

Informal politics and local labor activism in Indonesia

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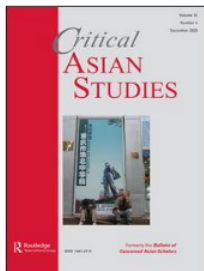
Submission date: 03-Sep-2021 04:20PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 1640666959

File name: Informal_politics_and_local_labor_activism_in_Indonesia.pdf (1.76M)

Word count: 10366

Character count: 57841



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Critical Asian Studies

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcra20>

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To cite this article: Nurlinah, Haryanto, Sukri & Sunardi (2021): Informal politics and local labor activism in Indonesia, *Critical Asian Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14672715.2021.1965896](https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.1965896)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.1965896>




Published online: 19 Aug 2021.




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Informal politics and local labor activism in Indonesia

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1 ABSTRACT

While studies on local labor activism in Indonesia have blossomed in recent years, they rarely look at the role played by informal politics. Using a case study at the grassroots level in Makassar that focuses on industrial relations, we look to start filling this gap. We explore how labor activism in industrial situations, such as factory strikes and protests, has evolved under informal political circumstances. We find that these relations are dominant and highly significant for influencing labor activism at the local level. Moreover, we find the emergence of informal politics is mainly influenced by the fragmentation of labor unions, the personalism of labor leadership, and the pragmatism of union officials and workers. All of these tend to trigger informal political participation, such as brokerage, illegality, and kinship, that can overshadow local labor activism in factories. We conclude with a discussion of how the influence of informal politics has weakened labor activism at the local level and ways to distinguish the patterns, characteristics, and vulnerabilities of workers in industrial relations.


16 ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 March 2021
Accepted 5 August 2021

KEYWORDS

Labor activism; informal politics; industrial relations; Indonesia

Introduction

Studies examining  informal politics and local labor activism in Indonesia are scarce. Most current mainstream literature only focuses on labor activism's character at both formal political and macro-political levels.¹ In the end, general conclusions are drawn about political openness, labor organizations, and the rise of labor activism in electoral politics. The various types of informality that bear significant influence on labor activism have not been well explained. Phenomena such as clientelism, kinship, brokerage, violence, and illegality need special attention for researchers to understand the development and dynamics of contemporary labor activism.

By contrast, labor studies in several Asian, Latin American, and African countries have found that informality is a part of activism in local labor politics.² For example, in Chile, trade unions have shrunk significantly due to patron-client exchanges that have influenced local labor activism.³ In Asia, in general, patriarchal union leadership, prejudiced by caste and/or kinship, often weakens labor movements.⁴ Indonesian studies

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¹Caraway and Ford 2020; Caraway, Ford, and Nguyen 2019; Ford 2014; Savirani 2016.

²de Neve 2005; Palacios-Valladares 2010; Evans 2017; Lazar 2008; Lindell 2010.

³Palacios-Valladares 2010.

⁴Evans 2017; de Neve 2005.

rarely portray how labor activists subtly penetrate local unions from behind informal political participation.⁵ Research on this issue can be tricky because political informality is almost invisible, but its impact is very effective in weakening labor activism. Some scholars have found that informal politics have reorganized industrial relations between unions, employers, and the state in the post-Suharto period.⁶ However, these studies still reflect a general perspective. A more specific analysis of the influence of informal politics on labor activism is an important, if rarely examined, topic that might provide a more adequate explanation.

We assess informal politics in local labor activism, specifically industrial relations. We explore how activism in those conditions, such as labor strikes, has evolved. We find that these relations are dominant and highly significant in influencing activism at the local level. This article is based on field research we conducted from March to November 2020 and June to July 2021 in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi.⁷ Makassar is far from the usual frantic Indonesian labor study sites dominated by the greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek) in Java or areas in western Indonesia, such as Medan and Batam. Therefore, our selection of Makassar provides nuance in understanding the dynamics of local Indonesian labor politics.

We have adopted a case study method to examine specific phenomena and arrive at greater conceptual significance. This case study may not represent other diverse regions of Indonesia; generalizations must wait for further studies. We have focused our research on select trade unions which most often hold strikes and organize protests in Makassar. We conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-three key informants, consisting of laborers and labor union activists who are members of the two militant labor unions in Makassar, namely the Federation of Indonesian Labor Struggle Unions (*Federasi Serikat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia*, FSPBI) and the National Labor Union (*Serikat Pekerja Nasional*, SPN). We also conducted in-depth interviews with local government officials and entrepreneurs, delved into official government and non-governmental organization (NGO) documents regarding company and labor data in Makassar, and extensively researched related topics available in online news archives. Additionally, we attended various meetings on labor strike movements in the Makassar Industrial Area (*Kawasan Industri Makassar*, KIMA), including protests and street demonstrations.

This article is structured as follows. First, we elaborate on the informal political concepts we use. Second, we critically review previous accounts of local labor activism in Indonesia. Next, we describe labor activism dynamics in Makassar. The fourth to sixth sections present our research results by exploring the allegiance of the unions, the impact of local elections, and the work of informal politics at the factory level. We also discuss the emerging avenues of informal politics, how those paths have evolved, and the participating actors. Finally, we assess the significance of our findings and offer future research suggestions.

⁵Juliawan 2011; Mufakhir 2014; Panimbang and Mufakhir 2018; Mizuno 2005.

⁶Mufakhir 2014; Mizuno 2005.

