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Audiopolitics and Social Movements: Popular Music in Indonesia's Corrupted Reform Era

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Abstract This article observes popular music practices and social movement ideals in Indonesia between 2019-24. It is an interrogation into traits of popular music through the framework of audiopolitics that underlines the political dimension of music practice. In the backdrop of the Corrupted Reform protest in 2019 as the period understudy, this article focusses on a cultural domain where neoliberal practices of popular music intersect with democratic practices that make up a social movement culture. In looking into this entanglement, this article takes a close study of songs, music performances, and extra-musical practices by musicians of the independent music scene in Indonesia with emphasis on their political meanings through culture-in-action.

Keywords Popular music. Indie music. Social movement culture. Indonesia. Audiopolitics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Independent Music Scene and Performative Politics. – 3 Prefigurative Aesthetics as Social Movement. – 4 'Musicking' as Social Movement. – 5 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

In this article, I would like to ponder upon the relations between music and social movements in Indonesia during the tumultuous period of 2019-24, a time marked by a decline in democratic values under President Joko Widodo. This period is known for manifestations of civil anger that led to the *Reformasi Dikorupsi* (The Corrupted Reform) protest movement.[1] In the backdrop of the political dynamic that questions the state's neoliberal reconfiguration, raising concerns about corporate greed, oligarchy, and the establishment of a political dynasty, this article embraces the sounds of politics, which are, in many ways, produced and performed in relation to the civil quest for democracy. It investigates practices of popular music within the protest movement culture through the framework of audiopolitics,[2] that is, the politics of music-related practice.

In post reform Indonesia, after 1998, the independent music scene has contributed countless songs with socio-political content in response to issues of social justice. The popularity of these sounds of politics were enhanced by the establishment of the industry-oriented Do-It-Yourself (DIY) independent music scene. What was once a subcultural DIY movement now follows the logic of the mainstream. At the intersection of a capitalist industrial music culture and the moral awareness of social movement culture, I observe music performances being inseparable from the workings of power, shaping people's ideology and worldview. In the commercial culture of the independent music scene, this has shifted toward cooperative capitalism (Luvaas 2013, 10).

Popular music advances dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate. Indeed, the sounds of politics have the capacity to construct collective identity within social movements. They can also sustain collective memory (Eyerman, Jamison 1998, 8). Without undermining the power of protest songs, I aim to focus on the cultural studies

1 The period under study emphasizes the vernacular notion of *Reformasi Dikorupsi* (Corrupted Reform) which refers to the era following the political reform (*reformasi*) in 1998, when the authoritarian New Order regime under President Suharto was ousted. Although this reform brought relative freedom, it was deemed unsuccessful, as elements of the status quo still linger within the state system, and human rights issues and corruption – the biggest demands for change during *reformasi* – remain far from eradicated. Hence, the label of 'Corrupted Reform'. In almost every aspect, post-reform Indonesia became increasingly and perniciously neoliberal. The independent music scene, which once upheld subcultural ideals, grew more industry-oriented.

2 The term 'audiopolitics' has been used to capture the political dimension of recorded sounds. Notably, during twentieth-century colonialism, which focused on racial hegemony (Brofman 2016), the global capitalism of the vernacular music industry, and the appropriation of sound in shaping the national identities of colonized nations (Denning 2018). Taking the cultural affordances of sound as politics, I employ audiopolitics to describe the everyday politics of music practice.

perspective of music practice, which emphasizes the relationship between power and culture. Although the sounds of politics are often inspired by specific political events or by a cognitive or affective understanding of moral issues, I question the extent of musicians' involvement in social movements beyond songwriting and the conveyed lyrical meaning.

This study is also informed by my own longstanding involvement in Indonesia's independent music (indie) scene. My interactions with the industrialized infrastructure of the scene serve as a reflexive node for examining music's relations with social movements. Some of my work has been inspired by, and advocates for, social justice. Often, I design my performances to reflect this, albeit in a metaphoric way. I have also aligned myself with initiatives concerning civil rights. For example, in 2013, I was involved in a compilation album for an anti-corruption campaign produced by ICW (Indonesia Corruption Watch). The release of the album, and the tour that followed, attracted media attention and drew in the indie 'scenesters'. The audience came to the shows and enjoyed the performances, as we musicians hoped they would. However, drawn heavily to the aesthetic aspects of music performance, I find myself reflecting on my participation in civil rights initiatives.

The meaning of music is not necessarily articulated through the organization of sound or song lyrics (Abbate 2004; Kramer 2002). Song lyrics or recorded sounds serve as 'signatures' that remain fixed, while the outside world and 'subjects' within it continue to change (Derrida 1982, 328). This idea also applies to performances. Therefore, instead of focusing on the sounds of politics through lyrical text or performances, the emphasis of audiopolitics lies in investigating social performances that are related to music. I question myself: Have I done enough to contribute to social movements? What critiques exist for musicians who articulate sounds of politics? How do sound performances relate to the broader scope of social movements? These questions resonate with me also on a personal level, and my observations stem partly from this.

The audiopolitical framework revolves around political actions, or musical actions, that correspond to the omnipresence of power structures, such as capitalism, dominant aesthetics, and patriarchal society, whereby musical meanings are determined by musician's responses to them. These responses encompass performances in a broader sense, incorporating musicians' social life, musical trajectory, and aesthetics – what Christopher Small (1998) defines as 'musicking'. We can also contextualize song lyrics through a political science lens, viewing political speech as more than just spoken text. The audiopolitical perspective recognizes that political ideas contain aspects of strategy in a way that is not secondary to or derivative of the 'real' idea. As Skinner (2002, 177) notes:

> [the] question of ideas in politics is always a question about the efficacy of particular political communications, the strategic deployment of which is fundamental to political activity.

