

Securitizing the Commons: Water Crisis and the Problems of Governance in Yogyakarta

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by **Tadzkia Nurshafira**

Research Assistant

Programme on Humanitarian Action (PoHA)

Institute of International Studies,

Universitas Gadjah Mada

tadzkia.nurshafira@mail.ugm.ac.id

“Who can live without water?”

Such a question is pivotal to highlight the essential role of water in sustaining life. We often take water for granted: water seems abundant as some people in society have not yet faced any difficulty in accessing it. Yet, in many parts of the world, people do have difficulties to access water. Around 1.8 billion people consume water contaminated with fecal material and therefore have to cope with waterborne diseases ([WHO and UNICEF, 2014](#)). Unsafe water, poor sanitation, and hygiene cause around 842,000 deaths in 2012 ([WHO, 2014](#)). Meanwhile, 663 million people still lack of access to good-quality drinking water sources ([WHO and UNICEF, 2015](#)). By 2050, close to 70% of the world’s population will live in cities, compared to 54% today ([United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2014](#)). Most cities in developing countries do not have adequate infrastructure and resources to address wastewater management in an efficient and sustainable way ([UN Water, 2017](#)). All these have enable water crisis to pave its way onto the global agenda of the United Nations ([Weiner, 2007](#)).

Water Crisis in Yogyakarta

The impact of water crisis can also be felt in Yogyakarta. Since 2015, 15 subdistricts in Gunungkidul, 6 in Bantul, 5 in Kulon Progo, 2 in Sleman, and 5 in Kota Yogyakarta ([Himawan, 2016](#)) are declared prone to the crisis. According to the Provincial Environmental Agency (BLH,

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Badan Lingkungan Hidup), 70 percents of the water wells are built in areas contaminated by E-Coli (Putra, 2016; Priambodo, 2016). Moreover, the surface of the province’s ground water is continuously decreasing up to 30 centimeter per year¹, which becomes another symptom that Yogyakarta is going to face a water catastrophe both in terms of its quantity and quality. This brought us to a moment of contemplation: *what is to be done to improve the way we manage our water resources?*

UNESCO (2006) and UNDP (2004) stated that the current global water crisis is not merely caused by the lack of water supply, but rather by a failure in water governance. There is actually enough water for everyone, but we do not have the governance to ensure its just and sustainable distribution. According to Castro (2007), water governance consists of interactions among governments, large businesses, political parties, civil and other organizations representing sectoral interests, international agencies, NGOs, and other relevant powerholders. These actors involve in political contestation around how water provision and water services should be best governed. At another scale, governance also has to touch upon low and high political

issues (Commission on Growth and Development, 2010) which eventually will shape its public saliency. Thus we can observe how water is governed justly or unjustly by looking at two aspects: (1) the involvement of the myriad of actors in the political contestation behind water provision as well as (2) how each actor benefits from a certain way of constructing and framing the water crisis issue.

The shift from government or state-centric management to democratic water governance that emphasizes on participatory, decentralized, networks, communities, and informal ways of managing challenges (Gupta & Pahl-Wostl, 2013) is needed to handle the problem of unjust water distribution. Democratic water governance meets its profundity in the concept of water citizenship, which refers to the discursive processes and institutional practices through which water users create membership, belonging, and loyalty to water supplies and water infrastructure through which they distribute, govern, and manage water (Neveu et al. 2011 in Paerregaard et al. 2016). Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom and former UN Water Advisor Maude Barlow introduced how water citizenship is deeply tied to the recognition of water as human rights and as common goods (Dargantes, Manahan, Moss, & Suresh, 2012). As common goods, water must be accessible and managed by people. People will treat water resources with greater care because they draw benefits from it and take part in deciding for whom and how the resource is used. This enables greater space for political participation beyond technocratic approach. This act of voluntarism is also an exercise of citizenship (Masri, 2015) or the force of ‘commoning water’. Exercising water citizenship means ensuring the role of civil society in water governance.

To do so, a certain framing might be needed to justify for the deliberate political action needed to exercise water citizenship. Framing the issue under the realm of security, known as securitization, could be seen further as an

¹ Speech by Halik Sandera, Coordinator of WALHI Yogyakarta in the opening session of Stakeholder Forum (Forum Pemangku Kepentingan: Membangun Tata Kelola Air Berkeadilan di Yogyakarta. Perspektif Masyarakat Sipil) initiated by Programme on Humanitarian Action Universitas Gadjah Mada, held on 2nd of February 2017.

advocacy strategy that can be beneficial by tying water issue to people's survival; understand it as an existential threat to referent objects who need to be protected (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998). Securitization provides justification for state to take extraordinary measure on decision, public policy, and resource allocation—beyond normal political procedure—to relieve the threat imminently and put the issue on a high priority. By securitizing the water crisis issue, the action taken would be about survival and the need to save all referent objects, shifting from the level of politicization which put an issue as a choice to handle rather than an existential threat which need a promptly measure. Hence, securitization requires the existence of (1) securitizing actor—who decide and give a speech act to label some issues in security domain (McDonald, 2008; Weaver 1995 in Abrahamsen 2005) and (2) audience—the acceptance from targets as the essence to the success of securitization (McDonald 2008). The challenge is how to ensure that water securitization can lead to democratic water governance. Securitizing water crisis on the one hand can compel the government to handle the problem with extraordinary mechanism, but on the other hand this process should not risk the communal nature of water. Involving people in the process of protecting water becomes crucial.

Looking at how Yogyakarta's water governance has evolved, two aspects are worth noting. First, there is a limited effort among civil society to link water issue with

human security. Current debates are revolving around the frame of justice and human rights, which is necessary but not sufficient. People must emphasize more on the existential threat dimension of water crisis by linking water access as essential to survival and right to life. Such framing is needed not only to gain state's attention to the issue, but also to increase the broader society's awareness of the importance of water management for their survival. While striving for justice and rights, framing water crisis as a security issue will put people as the referent object.

Second, as water crisis occurs under the condition of lack water governance, identifying the origin of the crisis as a threat might be crucial to the act of securitization. In Yogyakarta, some critical issues can be addressed as the sources of threat: (1) the absence of regulation to protect water access for people from private sector and to ensure the sustainability of communitys' initiatives; (2) the lack of states' transparency in regards to the building of commercial infrastructures which impact to the contestation of water using; (3) the lack of communities' social control to anticipate the market domination in water governance; as well as (4) the less involvement of civil society in water management and policy.

These issues essentially show the state's lack of capacity and political will in fulfilling its basic responsibility to provide water for all citizens and in ensuring democratic water governance. The problem of water crisis therefore comes from the state's ignorance and the less-democratic governance that becomes a source of existential



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threat to the lives of the people. As the threat is coming from the state, the securitization of water issues should demand for extraordinary solution from actors outside the state circle (Hadiwinata, 2004).

It is the civil society in Yogyakarta who has to play their active role as citizens to fulfill the gap made by the state; they should underline the commonality of water by securitizing the access of water as necessary for survival, while demanding the government attention to a more-democratic water governance and greater participation in the policy-making process. In other words, water securitization will lead to democratic water governance as people become aware to the origin of threat in the states' governance system and actively demand on a more democratic one while relentlessly participate in creating alternatives for community-based water management. A democratic handling under the realm of security is indeed a challenge, thus people need to make sure the principle of water commons are always respected in the process of protecting water.

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Erratum:

In the version of this article initially published, the date was incorrect. The correct date is March 2017. The error has been corrected in the PDF version of the article.

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