⁷Our field research was interrupted and postponed from April through July 2020 due to the city's lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Informal politics and political participation

The empirical experience of informal politics is found everywhere. In their edited volume (2000) on this phenomenon in East Asia, Lowell Dittmer, Haruhiro Fukui, and Peter Lee found that informal political participation is pervasive and often serves as the most effective way to get the state's business done.⁸ Studies on democratic institutions in Latin America have found that informal rules influence how electoral systems, legislatures, judiciaries, and other democratic institutions work.⁹ The implications are varied; some cases of informal politics can strengthen democratic institutions, while in other cases, they weaken democratic institutions. Meanwhile, scholars who have looked at the dynamics of informal politics at the grassroots level argue that informality is part of everyday life in communities in Africa¹⁰ and Asia.¹¹ These studies do not examine the state as the main focus of informal political participation, as in previous research. They instead discuss informal politics in grassroots communities as a significant part of political participation.

In the current dynamic of Indonesian politics, informal politics constitute a crucial aspect of the daily interactions between citizens and the state.¹² Ward Berenschot and Gerry van Klinken conclude that everyday citizens struggle to mark a widespread dependence on personal connections in three forms: mediation, dependence on reciprocal norms, and the use of social affiliations.¹³ This informal political participation is often practiced by members of marginalized communities such as the urban poor, Indigenous, and members of ethnic minority groups.¹⁴ Local laborers in Indonesia, as one such marginalized community, also experience the same thing. However, current research on local labor activism in Indonesia has not detailed this topic. The notion agrees with our finding that informal politics have played roles in labor activism from the factories where strikes take place. The question is, what process leads to the emergence of this type of informal political participation?

Informal politics is often contrasted with formal politics. The terms “formal” and “informal politics” involve two different concepts, in which the difference lies in the patterns of political participation.¹⁵ According to Hans Lauth, formal and informal politics have different relationships with each other. He distinguishes between three types of relationships: a complementary type, where people live side by side, mutually reinforcing and supporting each other; a conflicting type, where they can displace each other; and finally, a substitutive type, in the sense that people are functionally equivalent to each other.¹⁶ In our case study, political participation took the form of the third type.

The definition of informal politics varies considerably, generating conceptual differences. Some scholars refer to it as an institution, while others call it culture, norms, or social relations.¹⁷ Scott Radnitz refers to how informal politics shape and underlie

⁸Dittmer, Fukui, and Lee 2000.

⁹Helmke and Levitsky 2006.

¹⁰Lindell 2010.

¹¹Morris-Suzuki and Soh 2017.

¹²Berenschot and van Klinken 2018; Berenschot 2019.

¹³Berenschot and van Klinken 2018.

¹⁴Soedirgo 2018; Muur 2018; Berenschot, Hanani, and Sambodho 2018.

¹⁵Fukui 2000.

¹⁶Lauth 2000, 25–26.

¹⁷For more details see Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Radnitz 2011; Dittmer, Fukui, and Lee 2000.

political behavior and outcomes.¹⁸ Haruhiro Fukui concludes that informal political work tends to be sporadic, erratic, and invisible.¹⁹ Gretchen Helmke and Stephen Levitsky consider informal versus formal politics in the same way as informal institutions deviate from formal ones, to wit, as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels.”²⁰ In this way, informal politics are not governed by rules and procedures established by formal authorities such as the state. In addition, although informal politics can be arbitrary, unfair, or corrupt, informal politics is equally significant in determining broad political participation.

Other scholars believe that informal politics can also be constructive or a constitutive dimension of political participation.²¹ In a contrasting concept, Tessa Morris-Suzuki has written that informal politics is “an act of collected self-protection in the face of the profound deficits of institutional politics.”²² She describes informal politics as a “politics of survival,” a kind of desperate act in response to a direct threat to an individual’s physical survival or the social survival of communities.²³

The above conceptual definitions have led us to study how informal politics operate labor activism in an empirical context. For the purposes of this study, we define “informal politics” as political participation itself, which determines the pattern, the rules of the game, and the behavior of the various parties involved in it. Informal politics consists of various formally illegitimate ways to pursue actors’ goals. This concept helps us discover and understand the various forms of political participation behind industrial relations, and how the involved parties pursue their goal of controlling and benefiting from informal rules in their political participation. In conducting our fieldwork in Makassar, we aimed to discover why local labor activism often stagnates vis-à-vis their employers. We also looked for factors that give rise to informal political participation in local labor activism. In doing so, we have paid special attention to how informal politics operate labor activism in the industrial arenas.

Local labor activism in Indonesia

The study of labor activism in Indonesia can be viewed through two main foci, formal and informal politics. The main difference between these lies in their patterns of political interaction. Labor activism studies in formal politics tend to explore institutions within state-society relations, while informal politics approaches consider the personal relations behind these institutions. The latter concerns have yet to receive adequate attention.

In contemporary Indonesia, labor activism became a significant research subject following democratization in 1998. In the following decade, scholars were pessimistic toward local labor activism issues.²⁴ However, labor activists have intensified and developed a mature and independent movement that is now entering its second decade.²⁵ This

¹⁸Radnitz 2011, 354.

¹⁹Fukui 2000, 3.

²⁰Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727.

²¹See Radnitz 2011; Berenschot and van Klinken 2018.

²²Morris-Suzuki 2017, 2.

²³This concept departs from James C. Scott’s work on the everyday politics of the lower classes. See Scott 1985.

²⁴Törnquist 2004; Hadiz 1997.

²⁵Caraway and Ford 2020; Suryomenggolo 2014.

is evident in the ability of union networks to build powerful mobilization machines and pressure the government and corporations. Moreover, local labor activists involved in national and regional election dynamics have managed to forge political alliances with local candidates or even win local parliamentary office.²⁶

Scholars consider the dynamics of local labor activism in Indonesia from two broad bases. On the one hand, some argue that local labor activism did not, in fact, change much after the 1998 formal political reforms, as it was “incapable of making much use of democratization, and grassroots activists are likely to be marginalized in the form of local pressure and lobby activists, unable to join together and federate from below.”²⁷ To wit, labor activism has not entirely escaped informal politics, such as patronage and political thuggery.²⁸ On the other hand, scholars acknowledge the progressive side of labor politics.²⁹ Formal political spaces available for laborers support this activism, as seen in tripartite and local elections. Besides, formal political spaces have triggered transnational activism to secure labor rights at the local and national scale.³⁰

Meanwhile, in informal analyses at the grassroots level, local labor activism, such as strikes and street actions, have been shown to provide significant resistance and put laborers in a significant political position.³¹ Although local labor activism is believed to “unsettle the institutions of formal politics, its proliferation in the period since the end of the New Order suggests more than just the undermining of formal politics.”³² Kosuke Mizuno has concluded that informality often occurs through “infringements of the labor law, such as the rejection of a newly organized labor union, the hiring of gangsters, and the use of violence as well as deviations from the legal framework.”³³ In short, formal and informal political approaches have different impacts, both positive and negative, on labor activism.