It observes "the gap between rhetoric and reality, between discourse and action" (Fairclough 2000, 147). Building on this, I strive to interrogate popular music not as a mere static rhetoric but as texts that incorporate cognitive and affective dimensions, attributing musicking as social life. This approach considers ethos (Griffiths 2017, 26) and the institutions in which potential makers and distributors of ideas operate (Finlayson 2006, 541). The performance aspect of musicking emphasizes the fundamental nature and meaning of music in performances, social actions, and the formation of individuals, relationships, and culture. Rather than solely focusing on song forms or lyrics in relation to escalating protests, I thus examine the aesthetics and social performance of musicians. Musicking implies that music is 'not an object' but an activity – something that people do. It is a set of relationships that constitutes a performance, reflecting cultural meaning.

In the wake of the numerous socio-political songs produced by Indonesians musicians, and influenced by the neoliberal-oriented industrialized independent music following the political reform in 1998, the question of moral practices through song lyrics and musical performance reflects musicians' political actions in response to social movements. My intention here is to capture musicians' political performances, highlighting both the sound of politics and the politics of sound that arose alongside the intensive skepticism over reform, situated in a cultural labyrinth of moral praxis and economic doings. Within the context of utopian social movements and the neoliberal music scene, these practices are also political choices. This study considers "individual behavior that derives from quotidian, collective, even unconscious, influences" (cf. Davis 2008, 1), where musical meanings relate to the informal logic of actual life (Geertz 1973, 17) and inevitably involve a presentation of the self (read: the musicians themselves) (cf. Goffman 1959).

In this article, I will proceed as follows: the following section describes the formation of the independent music scene (indie) in Indonesia and examines music performances that account as political. Although these performances align with popular movement democratic ideals, they exist at the intersection of moral ideas and capitalist cultural hegemony, often representing only superficial aesthetic support for social movements. Second, I analyze a performance deeply rooted in its socially engaged Indonesian musician's political history, demonstrating how the creation of aesthetics became a crucial element of social movement practice. Third, in section 4, I expand the discussion from aesthetic performances to broader social and music-related performances, exploring how social movement culture is musically sustained.

2 The Independent Music Scene and Performative Politics

The independent music scene, associated with the DIY ideology started in Indonesia in the 1990s during the last decade of President Suharto's oppressive New Order's regime. Just like anywhere else in the world, the indie music ideology originally served as an anti-capitalist business model (Dunn 2012, 140), privileging a set of social, economic, and political practices, such as social engagement based on an ethos of community participation and 'gift economy'. Based on anarchist ideas of the autonomous DIY culture, indie brings prefigurative sensibility for their "oppositional content, aesthetic experiments, community practice, anti-hierarchical organizational structures, prefigurative processes, anti-capitalist economics, and direct action" (Jeppesen 2018, 207). The ideology fitted with the escalating protests that highlighted the late New Order in the 1990s, which ultimately led to political reform in 1998. This was partly why DIY practices associated with indie and underground genres (punk, death metal, hip-hop, and experimental music) flourished (Sasono 2021).[3]

However, the independent scene itself has been long overrun by neoliberal trajectories.[4] Today, many of the indie practices in Indonesia have developed into modes of entrepreneurship. This has been in line with the state's view of cultural expressions as a potential industry of 'creative economy' (cf. Departemen Perdagangan Indonesia 2014; Purnomo 2016). It reflects the capitalist culture of the indie music scene, which encourages everyday social practices to follow the logic of neoliberal capitalistic social form. In a seminal study of the Indonesian popular music, Brent Luvaas asserts that "Global capitalism tends to co-opt and commercialize local music scenes, which can dilute the authenticity of subcultures" (2009, 263).[5] In my observation, small generative indie labels that grew in the 1990s, along with those that followed, adhered to comparable market-oriented models similar to the mainstream companies they originally sought to resist. Anything that appears subcultural is now often dismissed as pseudo-subculture (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 51-6).

3 The term indie and underground are interchangeable. They both refer to certain music genres, but mostly associated with their music production ideals of Do-It-Yourself.

4 Hesmondhalgh 1999; Kruse 2003; Luvaas 2009; Moore 2013; Garland 2014; Kim 2019.

5 Despite this, Luvaas also emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of Indonesian musicians, who often navigate the capitalist pressures by blending global influences with local traditions or gaining some level of independence. While I agree with his views that put emphasis on confronting aesthetic traditions and negotiating with record companies, these perspectives are less relevant to the scope of political performance discussed in the article.

Similarly, performances of political songs also follow the logic of the dominant culture of popular music. In such circumstances, musicians' engagements with democratic processes might be reduced to mere 'performative activism'. This term, often used pejoratively, expresses the suspicion that support for a political or social justice cause is shallow, artificial, ineffective, and primarily aimed at garnering social capital and supporters' recognition. The accusation hinges on a contrast between what supporters say and what they actually do (Thimsen 2022, 85). It implies that individuals associated with social movements might be involved in activism primarily with the goal of increasing one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause (Moore2021).

I would like to examine examples of audiopolitics that embellish the post-reform social movement soundscape and might be considered 'performative'.[6] To illustrate this, I draw on my own experience as a performer. During a 2013 with Indonesia Corruption Watch in Yogyakarta in 2013, my band and I performed for approximately forty-five minutes. Our one-hour setlist consisted of songs included in the compilation album *Frekwensi Perangkap Tikus* (The Mousetrap Frequencies – ICW 2012), and a long repertoire that depicts the murder of a human rights activist, Munir. The performance followed the logic of 'rock 'n' roll', focusing more on delivering an excellent show than on the political message. Does this make the performance performative? Possibly. Given that such music practices exist at the intersection of democratic ideals and the popular music star system, these assumptions are reasonable. While I criticize myself for 'talking the talk' without always 'walking the walk', the indie scene does provide a platform for sounds of politics to take place as an insincere attempt to jump on the bandwagon of social movements. The following observations prompt us to consider how political musical performances might sometimes aim to self-promote and build one's own personal or corporate progressive bona fides.

