian and English), while the later version, launched on May 13, 2002, was only in Indonesian. In both versions, a daily updated news page is always inserted with citations from the Koran. The website provided information about LJ and its leader, and the argument behind this movement. It offered all information—including news from the battlefield in the Moluccas—in textual, visual, and audio forms. Mutilated bodies said to be Muslims massacred by Christians, burned or damaged mosques, and graffiti on walls containing messages that insult Islam were graphically shown in support of the textual argument that is full of heated rhetoric of resistance to Christianity, Judaism, and globalization à la America (one pictorial was titled “Die America”). The webpages not only justified the movement, but the information provided also tried hard to convince Muslims about the truth of jihad and to raise the emotions of readers through images and sounds. Real Audio files were included. Most contained the speeches of LJ and other radical leaders that tried to boost the spirit of fighting for holy war.

Beyond the website, this group had, as of October 2001, 1,419 members on its mailing list, whose intent was to keep the “troopers” updated with its latest news. What the LJ did was to marry communal resistances based on religiosity with the postmodern weapon of information technology. This was exemplified by the LJ webmaster—a medical student by day, cyberspace holy warrior by night—who wrote as a mission statement for its cybernetwork that LJ’s intention was “to show the software site of Jihad, a holy war” (Ebiz Asia 2001).

As a social movement, LJ does not stop in cyberspace. More advanced than the student movements, which traditionally spread their information by photocopying and faxing, the printed information from LJ is published professionally. LJ had print media—a biweekly bulletin, a monthly Salafy tabloid, and the Moluccas Daily—all sold through more than sixty agencies throughout Indonesia and by thousands of volunteers who stood at traffic lights to disseminate these publications while passing a bucket to ask for donations. The news from LJO was also spread to many Islamic communities, especially to some madrasas (Islamic boarding schools) that were funded by Jafar Umar, the leader of the LJ. The printed versions of LJO news were placed on schools’ announcement boards, where crowds of pupils would read them during their breaks. Reading and talking about this kind of news collectively helped raise certain feelings in these young people’s hearts. Some of them then would see the leader of the LJ as a hero, thus making them want to join him in holy war. These madrasas were clearly major sources of the LJ’s candidate warriors.
The LJ also received support from the more traditional media. Some newspapers showed obvious sympathy toward it, while some others tried to be neutral. The contents of many newspapers were actually drawn from LJO, even though most journalists did not mention the source. Not only was LJO the major source of information for these journalists, but also information about the LJ that was passed to readers was based on the LJ’s perspective.

By holding rallies all over the country, the LJ group had successfully drawn thousands of students and young people to join its team and become troopers. They also had thousands of youth who collected donations at traffic lights. They were professionally trained to be fighters; they had real weapons and fought real battles; and they successfully gained power and even tacit legitimization from some segments of the state and society. This legitimization was readily shown in its first National Congress, held in May 2002. This congress was opened by Indonesia’s vice president, Hamzah Haz, and included some public figures as speakers. The Laskar Jihad story is a success story of how creating resistance identities makes use of cybercivic space to turn embark on a project and, finally, to form a community of resistance against the broader civil society of Indonesia. While the members of the LJ were still in a minority, the LJ had gained much support. Many who reconstructed their defensive identities around the LJ’s communal principles wanted to believe in the group and felt sympathy toward its movement.

The LJ disbanded in October 2002, a few days after the Bali bombing, and LJO has since closed down. However, pioneered by the LJ, many projhad movement groups follow in its path. The true believers in this kind of group are small in number—perhaps not even 1 percent of the total population of Indonesia (240 million)—but as a community of resistance that relies mainly on violence, it is an Achilles heel in the process of democratization in Indonesia. Castells suggests that these kinds of communal resistance emerge as negations of civil societies and can lead to the end of nation-states (1997, 66–67).

Conclusions: the New Politics of Reformasi
The lessons from Indonesia about the Internet and political change can be summarized under two points. First, the Internet is a powerful technology that can be instrumental in changing equations of power between a regime and the populace at large. This does not mean that the Internet somehow mechanically accomplishes such change. It is, of course, societies’ uses of the Internet that does so. The particular difficulties the state confronts in regulating its uses allow a potential for wider societal uses and social mobilization for political reform. The capacity of the Suharto
regime to close off other forms of media stands in contrast to its inability to significantly inhibit the spread of Internet access through privately owned Internet warnet that sprung up in major settlements and brought into Indonesia for the first time substantial information deeply critical of his regime.

A second insight from the Indonesia case is about the Internet and identity politics, specifically the political activism that was unleashed leading up to and following the collapse of the New Order government after more than three decades of authoritarian rule. A weakened state provided openings for elements of civil society not only to oppose the state but also to oppose each other. In the case of Indonesia, the Internet became a vehicle for strengthening certain identity coalitions, some of which were not averse to using violence to achieve their own hegemonic designs. The case of the Jihad Troopers illustrates the potential of the technology of the Internet to promote destructive uses of civil society energies, partly through the interplay of global and more local organizations allied with jihad sentiments, an interplay made readily possible by the Internet. While the Jihad Troopers were certainly not the only fractions of society to emerge and use the Internet as a key technology in their political pursuits, they were indicative of a shift in identity politics from prodemocratic movement against an authoritarian state to ethnoreligious movements against other religions, other ethnicities, and the secular state.