The dynamics of industrial relations are the most significant aspect of local labor activism in Indonesia. In fact, for a long time, strikes and protests were the most prominent elements of local labor activism, and an almost daily feature of industrial life in certain regions, particularly on Java.³⁴ Unfortunately, there are very few studies on this aspect, especially from the perspective of informal politics.³⁵ Fahmi Panimbang and Abu Mufakhir conclude that workers demonstrate their ability to play a more significant role in promoting policy changes and can develop the capacity to use their activism in broader political struggles.³⁶ Trade unions may use illegal or informal political strategies, such as *grebek pabrik* (factory raids), to achieve their goals – mainly in factory areas on Java.³⁷ Workers use factory raids to defend their rights, establish labor union solidarity, and develop institutional capacity. Benny Juliawan has concluded that workers come to

²⁶Caraway, Ford, and Nguyen 2019; Savirani 2016.

²⁷Törnquist 2004.

²⁸Hadiz 2002.

²⁹Caraway, Ford, and Nguyen 2019; Ford and Sirait 2016; Savirani 2016.

³⁰Brookes 2018.

³¹Panimbang and Mufakhir 2018; Juliawan 2011; Mufakhir 2014.

³²Juliawan 2011.

³³Mizuno 2005, 191.

³⁴Elmhirst 2004, 387.

³⁵Panimbang and Mufakhir 2018; Juliawan 2011; Elmhirst 2004; Mizuno 2005.

³⁶Panimbang and Mufakhir 2018.

³⁷Mufakhir 2014.

believe that the state and companies can be resisted through street protests, and has asserted that local labor activism has shaped the institutionalization of protest and was the forerunner of the society movement in Indonesia.³⁸ In his study of a garment company in West Java, Mizuno concluded that industrial relations and labor activism often used informality to resolve labor disputes and “can be more important than the law itself.”³⁹ Rebecca Elmhirst portrays the importance of ethnic and cultural identities on local labor activists, especially women workers.⁴⁰

This overview of recent labor studies demonstrates the importance of informal politics on local labor activism. Still, there has been little systematic attention by scholars on how informal politics affect labor activism, nor on how built-in informality works in power relationships. Our study shows how the emergence of informal politics characterizes labor activism rather than formal politics itself. Paying attention to formal institutions is not sufficient to understand political dynamics and realities, so studying informal political relations is key.⁴¹

Labor activism in Makassar

The resurgence of militant labor activism in Makassar began eight years ¹² after the fall of the New Order through the militancy of the FSPBI. After 2006, labor strikes and street protests began to be reported frequently by domestic media outlets, but only a few of these events ended in unrest.⁴² Closing the airport entrance on May Day 2011 was the most extensive street action that local labor unions have ever taken.⁴³ In the following years, May Day demonstrations often ended peacefully. Even if there was a riot, this would typically be triggered mainly by students.⁴⁴

Even though labor activism in Makassar has attracted the attention of the national media, it has failed to draw the interest of political researchers at the national and international levels.⁴⁵ This is unfortunate because research ⁸ on local labor activism – apart from Java and Sumatra – is one way of building a more comprehensive argument about the dynamics of labor activism in post-Suharto Indonesia.

Workers in Makassar faced two significant disasters throughout 2020. First came massive layoffs across the region following the outbreak of COVID-19 at the beginning of the year. According to the Manpower and Transmigration Office, 12,197 workers had been laid off in South Sulawesi province by April 2020 due to the pandemic.⁴⁶ A large ¹³ portion of this number, approximately 7,893, were in Makassar. Data gathered by the Industrial Relations Court (*Pengadilan Hubungan Industrial, PHI*) shows that during the pandemic the total number of layoffs has increased considerably compared to previous years (Table 1). The second disaster was the enactment of an Omnibus Law at the end of the year that appears to be unfair to and oppressive of the working class.⁴⁷

³⁸ Juliawan 2011, 367.

³⁹ Mizuno 2005, 208.

⁴⁰ Elmhirst 2004.

⁴¹ Radnitz 2011, 351–352. See also Lauth 2000; Helmke and Levitsky 2004.

⁴² Liputan6 2007; Tempo 2010.

⁴³ Interview with Edwar Rossi, July 13, 2021.

⁴⁴ Interview with Salim Samsur, July 12, 2021.

⁴⁵ Existing studies consist only of reports from local state university students. For example see Nurmila 2018; Sunardi 2017.

⁴⁶ Himawan 2020.

⁴⁷ Rizal 2020.

Table 1. The number of PHK registered in PHI between 2016 and 2021.

Year	Cases	Processing time	
		Fastest	Longest
2021	31	in process	in process
2020	28	18 days	123 days
2019	22	20 days	147 days
2018	19	43 days	182 days
2017	15	10 days	182 days
2016	21	34 days	119 days

Note: In 2021, data on July 13, 2021.

Source: SIPP.PN-Makassar.go.id.