Jakarta based garage-rock band The Brandals has been investing in social critique since their establishment in the early 2000s. Their songs describe those who are victimized by Jakarta's urban modernity, depicting the dark side of urban life, including issues related to drugs and crime (*The Brandals*, Sirkus Record, 2003). They continue to articulate narratives about "trudging through life's hardships" (*Vice*, 7 November 2016). Their 2020 song *The Truth is Coming Out* was accompanied by a music video that extends this critique. The video features empathic visuals depicting the daily life of working class Jakartans, which seem to support the band's critique to

6 The term 'performative' refers to its colloquial use, which is different from the 'performative' used in the scholarly discourse of performance studies.

the capital city's neoliberal trajectory. On the one hand, these images (and sounds) may serve as affective aspects that contribute to a deeper cognitive understanding of social inequality. On the other hand, such emotional images may also be instrumentalized to gain social capital.

One of the Brandals' best-known songs is entitled *Awas Polizei*! (Watch out, The Police!) – a song which addresses the notorious police institution. As one important institution for law enforcement, the Indonesian police force has been known by the Indonesian public for their obvious unlawful daily practice of bribery.[7] Despite the ongoing reform in the institution, the narrative of corrupt police officers who stop traffic violators and make offenders pay the fine to their benefit still lingers. The lyrics of *Awas Polizei!* was written to capture this.

> Enter through the back door | Chasing night and day | from small business to suicide | cars, motorbikes, city bus | rolling wheels on asphalt, and | Watch out *Polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | watch out polizei! | oh watch out polizei! | standing tall at the crossroads | eyes looking to see who dials | hustling left and right looking for opportunities | muscles, sweat | let's bargain on the sidewalk and | Watch out *Polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | watch out *polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | Oh please try to understand | [We] serve and protect, yeah | We also need rice | [Go to] hell with dignity | no one cares. (*Awas Polizei!*, The Brandals, 2011)[8]

In 2007, the Brandals were invited as guest performers at a music festival in Jakarta. On stage, their lead singer Eka Annash (born 1976) publicly exposed the conflict between The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the Police Force. That year, the relationship between the KPK and the Police led to a national tension when the KPK investigated allegations of corruption involving a Police leader and members of the Prosecutor's Office.[9] The song *Awas Polizei!* was performed to contextualize the notorious conflict between two

7 The theme of the 'Police' has been employed by many Indonesian musicians. Indonesian supergroup, Swami, for example, symbolically depicted the police as an "arrogant and antagonizing evil" in their hit song *Bongkar*. The slogan *Aparat Keparat*! (Fuck the Troops!), which is akin to the All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB), is often used in the underground punk communities, though it frequently lacks detailed understanding of the systematic violence it critiques (Sasono 2022). The underground scene has often criticized Indonesian democracy by incorporating issues of human rights violations by law enforcement into their music (cf. Wallach 2005; 2014; Donaghey 2016; Jauhola 2020). In 2019, the pop group Tashoora collaborated with The Jakarta Legal Aid campaign program to release a narrative about wrongful police arrests in their song *Aparat* (Troops).

8 All lyrics translated by the author.

9 The tension between the KPK and the Police remerged in 2012, with the Police launching counterattacks by also accusing a KPK leader of being a suspect.

prosecutor institutions: KPK and the Police. Although the song was not written for this specific case, the band framed the performance to suggest their support for KPK, which at the time was the 'cleaner' institution out of the two prosecuting institutions.

Awas Polizei! is a constant presence in their performance setlist. Ten years later, the band performed at another grand music festival in Jakarta. The song remained the same, but the context was different. The music festival was held just a week after a football tragedy in Malang, East Java, that killed more than 100 spectators. A match between regional rivals Arema Malang and Persebaya Surabaya ended with a crowd invasion. Although the situation could have been controlled, the police used excessive physical violence against on-field spectators. Additionally, they also fired tear gas into the stands, leading to hundreds trying to flee through the exits, which caused a deadly stampede. The incident has led to public anger, with much of it directed at the police and their use of tear gas.

With the incident still fresh in the minds of many Indonesians, the Brandals dedicated the song to the victims of police violence. They invited guest singer Bhaskara Putra, the lead singer of the prominent band Feast (discussed later) to perform the song collaboratively. The presence of two high-profile singers on stage added to the celebratory atmosphere, while the band played against a backdrop of abstract visuals projected on multiple screens. The Brandals lead singer covered his top with another layer of clothing, notably an Arema Malang football jersey, while Bhaskara wore a blue and white scarf around his neck – colors associated with the football team. Towards the end of the song the Brandals lift a red smoke flare – commonly seen in football matches – which the lead singer waved around the stage. At the end of the performance, the two lead singers embraced, congratulating, and thanking each other for a successful show **[fig. 1]**.

The celebratory mood of the performed song raises questions about the relationship between the performance and those in despair, such as the families of the victims, and the extent to which the song advocated for public empathy regarding police misconduct. The semantic meaning of the song may align with the common view of the police as corrupt, and, in this case, violent against civilians. However, their performance introduced a dimension of aesthetic hegemony that distorted this idea. In commercial music festivals, the meaning of performances usually follows the logic of popular music. Although the band performed a political song, the interface between listening subjects and sounding music (this includes the concept and execution of the performance) is prescribed by concepts driven by values of the music industry. For example, the choice to perform *Awas Polizei!* as the final of their song of their performance most probably derived from the band's conception of 'save the best for last' a typical aesthetics flow in popular music performances. The

Figure 1 Synchronize Festival, The Brandals at performing Awas Polizei! at Syncronize Fest 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQ15Mg6YlM0&t=1050s, Jakarta, Copyrights Synchronize Fest

use of red smoke flare and football jersey served as 'stage acts' intended to create a symbolic allyship with the football fans, victims of police brutality. Assumingly, the inclusion of Bhaskara Putra, as a guest vocalist, was borne out of popularity consideration rather than functionality. The costume changes, theatrical acts, and guest musicians can be viewed as part of a neoliberal framing that aligns with narratives of the oppressed and the political milieu. This transforms the performance into a representation of a political narrative rather than a straightforward political statement.

