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## *Unlocking Indonesia's Diplomatic Potential: The Growing Role of Parliamentary Diplomacy*

**Nida Rubini<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

The Indonesian House of Representatives is poised to enhance its diplomatic role through parliamentary diplomacy, a less formal and more issue-oriented approach that complements traditional state diplomacy. Empowered by law and with a history of international engagement since Indonesia's independence, the House actively participates in various inter-parliamentary organizations and global forums to represent the nation's perspectives and convey grassroots concerns. Parliamentary diplomacy serves four key roles: overseeing foreign policy, engaging in diplomatic activities, involving international and regional organizations, and disseminating global issues to the grassroots. Despite challenges such as balancing national interests with multilateral cooperation and skepticism about its effectiveness, parliamentary diplomacy offers opportunities for growth, including increased funding for delegations, training for parliamentarians, and public awareness campaigns. This approach allows Indonesia to address global challenges, integrate international agreements with national policies, and ensure the voices of its citizens are heard in international decision-making.

**Keywords:** *The Indonesian House of Representatives, parliamentary diplomacy, inter-parliamentary cooperation, second-track diplomacy, DPR-RI*

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As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the role of legislative bodies in shaping foreign policy and international discourse has never been more pertinent. The Indonesian Parliament, The Indonesian House of Representatives, with its diverse representation and capacity for agile action, is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between government-led diplomacy and the multifaceted challenges of the modern world. Within this context, we must consider the untapped potential of Indonesia's parliamentary diplomacy. This potential promises a more integrated approach to global issues, transcending the limitations of formal diplomatic channels. The main argument of this article is that Indonesian parliamentary diplomacy, with its less protocol-bound and more issue-oriented nature, holds numerous unlocked and unexplored opportunities to bolster the government's diplomatic efforts, facilitate the efficient adaptation of international agreements to national policies, and disseminate international issues to the grassroots level.

### **Parliamentary Diplomacy: What Makes it Different?**

In parallel with globalization, the extensification of transnational issues requires a more extensive approach involving a broader spectrum of stakeholders. Along with this phenomenon, political internationalization in the form of international governance, cooperation, and institutions has also grown in the number and scope of issues (Kraft-Kasack, 2008, p. 534). Nevertheless, there is an international governance gap, where decisions with far-reaching consequences are made without the direct involvement of the global citizenry. In a democratic system, the legislature and its constituent political parties are pivotal in formulating policies with wide-ranging implications for domestic governance and international diplomatic engagements.

Parliamentary diplomacy is hence important in ensuring citizens are represented sufficiently in the international decision-making process, given that parliamentary representation is one of the most important tools for people's representation in modern democracies (Kraft-Kasack, 2008, p. 535). Parliamentary diplomacy represents a unique and increasingly significant form of international engagement characterized by direct interaction between representative bodies acting on behalf of their people. Domestically, parliamentary diplomacy is also important as the parliaments serve as the primary platform for the executive branch to rationalize fiscal allocations and strategic initiatives and counter critiques posited by rival factions (Rüland & Ruffin, 2024, p. 247). Parliaments' participation in foreign policy activities traditionally conducted by the executive per se will increase transparency in this issue.

Stavrivis and Jarcic (2017) define parliamentary diplomacy as parliamentarians' individual or collective actions to catalyze, facilitate, and strengthen the parliament's constitutional functions through dialogue with other parliamentarians on policy questions across national and levels of governance. Unlike traditional state diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy offers more flexibility to address complex issues (Indicators for Democratic Parliament, 2024). Traditional government diplomacy is often conducted through formal channels involving heads of state, foreign ministers, and ambassadors. Meanwhile, parliamentary diplomacy is exercised by legislators who bring diverse perspectives and expertise (Indicators for Democratic Parliament, 2024). Parliamentarians are always perceived as representatives of the people, so differences among parliamentarians in viewing certain issues are common and acceptable. This makes discussing difficult topics more fluid as more solution alternatives and perspectives are available.

In this sense, parliamentary diplomacy complements the main track of state diplomacy (Jaskiernia, 2022, p. 85). The Speakers of the Indonesian House of Representatives, Puan Maharani, called parliamentary diplomacy the necessary synergy within the government and as part of the international community in tackling global issues (VOI.id, 2023). The term synergy also indicates that to conduct parliamentary diplomacy, parliament will still heavily rely on the support of the executive in terms of organizational and logistics matters. Furthermore, regular information exchanges are also necessary to uphold national interests even though diplomacy is conducted through different channels (Zamfir, 2019, p. 1).

In order to reach its main aim, to strengthen the parliament's constitutional functions (Stavridis & Jančić, 2017), parliamentary diplomacy is deployed to fulfill four parliament roles (Cofelice, 2017). The first role is to enhance the parliament's capacity to oversee their government's foreign policy. Secondly, parliamentary diplomacy is conducted through diplomatic activities at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. Third, parliamentary diplomacy is conducted by involving international and regional organizations. Lastly, and most importantly, through parliamentary diplomacy, the parliament delivers the concerns and messages of the grassroots to international and regional organizations (Cofelice, 2017).

### **The Indonesian House of Representatives Conduct of Parliamentary Diplomacy**

The Indonesian House of Representatives' mandate to conduct parliamentary diplomacy is based on Law No. 37/ 1999 on International Relations, which mentions The Indonesian House of Representatives as a sub-state international relations organizer. The Law on Indonesia Parliament No.

17/2014 also states that the House supports foreign policy and mandates that the Committee for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation conduct parliamentary diplomacy (BKSAP DPR RI, 2024). However, Indonesia's active involvement in transnational parliamentary diplomacy can be traced back to even earlier independence. The House is a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the largest inter-parliamentary organization, since 1959. The involvement in IPU was used as a lobby forum to strengthen Indonesia's stance in international politics as a newly independent country. The House has also formed the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, a committee dedicated to coordinating inter-parliamentary cooperation, since 1979.