As a result, various labor actions protesting layoffs and the new law occurred at several companies in the city and took the form of strikes, protests, and street demonstrations.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, strikes at factories run by KIMA, a state-owned enterprise that manages the largest industrial estate in the eastern part of Indonesia, have increased. KIMA was established in 1988 with an area of 703 hectares. Until 2019, 284 companies were concentrated in KIMA, making up almost ninety percent of the total number of industrial companies in South Sulawesi province.⁴⁸ The KIMA authorities estimated the number of workers employed on the estate as **more than 20,000 workers** in 2019.

Workers **went on strike** after unilateral and premature layoffs on the pretext of experiencing a crisis due to the pandemic. As of December 2020, there were ten strike actions at KIMA, the most in the last ten years, and most of these lasted for months (Table 2).

For example, a seven-month strike action against PT Siantar Top Tbk (Siantar Top Ltd.), a snack food company, involved the SPN (Figure 1). In 2015, PT Siantar Top Tbk was the seventh-largest food industry company in Indonesia. More than 500 workers affiliated with three labor confederations participated in cross-factory solidarity rallies to help with strikes and protests. The union believed that companies such as PT Siantar Top Tbk were using the COVID-19 crisis as an excuse to justify layoffs and, according to labor activist Salim Samsur, engage in nothing but covert union-busting.

The strike and protests were carried out in KIMA by labor union members of SPN and FSPBI, mainly because of the layoff problem. By August 2020, more than a hundred SPN members employed in four companies had been laid off without proper severance pay. Meanwhile, data from the FSPBI mentions 200 union members employed at seven companies who also lost their jobs during the pandemic.⁴⁹

The FSPBI – previously known as the Indonesian Labor Struggle Union (*Serikat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia*, SPBI) – was established on December 2, 2001, in Makassar.⁵⁰ FSPBI only exists in the Sulawesi region, mainly in Makassar. The national president of the FSPBI, Mukhtar Guntur Kilat, also has an office in Makassar. Unlike the FSPBI, SPN has a national network and is present in many provinces in Indonesia.⁵¹ SPN had 321 members working in fourteen companies in Makassar in 2020.

⁴⁸For further information see: <https://ptkimamakassar.co.id/wp-content/uploads/tenantkima2019.pdf>

⁴⁹This figure does not include workers who had not joined the union nor members of other unions.

⁵⁰In 2006, SPBI changed its name to FSPBI.

⁵¹SPN was established in 2003 in Solo (Surakarta), Central Java, and now has a central board based in Jakarta. The SPN for the South Sulawesi region was established in Makassar on December 1, 2015, under the chairmanship of Salim Samsur.

Table 2. Labor strike actions in KIMA, 2020.

Company	Union members	Labor union
PT Siantar Top Tbk	80	SPN
PT SSS	30	SPN
CV Sriwijaya Utama	11	SPN
PT Gias	24	SPN
PT Prima Abadi Persada	15	FSPBI
PT Fajar Utama Makassar Perkasa	19	FSP-KOBAR
PT Alfa Ria	1	FSPBI
PT MJR	68	FSP-TUGASKU
PT Yong Xing Abadi Jaya	38	FSP-NAPAS
PT Alfa Furni Mega Indah	28	FSP-TUGASKU

Note: The strike duration was 4–210 days.
Source: Compiled by authors.

**Figure 1.** Workers' activities in a strike tent in front of a factory. Credit. The authors.

By comparison, there are four other trade union confederations in Makassar, namely the Confederation of Archipelago Unions (*Konfederasi Serikat Nusantara*, KSN-Nusantara), with five union federations; the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (*Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia*, KSPI), with nine federations; the Confederation of National Union (*Konfederasi Serikat Nasional*, KSN-Nasional), with one federation; and the Confederation of All Indonesian Trade Unions (*Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia*, KSPSI), with seven trade union federations. For the last, KSPSI, although the number of federations is quite large, their actions are not as militant as those of KSN-Nusantara and KSPI.⁵² KSPSI rarely conducts strikes and protests at factories in Makassar.

The five union federations of the KSN-Nusantara are FSPBI, FSP-NAPAS, FSP-TUGASKU, FSP-TRANSINDO, and FSP-KOBAR.⁵³ Meanwhile, the nine union

⁵² Most KSPSI officials in Makassar are old activists, in contrast to KSN-Nusantara and KSPI, which are dominated by youth.

⁵³ In Indonesian, these are: Federasi Serikat Pekerja Niaga, Keuangan, Perbankan, dan Asuransi (Federation of Trade, Finance, Banking, and Insurance Union), Federasi Serikat Pekerja Textil, Garment, Kulit, Sepatu dan Aneka Industri (Federation of Textile, Garment, Leather, Shoes, and Industrial Union), Federasi Serikat Pekerja Transportasi Indonesia

federations of KPSI are SPN, FSP KEP, FSPMI, ASPEK Indonesia, FSP FARKES-R, SP PPMI, FSISI, SP PAK Refomasi, and PGRI.⁵⁴

When compared to the total number of workers in KIMA, the number of union members is relatively small. Several confederation chairmen told us that they have no accurate membership data. The reasons they cited are complicated and rapidly changing labor registration rules, the cycle of recruitment of workers using third parties (outsourcing), and frequent layoffs. In addition, workers often join labor unions only when they have a problem with their employer and leave after this has been resolved. As a result, it is estimated that less than five percent of workers at KIMA were members of unions in 2020.⁵⁵

In the case of Makassar, labor activism tends to be slower to respond to change compared to other industrial areas in the country such as Jabodetabek, Medan, or Batam. Although in recent times, strikes and protests have taken place, they have ended peacefully, unlike in other industrial areas, where labor actions often end with violent clashes. The practice of informal politics in Makassar is why this happens. We have found that informal politics start with fragmentation, personalism, and pragmatism in the unions.