Performative politics in performance brings us to an ethical dimension of musician's orientation to social movements. Performance of politics can become spectacles. That is, a 'seen' performance that can be misleading and inauthentic. According to Guy Debord, modern capitalist societies are characterized by 'the spectacle', a pervasive and dominant cultural phenomenon arising from the integration of media, technology, and commodity culture (cf. Debord 1967). As the world is often mediated rather than experienced firsthand by individuals, spectacular experiences deprive us of authenticity and direct experience.

Spectacles are an inevitable part of popular music culture. Beyond music stages, they also permeate mediated spaces such as virtual platforms. As such, spectacles are a powerful tool for endorsing commercial ideas, including the attention economy. Through their attentive mode of marketing, albums, songs, and images have somewhat served as an emotional instrumentalization of the audience. During the study period, when political discussions became a fixture of everyday social life, spectacle cognitively linked these conversations with the worlds of politics and social movements. Consider the example of Feast, a Jakarta based garage rock band known to produce songs inspired by sociopolitical narratives (*Hypeabis*, 9 June 2024).

In 2022, they released a digital mini album depicting the journey of a fictional character, Ali. The visual representation leading up to the album's release featured strong symbols of resistance. The cover of their single, released in April 2022, *Gugatan Rakyat Semesta* (Universal People's Lawsuit) offered a display of symbolism of resistance. For instance, the band employed nationalistic symbols reminiscent of Indonesia's founding father's struggle against imperialism **[fig. 2]**, and incorporated left-leaning ideological elements, such as the predominant use of red. The band even brought up ideas of the ideal of democracy by invoking the old and enigmatic Javanese folklore of *Ratu Adil* (Justice King), and imagined leader who would bring justice to the country. In contradiction to this utopian vision of justice, the image also depicted an elitist group sitting atop a human body lying under a table, symbolizing the oppressive nature of the state.

The band, however, has been subject of critiques, some coming from their musician slash activist colleagues, on 'political correctness'. This is best exemplified in the song *Padi Milik Rakyat* (Rice belongs to the People), a song that advocates for agricultural farmers as those who are pushed aside in the economic and political system. The song is formed through slogan-like verses about agricultural farmers' marginalized position against government-backed food chain industries. The sound of the fuzz in their blues-styled guitar riff may be the bridge that connects to their rock fan-base, but it may also obscure the true essence of rural life in Indonesia. The masculine sounding composition bolds the exclusion of women, who are key to agricultural sustainability. Moreover, a question looms: "Would a middle-class individual from metropolitan Jakarta be a good representative for the oppressed?" The lead singer claims the song idea derived from a short high-school internship program he had in a rural village in central Java in his younger days. Perhaps the short visit could be enough to capture the lived life of a farmer, which they turned into a song. The song's association to social movements, along with the band's cultivated social movement persona, could be enough to draw listeners to consider issues of social injustices. Nevertheless, some argue that, despite having the platform to amplify social justice issues, the band opted to voice these concerns in their own terms, using their own language rather than mediating for the powerless to speak for themselves (Spivak 2000).

While this reflection is assumptive, the discourse of musician's performative activism and prefigurative qualities can be pursued through their musical path. Feast's musical trajectory supports this argument. The band is managed by Suneater, which started as a digital content company, as opposed to a conventional record label. Suneater grew and developed mirroring inspirational corporations such as Marvel and Apple (Kukuh, pers.comm., 2022). From the macro

Figure 2 Feast, band photo depicting symbols of nationalism, 2022. @ffeast. Instagram. Jakarta, 2022. Copyrights Feast

perspective, Suneater employs the circulation of big data that can be mined for information and used in predictive modeling and other advanced analytics applications. They operate under the concept of platform capitalism, which focusses on the immaterial labor process, oriented toward the use and manipulation of symbols and affects (Srnicek 2016, 29). Feast's music and social media publications are designed to ensure that the public remains continuously engaged with their 'products'. The use of such an economic model reflects the currency of the music industry, which places high value on content, not necessarily music, as a strong aspect of public engagement. This denotes the possibility of framing current (political) issues in a way that captures public attention. Given the attention-driven economic model guiding their musical pathway, it is not surprising that the song structure of *Padi Milik Rakyat* closely resembles the song *Graves*, by the US bluegrass collective Whiskey Shivers, which was recorded four years earlier. On another occasion, in 2020, the band became subject of media attention when they threatened to sue a political party who used their song for a campaign without their permission (*Kompas*, 21 November 2022). While this case suggests that they embrace non-partisanism, it can also be viewed as a practice driven by attention economy. Arguably, music production influenced by the attention economy, especially in fields related to moral obligations like activism, may be inherently performative.

These examples compel us to consider the perspective of subjects situated at the intersection of social movements and popular music. Performative activism is "an accusation that demands more action, more activism – more than social media posts and progressive advertising themes. In short, it demands more performance" (Thimsen

2022, 84). In light of this, I can only reflect on my own case: How does my engagement with sounds of politics shape my political and musical trajectory? Have I ever engaged with victims or other social activists? To what extent have I committed to action following my sound of politics? Through this analysis, I do not intend to undermine the efforts of colleagues and other musicians who have been articulating critiques of state powers or advocating for social justice through their music. Many of them show significant solidarity for various civil society movements. My aim here is to explore how ideas from social movements can manifest in actions driven by different value regimes (cf. Appadurai 1986), whether these are moral or market-based. In the following passages, I describe music performances as embodiments of social movement culture.

