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Understanding the Role of
**Indonesian
Millennials**
in Shaping the Nation's Future

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EDITED BY

JU-LAN THUNG

MARIA MONICA WIHARDJA



BRIN
NATIONAL RESEARCH
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Introduction

Understanding the Role of Indonesian Millennials in Shaping a Nation's Future

Ju-Lan Thung and Maria Monica Wihardja

Millennials or Generation Y—those born between 1981 and 1996—represent the population cohort who are moving into the prime of their careers and lives. It is this generation that is being groomed to take up leadership roles in various sectors of society. How millennials mature and develop, the values they hold and the capabilities they acquire will be crucial determinants of the outlook for a nation going forward. Millennials may not be digital natives, but they have grown up amid what is known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution—the current era where virtually every industry is being transformed by the exponential pace of technological change and digitalization. Unprecedented technological changes and what is known as hyper-globalization have caused disruptions to cultural and societal norms. The values and work ethics of millennials are shaped by their exposure to digital social media (Smith and Nichols 2015; Tulgan 2016). These characteristics—their exposure to technology and their world views, among others—place a huge gap between millennials and previous generations. As Hoffman (2017) and Tulgan (2016) have noted, millennials are the most misunderstood among the generations, particularly by their parents' and grandparents' generations, the Generation X and baby boomers.

In Indonesia, those from the millennial generation are slated to take up positions as leaders in various important spheres of society—from

the political, economic and business spheres to the education, arts and culture sectors. Experiencing the prime of their lives amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic, millennials have acutely experienced disruptions to their family and working lives as well as ways of doing business.

Indonesia's demographic changes call for understanding the intergenerational gap that is at the core of the so-called millennial disruptions. The gap is a complex one—it exists not only between different generations but also between the millennials living in rural areas and those living in urban areas, as well as between rich and poor millennials. Several phenomena might indicate where to look in order to understand what has changed and how such change has disrupted our lives. Firstly, technology has created closer relationships between those separated by distance while making strangers of those living in close proximity to one another. Consequently, family and people-to-people relations have changed to the extent that the well-known solidarity of the Indonesian people, *gotong-royong*, has been completely redefined by the millennials. Millennials use different tools to empower and help each other. Secondly, materialism has taken hold of our lives to the extent that competition for acquiring material possessions, particularly IT gadgets, has become intense, even among youths in rural areas. The Internet and mobile phones are no longer luxuries but necessities. Thirdly, the Internet has created not only an instantaneous flow of information but also an overload of information (or “infodemic”) that people are unable to digest properly, let alone evaluate for accuracy and truthfulness. Consequently, hoaxes and disinformation have begun to circulate extensively over the past five years, indicating the detrimental influences of digital technology on our lives.

Moreover, the impact of hyper-globalization and increasingly cosmopolitan lifestyles have shaped the worldviews of, and sense of identity among, Indonesian millennials, affecting their interpretation of religion, art and heritage, and their engagement with global issues and challenges, such as climate change and gender equality. The rise of globalization and the growing pervasiveness of online religious communities have influenced traditional religious values and social cohesion. As new religious ideologies emerge, the observance of religious rituals in some cases has begun to differ across communities professing the same faith. Differences in ideology and religious practice have resulted in growing polarization between conservatives and progressives, the increasing exploitation of religion for

political ends, and the increasing difficulty of promoting moderation in religion. Such changes may also affect the religious views and activities of Indonesian millennials.

Indonesian millennials have generally grown up in the post-Soeharto period of socio-political change known as *Reformasi* and have been at the forefront of Indonesia's democratic transition. "Millennial generation" became a trending issue during and after the Jakarta gubernatorial election of 2012, when millennials campaigned through social media for Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), now Indonesia's president, and his running mate, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok"), who eventually won the election. The millennials' social media campaign was discussed as a new trend in Indonesian politics, particularly after many of them supported Jokowi in his bid to become president in 2014. Their important role gained greater prominence soon afterwards with the establishment of Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI, or Indonesian Solidarity Party) as the millennials' political vehicle. However, millennials started to become a national phenomenon when Jokowi attempted to appeal to unicorn start-up companies, many of which were founded by millennials, to win his second presidential election in 2019, where young generations made up a significant share of the eligible voters. Jokowi even introduced seven millennials aged 23–36, some of whom were start-up founders, as his special staffers when he started his second term in November 2019. This generation, in the mid-twenties to early forties, is now in a position to contend for the country's political leadership. How they think about politics and governance will be pivotal in Indonesia's political development in the future.

In industry and the business sector, Indonesian millennials have been forging alternative paths and innovations in the digital economy. Millennial business leaders have catalysed Indonesia's buzzing start-up scene. In the last few years before COVID-19 struck, we saw the rapid development of online businesses such as Gojek, Bukalapak, Tokopedia and eFishery. How these start-ups develop, grow and lead in these areas will influence Indonesia's economic dynamism in the coming years.