Fragmentation and personalism

Currently, the fragmentation of labor unions in Makassar is increasingly widespread. Seemingly, the more easily a union is established, the easier it is to split. This separation generally stems from differences in perspectives between union members, which often develop into misunderstandings. This tension grows stronger ahead of changes in union management. The disagreements usually relate to the direction of the union's political choices, struggles, and labor movement strategies. For example, some choose to fight outside the electoral process, while others prefer to get closer to local electoral candidates. Those who opt out usually end up establishing new unions. Armin, a union official in FSPBI, argued in an interview:

One thing that made labor activists decide to leave the union was their different political stances. Some consistently fought on the streets, but some want to fight on other paths (elections).

The fragmentation of the FSPBI became the precursor of disputes among labor activists in Makassar. In 2006, their resistance in the form of street actions was highly recognized. In late 2006, however, conflicts between union members began to emerge which eventually ended with the union's division, leading to the establishment of two new labor federations by those who had left called the Joint Labor Union Nusantara (*Gabungan Serikat*

¹⁵ (Federation of Indonesian Transport Workers Union), and Federasi Serikat Pekerja Konstruksi, Bangunan dan Informal (Federation of Construction, Building and Informal Workers Union).

⁵⁴ Federasi Serikat Pekerja Kimia, Energi, Pertambangan, Minyak, Gas Bumi, dan Umum (Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mining, Oil, Gas and General Workers Union), Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia (Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union), Asosiasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia (Indonesian Trade Union Association), Federasi Serikat Pekerja Farnasi dan Kesehatan Reformasi (Federation of Reformed Pharmaceutical and Health Workers Union), Serikat Pekerja Percetakan, Penerbitan, dan Media Informasi (Printing, Publishing, and Information Media Workers Union), Federasi Serikat Pekerja Industri Semen Indonesia (Federation of Indonesian Cement Industry Trade Union), Serikat Pekerja Pariwisata Reformasi (Reform Tourism Workers Union), and Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Teachers Association).

⁵⁵ Interview with Salim Samsur, October 6, 2020.

Buruh Nusantara, GSBN), and the National Federation of Workers' Struggles (*Federasi Perjuangan Buruh Nasional*, FPBN). Regarding these divisions, the vice-chairman of KSN-Nasional, the president of KSN-Nusantara, and the chairman of the SPN believe that fragmentation makes the labor movement weaker and more individualist.⁵⁶ Likewise, our observations in the field during a Omnibus Law demonstration in October 2020 indicated divisions without obvious significant pressure.

The fragmentation of trade unions in Makassar has marked the emergence of informality in local labor politics. Fragmentation tends to stimulate the development of unions born of the egoism of local activists. The consequences can be spaces that are less conducive to the development of more collective political power. At a more severe level, the absence of collective power has tended to create both personalism and pragmatism.

In Makassar, labor union elites, who spread out and became the chairpersons in the newly formed federations, are now the dominant actors. Labor union leaders full of individual charisma and who are difficult to replace have given rise to informal politics in labor activism. The influence of a chairman's charisma, together with informality, have made union management more personalistic and led to the emergence of "eternal" leaders. For instance, the FSPBI, from its establishment in 2001 until today, has been led by the same chairman, Mukhtar Guntur Kilat. If he were to be replaced, Kilat would draw off the masses and establish a new union. SPN is also experiencing the same problem. Salim Samsur, a former FSPBI member who lost in a chairmanship election, has chaired SPN from 2015 until the present.

Personalism is often more effective in garnering workers' support than relying on collective strength from below. Moreover, this condition is supported by the absence of effective labor union management at the factory level. This phenomenon was explained by Novri, the vice-chairman of KSN-Nasional, who asserted that:

The eternal union chairman phenomenon has been going on for a long time in union management. It seems they are trapped in personalism. Even though the members realize this, no one dares to speak up. When one or two people want to talk, they are usually ostracized. Consequently, many of them choose to keep silent. The problem is, this will impact advocacy later. It has been a chronic problem in the labor union for the last few years.

Another form of personalism in labor unions is seen in daily management, as nepotism has become fairly common among labor union officials in Makassar. Almost all of the wives of the FSPBI and SPN's presiding officers hold seats on the boards of directors of these unions. Some have become treasurers or secretaries. Apart from kinship ties, labor union leaders also use regional propinquity or social affiliations as instruments to maintain control over union members. Union officials are determined mainly by regional origins. If the union chairperson comes from the southern region of South Sulawesi province, core positions will also be filled with people from the south. For example, in the FSPBI, the union chairman comes from the Bantaeng district, in the southern part of the province; workers from the southern areas dominate core union positions. Likewise, for SPN, the core management is drawn mainly from the northern region of the province because the SPN chairman comes from that same region.

⁵⁶Expressed in interview sessions by Novri on November 18, 2020, Mukhtar Guntur Kilat, March 6, 2020, and Salim Samsur, August 21, 2020.

The characteristics of informal relations that prioritize kinship and social affiliations contribute to strengthening personalism with regard to ideological factors. Member apathy has reinforced this situation. At the member level, the eternal union chairman phenomenon has never been a serious topic of discussion. Union members avoid getting involved in management matters. One of the reasons often cited is the absence of someone who could replace a current leader. Talking about leadership is also taboo for members. This shows that internally there are serious problems related to the education and regeneration of union cadres.