To oversee foreign policy, the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee for Inter-parliamentary Cooperation become crucial. They shall optimize and oversee capacity building and knowledge sharing with their international counterparts. The Indonesian House of Representatives uses parliamentary diplomacy to closely engage and cooperate with its international counterparts in knowledge sharing and capacity building on many issues. For instance, Indonesia is an active member of Global Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) and Southeast Asia Parliamentarians Against Corruption (SEAPAC). Both organizations facilitate capacity building for anti-corruption issues of the member parliament in cooperation with other regional parliamentary organizations and international non-governmental organizations. Regarding climate change issues, The Indonesian House also, in collaboration with global counterparts, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, conducts joint research and seminars on increasing the House's role in supporting Indonesia's national climate action (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023).

To enhance its oversight practice, the Indonesian House members have also actively participated as national delegates in significant international forums, including the United Nations General Assembly, the Conference of the Parties (COP) on climate change, and the Group of Twenty (G20) summits. The House's involvement ensures that Indonesian perspectives and interests are represented and that the voices of its citizens are integrated into the global dialogue. For instance, during the 10<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum held in Bali on May 2024, The Indonesian House prepared a parliamentary session emphasizing the importance of political solutions to water challenges and underscoring the role of parliaments in driving concrete solutions at international levels (World Water Forum, 2024). As a concrete follow-up to strengthen its role in water issues through the political national process, the Committee for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation has also created a Water Caucus.

Since the 1950s, the growth of parliamentary assemblies at regional and multilateral levels has grown in number and scope issues. Such transnational parliamentary assemblies are assemblies of

parliamentarians from different countries who work in a certain adopted working mechanism. Some assemblies are also linked to intergovernmental organizations as their oversight mechanism (Kraft-Kasack, 2008, p. 535). Currently, the Indonesian House of Representatives is an active member of several regional and international transnational parliamentary organizations and forums such as IPU, Asia Parliamentary Assembly (APA), ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA), Parliament-20 (P-20) Forum, and Parliamentary Union of OIC Member Countries (PUIC). Some assemblies have their secretariat and scheduled meetings and assemblies, while others are organized on the sidelines of government meetings and assemblies, such as the United Nations Parliamentary Hearing and Parliamentary Conference on the WTO (PC-WTO). The Indonesian House of Representatives is also the Committee coordinating the bilateral friendship group of 102 countries. The bilateral friendship group aims to directly engage with other parliamentary counterparts to support and enhance bilateral relations between Indonesia and other countries.

The flexibility and informality of parliamentary diplomacy offer distinct advantages over traditional government diplomacy. Parliamentarians can engage with a wider range of local stakeholders and communicate on more sensitive issues with fewer constraints (Zamfir, 2019). Parliamentarians are crucial in translating global issues into local understanding and action. Sustainable development, water crisis, and climate change are among the problems that The Indonesian House of Representatives has actively voiced through parliamentary diplomacy. Since 2010, the House had a Working Committee on Millenium Development Goals, renamed the Working Committee on Sustainable Development Goals. The committee serves as a part of a global partnership to achieve the development goals, in which it not only actively participates in discussions and conferences on the attainment of the goals in international forums but also serves as the parliament focal point in coordinating the national attainment of the goals.

Further, the committee is also responsible for disseminating information on MDGs and SDGs to society and regional government through working visits and recess constituent visits. At the same time, the committee also responsible in absorbing grassroots concerns over the issue, which will be later included in the international forum (BKSAP DPR RI, 2019). Disseminating transboundary issues to the grassroots level profoundly affects policy-making and public opinion. When international issues are communicated effectively locally, it can lead to more informed public discourse, influencing policy decisions and priorities.

## **Challenges and Way Ahead**

While offering a unique platform for international engagement, parliamentary diplomacy faces several challenges in today's complex geopolitical landscape. One of the primary challenges is the balancing act between maintaining national interests and engaging in multilateral cooperation. Despite its potential benefits, parliamentary diplomacy also faces criticisms and challenges within the government and the public. Skepticism about the effectiveness and accountability of parliamentary engagements abroad may hinder the full realization of Indonesia's diplomatic goals through parliamentary channels.

Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities for growth in parliamentary diplomacy. The Indonesian House of Representatives must strengthen its most unique diplomatic features to serve as a hub for international issues in society and vice versa, ensuring grassroots concerns are voiced within the transnational decision-making discursive mechanism. Parliamentary diplomacy offers a unique opportunity to complement and enhance government-led initiatives by engaging directly with foreign counterparts, civil society organizations, and international institutions. By leveraging parliamentarians' networks and expertise, Indonesia can expand its diplomatic reach and influence on the global stage. To maximize the impact of parliamentary diplomacy, Indonesia should consider increasing funding and resources for parliamentary delegations, providing training and capacity building for parliamentarians involved in foreign affairs, and launching public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of parliamentary engagement in international relations. Parliamentary diplomacy continues the parliament's engagement in national issues and inspires domestic constitutional values (Jančić & Stauridēs, 2017, pp. 105–106).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Indonesia's parliamentary diplomacy stands as a beacon of potential in international relations, poised to harness its historical legacy and current capabilities to address global challenges. The flexibility and issue-oriented nature of parliamentary diplomacy offer a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between international agreements and national policies, ensuring that the voices of the Indonesian people are heard and considered on the world stage. Effectively disseminating transboundary issues to the grassroots can solidify Indonesia's diplomatic stance while strengthening policy impact on the people.

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