In the field of art and culture, we see that Indonesia's millennials, who have been raised in a globalized culture, have brought disruption not just in the art production process and in how art is enjoyed itself, but also in the art market, where the use of cryptocurrencies has revolutionized the transaction and ownership process. Even though this artistic revolution can be seen as a new interpretation of various art forms that adapt to

the conditions of each era, three dimensions of art, namely art objects, art creators and art audiences continue to be involved in the process of acculturation, inculturation and cultural transformation through a continuous process of dialogue and synthesis across generations. The continuation of dialogue between the traditional and the contemporary has led Indonesia's millennials to a greater propensity to search for their local identity, which in turn brings them closer to Indonesia's traditional heritage and culture. We might find the involvement of this generation in various activities that empower local culture such as the creation of Indonesian anime. Clearly, art and science are close to young people's hearts and minds, a trend that was reflected in 14,000 innovations by youths (branded as "Insan BRILJian MUDA") submitted to the Millennial Innovation Summit 2020, an event organized by a government body (CNBC Indonesia 2020).

Few studies have been conducted to understand the role of millennials in Indonesia's social, economic and political landscape today. The first book on Indonesia's millennials was written by Dr Muhammad Faisal, the founder of Youth Laboratory Indonesia. The book, titled *Generasi Phi: Memahami Milenial Pengubah Indonesia* (The Phi Generation: Understanding Millennials, the Transformers of Indonesia), was published in 2017. According to the writer, the book was intended as "a public narration to stimulate changes". It was followed by the 2018 book *Mempersiapkan Generasi Milenial ala Psikolog: Kiat-kiat Pendidikan Anak bagi Orang Tua and Guru* (Preparing the Millennial Generation in a Psychological Way: Child Education Tips for Parents and Teachers), written by a team of lecturers from the Psychology Faculty of Atmajaya University in Jakarta, and another book in the same year titled *Statistik Gender Tematik: Profil Generasi Milenial Indonesia* (Thematic Gender Statistics: Profile of Indonesia's Millennial Generation) and published by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection in cooperation with Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) or the Central Agency on Statistics. A 2019 book by Tsamara Aman et al. of PSI that was intended to explain millennials' political expression is *Ekspresi Politik Milenial: Dari Anak-Anak Muda untuk Indonesia* (Millennials' Political Expression: From Young People for Indonesia).

This book is the outcome of a webinar we conducted on 15–16 August 2022 titled “Millennial Disruptions: Understanding the Role of Indonesian Millennials in Shaping a Rapidly Changing World”. It was jointly organized by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and the Research Center for Society and Culture, Indonesian National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN). The webinar covered six broad themes: (1) Defining and debating millennials: Demography, worldview and consciousness; (2) How Indonesia’s millennials are changing politics in Indonesia; (3) How Indonesia’s millennials are changing the economy and business in Indonesia; (4) Millennials in culture and heritage; (5) Millennials’ art and artists; and (6) Millennials’ religious engagement. Twenty-five speakers addressed these themes and generated lively discussions. A total of 329 participants attended the two-day event.

Through a careful selection process, we picked nine of the papers presented at the webinar for inclusion in this book. One of the chapters covers the demographic theme, two cover the political theme, two touch on the economic aspect, two cover the religious aspect and two cover the theme of art. The selection was intended to provide a broad picture of the role of millennials in a changing Indonesia. But each chapter also draws attention to the generational differences between millennials and previous generations.

Does technological development really change the behaviour of millennials? Or is the growing adoption of technology just one reflection of the kind of socio-political, demographic and other changes that occur from one generation to another? We pose these two questions as areas worth pondering over not just when reading this book but also as a continuation of it.

Meirina Ayumi Malamassam and **Yuly Astuti** in Chapter 1 examine the generational differences in the occurrence and timing of life course events that mark the transition to adulthood, including first marital union, entry into the labour force and migration. They seek to find out the extent to which the demographic behaviours of young Indonesian adults can be explained by generational differences. They find that the remarkable variation in educational attainment across the generations has a significant impact on demographic behaviours over time. Moreover, the expansion of labour market opportunities, including digital jobs, and the improvement of regional connectivity in recent years may have influenced generational differences in life course events.

Kurniawati H. Dewi and **Ahmad Helmy Fuady** discuss in Chapter 2 the growing political participation of Indonesian millennials, particularly their participation in the 2020 direct local election (*pilkada langsung*). They provide detailed explanations of the winning strategies of millennials who have been assuming political office at the local level as district heads or vice heads. However, the writers' main concern is the fact that these millennial leaders represent a continuation of dynastic politics.

For their part, **Muhammad Fajar**, **An Nisa Astuti** and **C. Bregas Pranoto** explore in Chapter 3 the institutional foundations of youth organizations and highlight some of their progressive characteristics. The authors conclude, on the basis of an online survey and in-depth interviews, that even though millennials as youth activists have been drivers of a progressive agenda, they lack a broad social base. The authors argue that youth organizations require a stronger organizational foundation (better work distribution, wider geographical networks, as well as long-term education programmes) in order to bring about any societal change.