Union leaders' pragmatism

The next process that has created informality in labor activism in Makassar is the effect of local elections. According to some scholars, local elections are considered good opportunities for workers to negotiate with company executives for better wages.⁵⁷ Alternatively, workers take the opportunity of local elections to run for local parliament seats.⁵⁸ That said, some researchers find that being dragged into practical politics causes a decline in local labor activism, because the practices are likely to involve voter mobilization and money politics.⁵⁹

Regional Head Elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah*, Pilkada) is a process that encourages workers to bargain with candidates, who are expected to incorporate worker interests into state policies. This practice encourages labor unions to be actively involved in the electoral process at the local level.⁶⁰ Except for some positive programmatic impacts, such as better enforcement of labor, health care, and minimum wage regulations, the process also encourages pragmatism, in which union members support candidates in exchange for promises of money or access to public goods. Some labor union officials also become members of campaign teams.⁶¹ Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot characterize this particular phenomenon as “democracy for sale.”⁶²

In Makassar, the initial pragmatism of unions emerged in the 2008 regional elections. This campaign marked a new labor political dynamic: mass mobilization as an electoral strategy. The pattern is that labor union activists use union members to support candidates who compete in both regional head and local parliamentary elections. There are various forms of mobilization, including through union officials at the company level, whose job is to introduce candidates to the factory as well as workers' close family members. In some campaigns, workers will be presented as supporters at public events. For either socialization activities or for campaigning, unions often use laid-off workers. The lure is that, if the supported candidate wins, union members will access benefits (although in some cases, union members end up disappointed with the promises of candidates after the election has passed).

One interesting case occurred in 2018. At the time, a labor activist undertook informal lobbying with the mayor to resolve layoffs at a company. The activist hoped that the

⁵⁷ Caraway, Ford, and Nguyen 2019.

⁵⁸ Caraway, Ford, and Nugroho 2015; Savirani 2016.

⁵⁹ Lane 2018.

⁶⁰ Caraway and Ford 2020, 95.

⁶¹ Aspinall 2014.

⁶² Aspinall and Berenschot 2019.

mayor would provide support because the union with which the activist was associated had supported the mayor during the previous election campaign. Unfortunately, the mayor rejected the union's proposal, as the company in question was a *cukong politik* (a donor) to his campaign. The term *cukong politik* describes illicit funding. Entrepreneurs provide campaign funds for regional head candidates to keep their businesses safe or to receive government projects.⁶³

We also found recent political linkages between candidates and labor unions in the December 2020 regional elections in Makassar for mayor. The race included four candidates – Mohammad Ramdhan Pomanto, Munafri Arifuddin, Syamsu Rizal, and Irman Yasin Limpo. Of the four, Ramdhan Pomanto received support from several labor unions, including FSPBI and the Archipelago Workers Community Alliance (*Aliansi Masyarakat Pekerja Nusantara*, AMPERA). Union members openly posted large pictures of their preferred candidate in their offices (Figure 2).

Through a personal approach with candidates, union officials promise to mobilize their members. In exchange, they bargain with candidates over how much will be paid for workers' voter support. Salim Samsur, chairman of the SPN, explained that:

Indeed, some labor unions are complaining about the Pilkada process in Makassar. They say, "Sorry, this is too harsh, you're selling the union." They shamelessly volunteer to join the campaign team by promising the votes of the workers. They usually ask candidates for a certain amount of money as a pre-condition for support. There is a certain amount of money – I won't mention the norm – which is clear and quite large.

Union involvement in the electoral process as part of a campaign team usually involves the union chairperson. Members are rarely involved. However, just before the campaign period, union members may be tasked with garnering votes in factories. For example, in the 2020 Makassar elections, the FSPBI instructed all members to go down to the factories two weeks before voting and solicit support for their preferred candidate.

The involvement of labor unions as part of election campaign teams directly impacts the quality of advocacy for labor cases in factories. Many cases that should be advocated are postponed and rescheduled because they coincide with an election campaign. When faced with this situation, most union officials will be more inclined to emphasize election actions on the pretext that supporting a particular mayoral candidate will help workers participate in tripartite forums.

Informal politics in the factory

Apart from local elections, pragmatism is also evident in factories. Due to the weakness of union ideology, there are chances for informal practices. Workers take advantage of their union only at critical times, like the "fire brigade" that suddenly forms at the factory level when an industrial relations case occurs. After the case is concluded, the members will leave. It is rare to find members who will last as long as two years in a union. Instead, workers use unions as a refuge and a tool to demand their rights be respected, such as severance pay. Therefore, the unions tend to be ad hoc and fragmented. As Aswar, a union member of SPN, observed:

⁶³Savirani 2014; Mietzner 2011.



Figure 2. Union leader candidates portrayed in a union office, Makassar. Credit: The authors.

Many workers only regard trade unions pragmatically. That is, they will come if there is a problem because they need a union. But once the problem is solved, they are no longer here. They leave the union just like firefighters who are there for a fire and who leave when the fire is out.

There is a kind of built-up faith among workers that their participation in a union will provide them higher severance pay in the event of a layoff. As an example, an employee of PT SSS (Sarana Sinar Sulawesi, an industrial company that produces plastic products for food and beverage packaging) worker was fired without severance pay even though he had worked at the company for ten years. Meanwhile, another PT SSS worker who had joined a union received severance pay after losing his job, even though he had been with the company for less than ten years.

Both workers and union officials are aware that a union is only a vehicle for advocating for things such as severance pay and nothing more. Thus, the typical worker who joins a union is someone whose working period is about to end. Union officials have never expected much from workers who only use union membership as a platform to demand severance pay. In Makassar, several labor union officials we interviewed admitted that almost all workers who joined labor unions were motivated by severance pay promises. After receiving their severance pay, some remained in the union, while most of them left.

On the other hand, labor unions sometimes use industrial relations cases as a source of income. Labor unions that successfully resolve a compensation case will receive a fee, which varies depending on the union requirements and the amount of severance pay received by the worker. Standards differ among unions, but generally, this fee ranges from ten to fifteen percent of the severance pay a worker receives. However, this fee does not include operational funds during the advocacy process, such as strikes, protests, and PHI assistance. How union officials set the price for each case seems to coincide with the pragmatic attitudes of workers.

The above illustrates how various avenues of informal politics in labor activism emerge and influence political participation. Informal institutions then shape modes of

behavior and attitudes toward political participation and determine the choices of risk and opportunity for action.⁶⁴ Thus, pragmatism produces the actions that curb or supply the available resources. In what follows we explore the pursuit of this informal political influence, where individual preferences and behavioral dispositions directly impact political participation and lead to the limitation and relativization of democratic participation.