3 Prefigurative Aesthetics as Social Movement

To discuss the notion of prefigurative politics in opposition to performative politics, I take an example from the 2019 Corrupted Reform protests. The slogan *Reformasi Dikorupsi* became a rallying cry for students, activists, and others participating in the protests, calling for preserving democratic reforms and fighting against perceived restrictions on civil liberties. It was the first large scale nationwide protest since reformasi in 1998. An important trigger was the proposed revision of Indonesia's criminal code (RKUHP). The reforms included controversial provisions, such as criminalizing consensual sex outside of marriage, cohabitation, and insulting the president, as well as stricter laws on abortion. These reforms were viewed by many as a threat to civil liberties and personal freedoms. In addition, the government weakened the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which had been one of the country's most effective institutions for fighting corruption.[10] Activists and the public were outraged by the new law, which reduced the KPK's independence and authority and viewed it as a move to protect corrupt politicians and elites. Protests were also fueled by concerns about environmental policies. Students and environmental groups voiced their opposition to laws perceived as benefiting corporations at the expense of protecting Indonesia's forests and indigenous communities, particularly in relation to deforestation and land use regulations.

The peak of the Corrupted Reform Protest in 2019 occurred on Thursday, September 19. It was the day the parliament issued a bill that severely limits KPK's authority. A song by an indie-rock band, Efek Rumah Kaca (ERK), *Mosi Tidak Percaya* (Votes of No Confidence)

10 Asyikin, Setiawan 2020; Lane 2021; Putriyana, Rochaeti 2021; Mudhoffir 2022.

was very contextual to the occasion. The song conveyed a deep erosion of trust in the government and a demand for their removal, as protesters no longer have confidence in their ability to lead. Protesters were singing the song. It became the soundtrack of the protest (*The Jakarta Post*, 30 September 2019). Often, netizens would refer to the song on social media showing their alignment to the protest movement. Following a massive protest earlier in the day, ERK's lead singer, Cholil Mahmud, performed solo in front of KPK's head office as part of a press conference. Instead of singing *Mosi Tidak Percaya*, he followed his emotions and performed an acoustic ballad, *Bunga dan Tembok* (Flowers and Wall), a song written by Wiji Thukul – a leftist poet and activist who was disappeared by the New Order regime in 1997. The exact poetry was then composed and recorded as a ballad by the late activist's son, Fajar Merah. In front of the KPK office, Cholil chose to sing a song rich with aesthetic symbols: 'flowers', representing life, and the 'wall', symbolizing the rigid and oppressive traits of the regime. Cholil sings:

> "If we are flowers | we are the ones you don't want to grow | If we are flowers | we are what you don't want us to be | You prefer building houses, seizing land | You prefer building highways, building iron fences. | If flowers | we are the ones you don't want to grow | If flowers | we are the ones who fall on our own earth | You prefer building houses, seizing land | You prefer building highways, building iron fences | If we are flowers | you are the wall | We have spread the seeds in your body | One day we will grow together | With confidence | You must be destroyed! | You must be destroyed! | You must be destroyed! You must be destroyed!" (*Bunga dan Tembok*, Fajar Merah/Cholil Mahmud, 2015)

The performance was theatrically devised, incorporating the dramaturgy of a funeral procession, with symbolic elements such as a bouquet, casket, and candles, indexing a vigil for the dead. Yellow flags, a local symbol of mourning, were raised, signaling the need for social awareness. As the singer entered the song's second verse, four women appeared from inside the head office's main entrance carrying posters that read *KPK sudah mati*: KPK is (proclaimed) dead. They took their positions on either side of the singer [fig. 3]. Next, a casket carried by four men made its way out of the building entrance. The top of the casket read 'R.I.P. KPK 2002-19', indicating the year the anti-corruption agency was established and the year in which it died. The group of men laid the casket behind the singing performer and placed candles around it. A bouquet of mourning was also arranged in the background with visibly written words of condolences.

This kind of performance was not new. In the struggle for *reformasi*, symbolic performances depicting funeral rites were ubiquitous. It

Figure 3 Watchdoc, Cholil Mahmud of Efek Rumah Kaca performing 'Bunga dan Tembok' outside the KPK Head Office in 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjBBDtUCb7o Jakarta, September 2019. Watchdoc

remained common in smaller-scale protests to symbolize the demise of democracy. The performance in front of KPK's head office, however, was rooted in the embodiment of prefigurative political values. Prefigurative politics is "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977, 100). It implies a deeper connection to the embodied values of social movements, rather than merely an aesthetic association with them.

The political circumstances demanded a comprehensive response to the systemic violation of democracy through "musical reality" – an imagined reality within the music world (Frith 1996, 165). *Bunga dan Tembok* is a song that reflects a poetic reality endured through multiple political regimes. It prompts listeners to think about the challenges facing democratic futures and represents an unaccomplished demand from the oppressed during the New Order era. It serves as a form of history from below, capturing the zeitgeist of the era's oppositional movements and resonating with countless numbers of people who have contributed to the democratization of politics (Mandal 2003, 196). It also conveys the worldly experience of its author, the late activist Wiji Thukul, who worked with marginalized groups such as laborers, farmers, and the urban poor during the New Order years. The song stands as a representation of the people – those marginalized and positioned at the lower strata of the political and economic structure (Weintraub 2006, 412).

Having been immersed in social movements since the ninetis, Cholil's performance exemplified the affective politics and politics of

affect within the prefigurative trajectory of his social movement involvement. Affect, according to Sara Ahmed, is an emotional element of the body that takes shape through the repetition of actions and orientations over. Emotions shape what bodies can do, as "the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished" (Ahmed 2014, 4). Although the performance was constructed as a struggle to uphold the KPK's authority at the height of the 2019 protest, it emanates from a deeper dimension of the struggle for democratic futures, which the singer is well-acquainted with. Cholil's performance derives from a prefigurative sensibility that opens up aesthetic choices. I argue that this choice is shaped by the back-and-forth interplay of political affect and affective politics.