In Chapter 4, **Ibrahim Kholilul Rohman**, **Raka Rizky Fadilla**, **Kevin Bagas Ksatria** and **Feisal Nadhirrahman** study how financial literacy affects risk behaviours towards investment in various financial products across generations. They address the question of whether Indonesia's younger generations are financially illiterate or so literate that they become more risk-tolerant in managing their portfolios. The authors find that, compared with Generation X, i.e., those born between 1965 and 1980, Gen Y as well as Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2010) have higher financial awareness of most financial products, including the high-risk asset types such as cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens. However, higher financial awareness of certain financial products does not mean they own more of these financial products compared with Gen X. For example, even though those from Gen Y know more about cryptocurrencies and NFTs than the Gen X do, they prefer to spend their money on lower-risk financial products, such as mutual funds, bonds and gold but not insurance products. This finding also shows a significantly weaker relationship between awareness and the level of ownership of financial products for Gen Z, compared with Gen X. It indicates that Gen Z youths, despite being generally more knowledgeable of various financial products, do not necessarily own more of these products.

The digital divide exists not only in terms of device ownership and access but also in terms of digital competency. Besides owning financial products, some millennials are able to use their digital competence to exploit the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital economy and establish micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Focusing on West Bandung District, **Diana Sari** and **Caecilia Suprapti Dwi Takariani** in Chapter 5 compare the digital competence of business actors among the millennial generation to that of business actors from other generations. Their findings show that there is a significant relationship between digital competence and the education of millennial MSME actors although some elements of digital competence such as ethics and responsibility are not directly correlated with education. Additionally, the study found that Gen X individuals with higher education exhibit significantly higher levels of collaboration competency.

Two separate chapters examining the religiosity of Indonesian millennials show the interesting differences between this generation and their predecessors in responding to religious authorities and in their spiritual journey to embrace the adulthood process of “social becoming”. Examining the views of millennials on the cryptocurrency economy and their responses to the *fatwas* issued by the Islamic authorities that declared cryptocurrencies to be haram, **Endi Aulia Garadian** and **Harun Arrasyid** formulated five typologies, ranging from Sharia compliance and reinterpreting *fiqh* (the body of juristic interpretations of Islamic law) to spiritual opportunism and spiritual relativism. Through their classification, the authors found that most millennials view the *fatwas* as religious opinions, not as legally binding exhortations. Their views are carried in Chapter 6.

Fuji Riang Prastowo’s chapter, on the other hand, locates the religious identity of digital natives within several concepts in youth studies, particularly relating to the transitional phase to adulthood, when digital natives are vulnerable to identity crises revolving around religion. He found that Buddhism has become the favourite choice of many Indonesian millennials who claim to be agnostics and atheists while studying meditation, yoga, veganism and other characteristics of the Buddhist lifestyle. The reason for their partiality towards Buddhism is that its doctrines are organically based on secular culture and rationality, particularly the so-called *Ehipassiko* principle of critical thinking, and inclusive of all types of youth identity, including sexual identity. Moreover,

there are no absolute conversion rules in Buddhism, that is, conversion to Buddhism does not entail renouncing one's original religion, so anyone can learn Buddhism without having to leave the religion taught by their parents. As such, Fuji Riang Prastowo concludes in Chapter 7 that while experiencing spiritual disruption, some millennials negotiate their identity by converting to Buddhism or reconstructing a hybrid identity in a process of self-discovery.

In Chapter 8, **Chabib Duta Hapsoro** addresses participatory art among millennials, which differs from that of previous generations. He argues that while taking cues from an existing tradition that has emerged organically in Indonesia, millennials develop their own form of participatory art practices. The dominant discourse fails to provide a sufficient perspective on millennial artists, who are only seen as dealing with recent opportunities in virtual and commercialized art distribution under the blockchain system. Millennial artists who practise participatory art no longer fit into one rigid ideological categorization, particularly since they encounter more complicated challenges today: the neoliberal economy and education regime, a commercialized and depoliticized art sphere, and regional feudalism, among others.

In the past decade, the art industry has been one of many sectors influenced heavily by the presence of platforms for non-fungible tokens (NFTs)—that is, unique digital objects validated and protected by a digital encryption technology known as blockchain, which guarantees the authenticity of digital transactions. Many, including Indonesian millennial artists, have quickly responded to the NFT phenomenon with a view to utilizing the technology as a medium for publishing their artworks. In Chapter 9, **Genardi Atmadiredja** and his colleagues from Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency discuss how millennial artists respond to NFT technology and the impact of NFTs on their art creation process. Their findings show both opportunities and challenges for Indonesian millennial artists in the NFT world. The opportunities include direct access to the NFT digital art market; flexible time; wider freedom of expression; the potential for networking and collaborating between fellow artists and collectors; and an inclusive space for women. The challenges include lack of regulation; instability of cryptocurrency rates; the threat of cybercrime; and the susceptibility of digital artworks to being lost in cyberspace or being copied without authorization.

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