During the period of strikes and protests, various actors were involved in the industrial relations debate in Makassar. Some acted as facilitators, their role being to mediate industrial relations between workers and employers. These actors became brokers in charge of overseeing labor cases leading to formal channels such as a tripartite forum, which involved not only workers and employers but also external agents entirely unrelated to the matters at hand, such as bureaucrats, members of the military and police, lawyers, thugs, and workers' relatives. Needless to say, this large number of parties multiplied the complexity.

The brokers shadowed every worker struggling for his rights. They lobbied through informal channels to convince workers to end factory strikes by applying for different severance payments. An example of this behavior of external actors can be seen in a case at PT SSS. A bureaucrat from the Makassar Manpower Office and the company's lawyer each offered IR 600 million (USD \$41,000) to workers to stop their strike. Meanwhile, a police officer offered a severance package of IR 800 million (USD \$55,000), even though, under Indonesian law, the workers were entitled to IR 1.2 billion (USD \$83,000) in compensation. One worker, Hamka, explained to us what happened:

The boss was too afraid to meet us. What we wanted was simple, we only asked for clarity and the company's capabilities to provide our severance pay. That's it. The problem became complicated because of the boss' messengers, and then the police, the bureaucrats, and the company lawyer. They all offered different prices for solving the case, even though we knew the boss had provided 1.2 billion [rupiah] for this. If the boss wants to meet, at least 900 million can be discussed. However, it got more complicated because all these messengers also wanted to profit from our problem.

Similarly, a worker named Ari told us:

There have been many offers that have come to us related to the case we are currently facing. The amount varies depending on who is offering. Some dare to give only half of our rights. They are all the same, wanting the case to be over. They come from different parties who offer "peace prices," from government agents to thugs, people ordered by the company, even union officers themselves. The point is they want us to stop this strike.

The efforts made by brokers often were relatively effective, even though they were illegal. It was evident in several cases that these methods had succeeded in reducing labor militancy. Some workers decided to end their protests and strikes at their factories. They used the term *jalur belakang* (backstreet) to identify members starting to turn out at strike locations. Almost all brokers in KIMA used this method by visiting workers at their homes or at coffee shops.

The amount of money promised depended on who offered it and how much influence certain workers would have in ending a specific strike. For a factory's labor union

⁶⁴Lauth 2000.

chairman, the amount promised could add up to between fifty and seventy-five million rupiah (between USD \$3,400 and \$5,200). Meanwhile, regular union members were only promised a range of twenty to thirty million rupiah (USD \$1,300 to \$3,400). Federation officers also tried to reduce labor activism by offering payments that could reach as high as seventy-five to 100 million rupiah (USD \$5,200 to \$6,900).

Although some broker efforts were unsuccessful, the *jalur belakang* proved to influence worker positions and activism. In such cases, it did not take long for disagreements to spread among strikers. Usually, those who had received money would secretly invite other workers to join them. In one case, we chanced to see a conflict between fellow workers in the strike tents at a factory entrance. The conflict started when some strikers questioned the pragmatism of workers who had betrayed their fellows by receiving sums of money from the company. The striking workers held a meeting to ask for clarification. The meeting was quite tense, but several workers who allegedly had accepted bribes eventually left the meeting. At times like these, conflicts between workers in strike tents could destabilize their collective determination to fight for their rights.

We found this type of conflict and tension evident throughout our research site, including between workers and their unions. For example, labor brokers hung out in the strike tents only with certain workers, while others gathered in several separate groups. At lunchtime of one strike, we witnessed groups of four to five workers having lunch in the strike tent while another group chose to play dominoes outside. In some situations, when we were at a strike site and talked with one group, the others ignored us.

The involvement of individual actors in advocating for industrial relations cases such as the one in Makassar further emphasized the weaknesses of labor unions and state intervention for resolving disputes. It creates opportunities for individual actors – inside or outside unions and companies – to act as brokers for industrial relations conflicts. It also happens that labor disputes that reach the Industrial Relations Court often occur with informality.⁶⁵ Several cases in other regions portray the court as an arena of corruption.⁶⁶ Industrial relations have become a wild arena that bring together diverse interests from vastly different backgrounds. This lengthens the time required for cases to enter the Industrial Relations Court, often at least thirty days (see Table 1). This fact makes most workers prefer pragmatism and leads them to favor receiving a definite amount of compensation, even if less than they are owed, as a way to avoid a lengthy arbitration process in the court.

The official arbitration process, which is quite lengthy and complicated, coupled with the weakness of the labor economic safety net, facilitates the brokerage process in Makassar labor cases. Even though workers are registered union members, they are fragmented and not adequately united. Although they may belong to the same association, the fragility of their circumstances also provides room for brokers to become directly involved. Brokers will make attractive offers and promises that may affect workers' integrity, and force them to choose between their personal interests and collective union interests. As a result, when they have to deal with employers, workers become unsettled. Some of them prefer to end their strikes and accept less money than they are owed.

⁶⁵Wiratraman 2017.

⁶⁶Suryomenggolo 2014, 6.

The practice of illegality is the second instrument of informal politics to curb ongoing industrial relations conflicts between workers and employers. The most frequently used illegal practice we observed in Makassar was intimidation, which often occurred amid strikes and protests in factories. Intimidation was performed in by bringing in security forces such as police, the military, or even thugs. A police presence could give the impression that a labor strike was a criminal act. In one incident, this impression grew even stronger after several demonstrators were accused of disturbing security and order. These workers were then forced to respond to a police summons as suspects, even though they were eventually proven not guilty. One worker said:

Some friends who were involved in the strike were summoned to Polrestabas [*Kepolisian Resor Kota Besar*, city police]. We were surprised by the reason for this summons, “disturbing the public order.” However, we have not committed a crime. I just wanted to meet the boss [of the company]. We assume that this is just a trick by the company to frighten the masses on strike.