The musical reality that amplified popular dissent creates an aestheticized sentiment of the New Order struggle through what Sara Ahmed calls "intensification of feeling" (224). The melancholic, plucked guitar ballad serves as the backdrop to this affective politics. In addition to the semantic meaning of the song, the performance's focal point is underlined through its impression of grieving. This grief, however, extends beyond merely mourning the 'death of KPK' to a collective imagining of the New Order struggle. The performance transforms the death of KPK into a symbol of a deeper commitment to democratic ideals, as reflected in the song's line: "We have spread the seeds in your body. One day we will grow together". This prefigurative aesthetics generated an affective flow to connect the past with the present struggle for a democratic future. This emotional interplay adds a constructive dimension to the practice of social movements, furthering the idea of grief as a refusal to let go of the object of struggle, thereby keeping it alive in the form of an enduring impression (Ahmed 2014, 184-7). This manifestation of prefigurative politics brought emotional elements into the realm of democratic cognition, and back. Toward the end of the song, Cholil – his watered eyes and tense face – could not hide his sentiments. Members of the audience also felt the heartbreaking emotion that the performance carried. The performance supplemented an affective value to song performances as a distinctive form of social movement praxis. This emotional intensification of feeling makes the cognitive aspect (the corrupt government) more powerfully introjected, elaborated and retained by the public.

Cholil Mahmud's political choices can be scrutinized through his musical works and social history. ERK, which he leads, is renowned for his lyrical work that voices social-political critique. His songs reflect his social experience. For instance, two tracks from his band's self-titled debut album, *Di Udara* (In the air) and *Cinta Melulu* (Always Love), serve as popular examples. The former depicts the state-conspired murder of a human rights activist, Munir, in 1994. The latter was inspired by the increasing prevalence of insipid love songs

worming their way into the local music scene (*Jakarta Globe*, 9 March 2011). Their second album *Kamar Gelap* (Dark Room), released in 2007, was pivotal in bringing indie artists into mainstream media. It includes tracks such as *Menjadi Indonesia* (Becoming Indonesia), a poetic introspection on the inertia that plagues the country; *Kenakalan Remaja di Era Informatika* (Teenage Delinquency in the Age of Information), a dig at rampant internet pornography. These songs emanate from ERK's social history in the sphere of student activism during the struggle for reform in the nineties. Singer and songwriter, Cholil Mahmud (born 1976) was a prominent figure in the student movement against the New Order regime in Jakarta. His wife, Irma Hidayana (born 1976), a member of the band's extensive lineup, was a former journalist with a critical student press group in Yogyakarta. Since they left college, the two have been working together or separately, in various civil society groups, including Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), Legal Aid Institute (LBH), and have frequently participated in organized protests. ERK's advocacy for democracy, including Cholil's aesthetic choices during performances at KPK, reflects the prefigurative politics emerging from their involvement in social movements across political regimes.

4 'Musicking' as Social Movement

Cholil's embodiment with prefigurative politics, however, extends beyond mere affiliation with civil rights institutions or producing music with socio-political critique that could be easily labeled as symbolic. Rather, his band's prefigurative practices also encompass the idea of social movements as democratic practices aimed at collectively creating alternatives to neoliberal hegemony. In this section, I will explore the broader scope of social movement ideas in popular music, beyond just protest-related music performances. Within the larger context of social movement culture, individuals who embody prefigurative values often develop an awareness of other hegemonies and become advocates for social change.

In light of the critique of popular music as an industrialized form of cultural production and the need for a multi-dimensional approach to social movements, I here turn to the concept introduced by musicologist Chritopher Small (1998) regarding the meaning of music practice. Central to this analysis is the idea of music not as a static form but as an activity – musicking. Small emphasizes that music is not just an object or a product (like a score or a recording), but an active process. Everyone involved in the musical experience – not just performers – are participating in the act of musicking. Musicking is fundamentally a social activity, involving relationships between people – performers, listeners, composers, and even the space where

the music is performed. Music, in this sense, becomes a medium for human interaction and expression. Through musicking, the essence and significance of music are found not in objects or musical works, but in actions and interactions of people. This perspective highlights that the fundamental nature and meaning of music are rooted in performances, social actions, and the formation of individuals, relationships, and culture.

Through this understanding, music practice is tightly knitted to the idea of culture as a battleground of ideologies. A social movement's culture is embedded in a broader tradition of ideas and practices – it draws on parts of it, challenges or rejects others, and subtly alters it through its actions. In the context of social movements, norms, values, and beliefs have no impact as long as they are locked in the mental life of individuals. However, when these elements are acted out, they provoke reactions from others and help shape the social representations that make up culture (Johnston 2014, 21). Culture, therefore, is a process of meaning-making activities rather than mere structures that impose themselves on individuals (cf. Spillman 2002). A meaningful social movement is thus the enactment of political opportunities within the realm of cultural creation. It is not confined in songs but acted out as a social practice in music-related activities.

Social movements often take advantage of political opportunities, which can vary across place and time (McAdam 1983). The affordance of political opportunities takes the form of 'free space' in the public sphere, where people are allowed to criticize the dominant culture within acceptable limits. However, the public sphere also serves as a site for contestation and the expression of alternative ideas. Popular music, as Theodor Adorno asserts, is a legacy of modern industrial society. It has been transformed into a neoliberal construct characterized by 'concept over matter'. This transformation is driven by commercial forces that manipulate music to placate and control the masses, who passively respond to it (Adorno [1941] 2006). Similarly, political theorist Herbert Marcuse criticizes consumerism and modern industrial society as "a form of social control that has imposed itself on every aspect of culture and public life, and has become hegemonic" (1991, 3). He argues that this hegemony has eliminated utopian thought, leaving society with only one-dimensional thinking that enforces compliance with the status quo (1991, 13). From this perspective, social movements are not only about opposing corporate greed, economic inequality, or unjust material distribution, but also about challenging the totality of the current system and the prejudices it enforces. Thus, social movement culture can be viewed as actors in the public sphere pushing for social change, engaging in meaning-making activities within specific rules.