The hope of many has been that Indonesia would pass intact through a transition from authoritarianism to democracy. At one level, this can be said to be the case. The government is now elected by the people, and the successive governments after Suharto have upheld the “unity with diversity” ideology of the state and its secular basis. Not too far below the surface, however, is a continuing legitimization crisis that makes prospects less sanguine. Indonesia continues to experience volatile discontents from many sources. Its government is still rated as one of the most corrupt in Asia (Transparency International 2004), and its economy is marked by high levels of unemployment, deep poverty, and capital flight to China and other Asian countries. In a situation lacking the full confidence of the people, and with militant oppositional forces having significant presence in society, the Internet is now playing a more complex role in highly fragmented identity formation, manipulation, and political mobilization.

With the state unable to be a vehicle for social, political and economic justice, and security, the populace tends to rally around leaders who offer provocative symbols and easy political solutions, such as a regression back into the mythological history of jihad, now—perhaps to be paralleled or replaced by other religiocultural reconstructions of history in the future. In such a situation, cybervigilant spaces become spaces for resistance identi-
ties to be more divisive, with the Internet magnifying discontents without readily assisting in a democratically peaceful social resolution. The question for further analysis is whether Indonesia has entered into a prolonged period of a severely weakened state and fragmented society that risks perpetual instability, or whether the reformasi of its system of governance will lead to a stable government under the rule of law. As in two episodes recounted here, the Internet is likely to play a significant role in this process as a technology that is eminently suited to the rapid dissemination of identity-laden information, symbolic meanings, and other information passing as truth to those ready to receive it.

This shows that the interplay between the technology of the Internet and society, whether directed toward secular democracy or religious orthodoxy, neither derives from nor results in linear pathways of socio-political change. It is instead marked by breaking points and disjunctures that have no necessary outcomes or future destinations. The fluidity and flexibility of the Internet applications have become the natural raw material from which more important things are built—coalitions, campaigns, networks, and mobilization. They, in turn, create new forms of organizing society and ways of working together that are changing the terrain of civil society and giving glimpses into an uncharted future. The Indonesian story shows that while the Internet can empower civil society, this does not always necessarily lead to democratization. The two cases demonstrate how the openness of the Internet interrelates with the ultimate instability, political indecisiveness, and fractured nature of civil society. The inherently democratic nature of the Internet can assist the civil society to burst into being; yet setting the foundations for democracy on the terrain of civil society is as yet only one of many possibilities.

Notes

1. The term reformasi can be translated to “reform” in English. In Indonesian context, reformasi is mostly used in reference to the big event that happened on 21 May 1998 when Suharto, the president of Indonesia who had been in power for thirty-two years, finally stepped down after the wave of student protests emerged in major cities in Indonesia, mainly in Bandung, Jakarta, and Yogyakarta. While there are many different analyses about the role of students in the ousting of Suharto, it is inarguable that on the street level of politics it was mainly students who played the main role.

2. Foucault (1979) applies the panopticon as a metaphor for the oppression of the individual by the state in modern society. Foucault observes that control no longer requires physical domination over the body, but could be achieved through isolation and constant possibility of surveillance. He writes that in modern society our spaces are organized “like so many cages, so many theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (200).

3. Palapa, a name signifying national unity, was chosen by Suharto in July 1975. This name symbolizes the fulfillment of a vow for unity first expressed by Gajah Mada, a revered national hero of the fourteenth century who served as a prime minister of the Majapahit
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Kingdom. He had vowed not to partake of Palapa, a national delicacy, until the goal of national unity was achieved.

4. By utilizing Japan’s concern about the digital divide, CNRG/ITB appealed to and connected with Japan Corporation Satellite and WIDE Japan, whom then put ITB in the Asian Internet Initiative Project and enabled ITB to create a mass base for the Internet in Indonesia (Lim 2003b, 238).

5. This mailing list was created and moderated by a U.S. citizen, John A. MacDougall. The real name of the mailing list was actually Indonesia-L (Indonesia-L@indopubs.com), but people called it Apakabar, referring to the e-mail address of the moderator (apakabar@clark.net).


7. See <http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace>.


10. FKAJW stands for Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah Jamaah Wal Jamaah. For background information on the FKAJW and its leader, Ja’far Umar Thalib, see Aditjondro (2000, 2002); BBC News (2002); Harsono (2002); Laskar Jihad Online (2000a, 2000b); and Noorhaidi (2001).

11. See <http://www.laskarjihad.or.id>.


13. The mailing list of this group, laskarjihad@yahoo groups.com, which was founded on 17 May 2000 and halted on 4 October 2001, was not meant to be a space for dialogues. It was only a one-directional newsletter that provided news from the battlefield (the Moluccas) and discredited the Christian side of the confrontation.

REFERENCES