Apart from the police apparatus, military personnel were also used to suppress worker actions. At one company, when a strike started, the company added eight security guards from the Indonesian Navy. Thus, even though employed as security guards, the purpose of their presence was actually to intimidate workers on strike. During a strike at PT Prima Abadi Persada, workers affiliated with FSPBI faced intimidation from groups of thugs, mainly from members of Pemuda Pancasila and Laskar Merah Putih.⁶⁷

Intimidation occurred not only at factory areas but often in public spaces. For instance, we were interviewing some striking workers at a coffee shop not far from their company. Without our realizing it, a company person entered with a policeman. We noticed that the policeman was secretly observing the workers. After a few minutes, another four men entered. Some of them were thugs. Their arrival made the workers suddenly reluctant to discuss industrial relations issues. One of them even asked us to stop the interview process for the sake of safety.

This kind of practice involving the police, military, and thugs has occurred in labor actions since the Suharto dictatorship, and has functioned as a form of political control on behalf of the state.⁶⁸ Although the fall of New Order authoritarianism in 1998 was a milestone for labor freedom, military involvement in handling industrial relations disputes has persisted and even expanded in 2018, when the government gave the military a role in handling demonstrations and strikes.⁶⁹ However, in Makassar, their involvement tended to be hidden, illegal, and intimidating, as a form of political control acting on behalf of the capital.

The third informal practice takes advantage of kinship and personal ties between laborers and certain parties such as family, friends, and bureaucrats. In terms of costs, using kin ties to reduce labor activism is inexpensive. Workers who go out on strike

⁶⁷Pemuda Pancasila and Laskar Merah Putih are paramilitary organizations that have networks throughout Indonesia. In society and among workers, they are considered like thugs because of their physical appearance and actions. Usually the members of these two organizations are men who are big, muscular, and have scary faces. Members of these two groups often commit acts of violence under the pretext of creating law and order. These groups are often called *preman bayaran* (thugs for hire) because they are used by politicians and businesspeople for intimidation and security. For more discussion of the role of paramilitary groups such as Pemuda Pancasila in informal politics in Indonesia see Wilson 2015.

⁶⁸Hadiz 1997.

⁶⁹Caraway and Ford 2020, 179.

have few options. They need money to meet their daily needs, especially those who are married. At times like this, family kin will very easily influence workers to end a strike.

Efforts to reduce activism are continuous, especially for workers whom brokers cannot influence. Initially, a company will identify striking workers' closest family members. Then, the company will ask those parties to persuade strikers to accept the compensation offered. In the PT Siantar Top Tbk strike described above, this method was effective in reducing labor activism; out of the forty-eight workers who went on strike, eighteen decided to end their participation because of family pressure. As Ari, a labor from PT Siantar Top Tbk, observed:

Many of my friends finally chose to stop striking and leave the struggle tent in the factory just for family reasons. They admit that they are not comfortable; there is pressure from their families, such as wives for married people. At the same time, others are urged by their closest family, such as an aunt or uncle who has a relationship with an official in the company. Usually, it involves maintaining the good name of the family in the company. "Don't embarrass us," they say. I'm grateful that my parents still understand, so I can still strike consistently.

In short, the informal political strategies of both internal and external stakeholders during strikes and protests take the form of coercion and persuasion. This depends on the complexity of industrial relations, including the strength of the labor activism they are facing. The weaker the strikers, the smaller the potential for coercion, but the more influential the persuasion. The greater the labor power, the greater the potential for coercion and the lesser the means of persuasion.

Conclusion

Our analysis of informal politics and labor activism in Makassar shows the importance of challenging mainstream views of local politics in Indonesia. Although general observations are that contemporary local labor activism has increased, the experience of labor activism in Makassar shows that the picture is more complex than generalizations allow. In this case, fragmentation, personalism, and pragmatism in labor unions were the main ways for informal politics to sneak in and develop alongside the labor activism dynamics in the region. On the other hand, informal politics such as brokerage, illegality, and kinship appear to be quite effective in subtly suppressing labor activism at the factory level.

This case study may not reflect the labor situation across all of Indonesia. However, studies of informal politics such as this are important because they demonstrate the influence of informal politics when workers are involved in industrial relations, and when they become scattered and unconsolidated. Subsequently, the vulnerability of labor activism impacts workers' ability to fight for their rights. Moreover, this impacts workers' political participation, leading to the limitation and relativization of democratic participation. Formal politics (elections), globalization, and neoliberalism all play roles in decreasing labor activism in recent dynamics.⁷⁰

Our findings have both theoretical and empirical implications for understanding labor politics, especially activism in various protests and strikes. This case study helps scholars

⁷⁰Lane 2018; Ayres 2020; Chen and Gallagher 2018.

to understand the dynamics of local labor activism toward labor politics in Indonesia and how to distinguish the patterns, characteristics, and/or vulnerabilities of workers in industrial relations. It also goes beyond conceptual issues about labor politics and Indonesia's democratic regression, such as in political participation. We show that informal politics is the everyday state of local labor activism, in the past, now, and in the future. Political observers and scholars need to explore informal politics as a significant part of labor activism. Furthermore, workers and the unions need to improve their power, which tends to weaken when dealing with informal politics. Although surrounded by systems that provide suitable environments for the growth of informal politics, the most significant immediate step that labor union officials can take is to use a more democratic organizational method and encourage ideological reinforcement among their members.

1 Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the editor of *Critical Asian Studies*, two anonymous reviewers, as well as Colum Graham for valuable comments on this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research for this article was funded by Direktorat Riset dan Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat, Kementerian Riset dan Teknologi/Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional [grant number 007/SP2H/AMD/LT/DRPM/2020].

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