For some musicians who embody the spirit of social movements, what matters is not merely the music itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded. They are acting out a utopian vision, "without utopian vision, social movements may run the risk of being just as vacuous as the 'one dimensional society' that they are protesting" (Langman 2013, 516). Musicking as a social movement emphasizes those who, in their entirety as humans, share solidarity with the oppressed, grasp the complexities of the neoliberal system, and engage in prefigurative acts to challenge neoliberalism. These individuals take advantage of political opportunities and relate to their communities in ways that are more direct, personal, and comprehensive compared to the formal, abstract, and instrumental relationships typically found in broader societal structures (Breines 1980). Below are some examples.

In 2010, ERK launched their own record label, Jangan Marah Records, which includes musicians from their network. While the idea of starting a record label reminisces the notion of economic determinism, its establishment was driven by values of communal reciprocity rather than market orientation. The band had set aside some of their gig fees for three years to create a gift economy that accommodated friends who contributed to their creativity and helped elevate ERK to its current status (*Tempo.co*, 5 May 2010). In 2018, they established an 'indie-bookstore', *Kios Ojo Keos*, that serves as a community hub and promotes youth literacy. The initiative emerged from a desire to find a new medium for expressing concerns and contributing to the community. During one of my visits in 2019, the space held a fundraising tour featuring music and t-shirt prints from a farmer community protesting a cement plant in Central Java. Other events included book discussions, film screenings, and small gigs, fostering engagement among various communities. Prefigurative politics involves strategies and practices employed by political activists to build alternative futures in the present and effect political change without reproducing the social structures they oppose (Fians 2022). In Indonesian society, which often lacks political education, the establishment of a space where youth can access alternative ideas and engage with democratic practices globally represents a significative prefigurative action.

Connecting with the community has been central in vernacular political education. Another notable musician from the 1998 reform era is Herry Sutresna, known as a hip-hop artist under the name Homicide. The influential band from Bandung, which disbanded in 2006, is recognized for its politically charged lyrics that resist neoliberalism. For instance, their track *Boombox Monger* serves as a manifesto, intertwining themes of power and politics, which index neoliberal evils, within both global and local contexts. Take a look at the first few lines.

"If the consumer is king, then industry is Kasparov | And every field vanguard is no more Lenin than Ulyanov | Looking for a shaft of Molotov | Nothing worse than critique of capitalism by George Soros | The compound of the soul of the creator | And the belch of the insurrectionist cosmos | Space outside workers and bosses | And election papers that you voted on | Where my comrade replaced the logos and dictionary with the stone of Sisyphus | Cut off state venous catheter and institutional IV lines until they die | In the land of co-opting tendencies Sony and "empty-V" and the phallus-sucking radios | 'must' preaching fascist swinging swords at the wings of every Icarus | With a hierarchy in the modus operandi worthy of *Kopassus* (the Indonesian army special force) | The microphone for us is the separation between silence and freedom that betrays | Militia without uniforms of colony, hip-hop philanthropy like Upski | Resurrection of the same boombox at Madison Park in the early eighties | That brings thousands of playlists from Chiapas, Kosovo and the Gaza Strip | Seattle and Prague, Chechnya, Genoa, Jerusalem, Dili and Tripoli | For the flames of militancy of activism that faded after the last Molotov was thrown in Semanggi". (*Boombox Monger*, Homicide, 2003)

While these words are symbolic discourse, Sutresna leverages his political agency to promote a prefigurative sensibility through practices of 'sharing discourse' and engaging in praxis. Together with musicians and activists in Bandung, Sutresna reevaluated their strategies and tactics for social change in the mid-2000s. Instead of focusing solely on 'taking power', they shifted their emphasis to daily political rituals, which Sutresna terms 'daily revolution' (cf. Sutresna 2024). In addition to continuing their DIY production and ethics, they also began to engage in more intense socioeconomic and political experiments. The movement became involved in self-managed economics, mutual aid initiatives like *Food Not Bombs* and *Arm the Homeless*, joining the labor movement by supporting strikes, and aligning with the urban poor movement. For instance, they utilized their network, Ultimus – an indie bookstore – as a hub for discussing leftist ideas and as a music venue. This contributed to the development of intersections between music and anti-authoritarian thought that persist into the following decades (Sutresna, pers. comm. 2024). Amid gentrification that sought to create a visually sanitized Bandung, they began to realize the importance of decentralization and space, leading them to build traditions within these autonomous spaces. Sutresna was involved in numerous space politics initiatives, collaborating with potentially displaced residents to host art and music festivals. A photo exhibition showcasing former residents and cooking classes led by local mothers are examples of the kind of cultural activism Sutresna and other politically conscious residents of Bandung advocate for.

Sutresna founded Grimloc in 2014 – a record label and store aimed at supporting homegrown bands. As a record label, Grimloc strives

Figure 4 Herry Sutresna, poster of a benefit event in North Maluku (left) and public gathering in response to gentrification in Bandung (right), 2024. Copyleft Herry Sutresna

to be fair to its community members in terms of royalties and compensation, which Sutresna claims as "far fairer than Spotify" due to its community-based model, as opposed to a producer-client logic (Sutresna, pers. comm., 3 February 2024). At Grimloc, some of the daily staff members are also part of the bands under its label – showing the use of resources of a DIY community. This approach values the community as a potential agent for social change, rather than as an object of capitalism. Moreover, Grimloc set up a progressive membership scheme termed DIWF (Do-It-With-Your-Friends) that allocates some funds for actions for social justice from friends in their network. Among other activities under the umbrella program Black September in 2024, they supported a benefit initiative to create a collective space in Halmahera, North Maluku, as an infrastructure for vernacular learning and organization of struggle in a region known for its massive exploitation of nickel reserves **[fig. 4]**.

Prefigurative values often lead individuals to become aware of other hegemonies. The embodiment of such values regard experimentation aimed at countering these hegemonies, one of which is the dominant mode of music production. This type of experimentation was caried out by a Yogyakarta-based experimental noise duo, Senyawa. In 2021, they investigated alternative ways to democratizing music production's economic system. They released an album entitled *Alkisah* (Once Upon a Time) by creating an innovative distribution model

that aligned with their culture of sharing (Sasono 2022, 230). Rather than being entrapped into a hierarchical power relationshi – such as submission to big streaming companies who know nothing about music's intrinsic and vernacular values – they issued an open call to invite record labels all over the world to act as co-producers, who would produce localized editions of the same record. Through this approach, Senyawa decentralized power and authority, relying on a network of trusted individuals. This trust network also allows the public to explore and reinterpret their works. Unlike traditional models where only selected labels negotiate distribution terms or formats (vinyl, cassettes, digital), this model allows the listening publics to transform the music into new forms beyond Senyawa's authority and original vision (Sabhara, pers. comm., 10 October 2021). Echoing the anarchist mode of production, which views DIY as a progressive mode of production (cf. Benjamin 1999), *Alkisah* is a subversion of the conventional economic mode of music production, where distributors and streaming companies have the tendency often hold disproportionate economic power.

The subversion of capitalist economic ideology through decentralization and egalitarian approaches highlight a shift toward more equitable means of production. As decolonizing economic practices, they also honor traditional local systems such as *swasembada* (self-sufficiency) and *gotong-royong* (mutual aid), which emphasize collectivism and communal service where people contribute their labor (Suwignyo 2019, 387). These practices resonate with the Western concept of 'gift economy' – an economy based on principles of generosity, community, and social relationships, as opposed to barter or market economies. For Senyawa, implementing the idea of gift economy extends beyond mere alternatives to conventional music production. In social realm, altruism and empathy, key elements of the gift economy, are also evident. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Rully Sabhara – one half of Senyawa – called out a 'help a neighbour-in-need' campaign in 2020. Amidst the state's inadequate social aid and work restrictions, grassroots awareness grew among daily wage workers. With two other musician colleagues, he campaigned for food aid through his musical network to collectively support those directly impacted by the state's policy. Senyawa's experimentation with sound, subversive modes of production, and economic practices question the dominant culture of popular music. Their endeavors can be viewed as practices of prefigurative politics, valuing mutualism and collectivity, as opposed to late capitalism's inherent individualism. Moreover, Rully Sabhara's prefigurative action go beyond the domain of music production, embracing broader societal and embodying a holist approach to community engagement.

5 Conclusion

Popular music serves as a sphere where power is exercised and knowledge is used to shape human beings as subjects of that knowledge (Foucault 1977; 1983). It is a domain rich with deeply internalized habits, styles, and skills (Bourdieu 1977). While the sounds of politics often symbolize specific struggles, they also reflect the capitalist nature of popular music production. Neoliberal capitalism extends beyond the notion of an economic system to become a social form with profound consequences for culture (Taylor 2014, 179). It influences how musicians work with, against, and within today's capitalism (18). In this article, I have explored an array of Indonesian musicians' skepticism, critique, and actions against hegemonic powers, including the state and dominant corporate mechanism. I have shown how the sounds of politics are performed in ways that are seemingly contradictory. For some musicians, their politics of sound can carry prefigurative aspects of democratic doings as well as more ideals of communal resistance. For others, the meaning of their music is drained into the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism, resulting in a more 'performative' quality.

The omnipresence of moral demands and market economy obligations in popular music, as exemplified in relation to the musicians discussed in this article, underscores the need to determine key points in the cultural politics performed at specific times and spaces. This emphasizes the importance of framing the audiopolitics of social movements as a means to disclose a public discourse on cultural systems. It reinforces the 'political process' model of social movements, which highlights how movements respond to the broader structure of political constraints and opportunities (McAdam 1983).

In the wake of the Indonesia's Corrupted Reform movement in 2019, songs and performances that articulate political views continue to be produced and performed in various ways. While it is challenging to directly measure their impact on social movements, these musical works contribute to a persistent narrative supporting democratic agendas in Indonesia. Social movements studies often measure success by tangible change. Yet at the time of writing this article, the Indonesian governmental elites persist in suppressing democratic progress. This trend seems to intensify as the 2024 election approaches, with the consolidation of power seeming to be first on their agenda. Additionally, neoliberal forces remain influential in the practices of popular music culture.

However, studies of social movements should also account for the multiplicity of cultural regimes and forms influencing resistance performances within society, regardless of formal political success. As I have shown through the notion of musicking, democratic discourses can manifest in smaller, community-centered musical performances.

These performances, along with various other forms of activism by politically conscious musicians, represent potential forces from below that can foster cognitive and affective awareness about the urgency of social change, powering ideas into practice for the publics. This embodied, musicking social movement culture can promote an enactment of anarchist values in the present (Graeber 2008; 2009), generating social structures that mirror the desired future and fostering supportive communities where resources and care are shared voluntarily. Anarchism, in this context, is not just about opposition, but about creating new, autonomous ways of living that disrupt hierarchies and power structures, thereby transforming everyday life. Living out the values and systems they hope to create in the future within their current actions (Shantz 2010, 154), such practices could potentially contribute to maintaining democratic integrity, just as they did at the time when this article was written. Uncoincidentally, some of the musicians discussed here were actively involved in the *Indonesia Darurat* (Emergency Indonesia, 2024) protests throughout August and September 2024, which were sparked by President Jokowi's efforts to consolidate power and establish a political dynasty toward the end of his presidential term. If Indonesian civil society's audiopolitics are not lured into the neoliberal world of popular music production, the democratic sounds of Indonesian grassroots politics will continue to be heard.

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