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The Role of the Middle Class in Indonesia's Political and Economic Transformation

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Article

Abstract

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Dalam catatan sejarah keberadaan kelas menengah di masyarakat sering mempengaruhi proses perubahan sosial dan politik, baik di dalam maupun di luar negeri. Sejarah revolusi Perancis yang di tandai dengan adanya revolusi Industri menandai perubahan social yang terjadi pada masyarakat Eropa yang di motori oleh kelas menengah. Sejarah di Indonesia juga menunjukkan posisi kaum menengah menempati posisi sentral dalam menetukan proses perubahan sosial di tengah masyarakat. Dalam penelitian menggunakan pendekatan yuridis normatif, di mana pengolahan data penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kepustakaan. Dalam konteks transformasi politik dan ekonomi, masyarakat kelas menengah di Indonesia juga selalu menjadi faktor penentu dalam mewarnai proses pelaksanaan pemilihan presiden dan wakil presiden, pemilihan anggota legislatif maupun pemilihan kepala daerah.

Kata kunci: Masyarakat, Menengah, Tranformasi, Politik

In historical records, the existence of the middle class in society often influences the process of social and political change, both at home and abroad. The history of the French revolution marked by the Industrial Revolution marked the social changes that occurred in European society driven by the middle class. History in Indonesia also shows that the position of the middle class occupies a central position in determining the process of social change in society. In the study using a normative legal approach, where the processing of research data uses a library approach. In the context of political and economic transformation, the middle class in Indonesia has also always been a determining factor in coloring the process of implementing presidential and vice presidential elections, legislative elections and regional head elections

Keywords: Social; Middle, Tranformation, Politics

INDROCTION

The middle class in Indonesia has a unique position in the context of state and politics. On the one hand, the middle class is considered the driving force of change towards democracy and political stability.¹ On the other hand, their involvement is often ambivalent, depending on social and economic dynamics. Since the Reformation era, the growth of the Indonesian middle class has not only had an impact on the economy, but has also influenced politics, from patterns of political participation to attitudes towards government policies.

This growing middle class society influences and is influenced by political dynamics, state policies, and the direction of economic development. Since the Reformation era, Indonesia has experienced rapid middle class development, marked by increased economic welfare, higher education, and wider access to technology and information. This condition places the middle class as one of the important social and political actors. However, the role of the middle class in Indonesian politics is not entirely clear. In some countries, the middle class is often associated with the forces that drive democracy and social change, but in Indonesia, this class shows more pragmatic characteristics. For example, the middle class tends to prioritize economic and political stability that supports their financial prosperity, rather than fighting for structural changes in politics or government.²

In addition, the middle class also faces ambivalence in political participation. They are active in certain social movements and use social media to voice their opinions on issues such as corruption, the environment, and human rights. However, this involvement is often temporary and inconsistent, depending on their immediate economic interests or social needs. The middle class also faces challenges from the influence of oligarchic powers and elite economic interests, which often limit the impact of their political engagement. As a result, although the number and influence of the middle class is increasing, their role in supporting democracy and deeper political reform is still limited.³

This middle class group was born from the roots of long resistance to the authoritarian regime and now corruption. That confirms that they are a middle class group that is activist-reactive in nature. The rationality that they put forward is to make social changes according to the current reality that touches on affection and emotion. Therefore, this middle class is included in the category of swing voters in Indonesian politics.⁴

¹ Qorry Aina, (2018). *Membaca Kelas Menengah Muslim Indonesia*, Jurnal Politik: Vol.3: Iss. 2, Article 6. DOI: 10.7454/jp.v3i2.1091

² Warburton, E. (2016). *Jokowi dan Developmentalisme Baru*. Buletin Studi Ekonomi Indonesia , 52 (3), 297–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2016.1249262>

³ Bulkin, Farchan. (1984). "Kapitalisme, Golongan Menengah, dan Negara. Sebuah Catatan Penelitian." Prisma 2.

⁴ Jati, W. R. (2016). Kelas menengah dalam bingkai middle Indonesia. *Jurnal Politik*, 1(2), 6.

FOCUS OF PROBLEMS

From the background explanation above, the author can take the formulation of the problem to be discussed further in this paper:

1. How can the Indonesian middle class become a consistent force in encouraging democracy and substantial political change?
2. What is the role of pragmatic groups that focus more on economic stability than political transformation?

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used is the library study method, which is a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading, recording and processing research materials. The four main characteristics of library study research are:

First, that researchers are directly dealing with texts (manuscripts) or numerical data, not with direct knowledge from the field. *Second*, library data is "ready to use" meaning that researchers do not go directly to the field because researchers are directly dealing with data sources in the library. *Third*, that library data is generally a secondary source, in the sense that researchers obtain materials or data from second hand and not original data from first data in the field. *Fourth*, that the condition of library data is not limited by space and time. Based on the above, data collection in research is carried out by reviewing and/or developing several library materials such as journals, books, and documents (both printed and electronic), as well as other data sources and/or information that are considered relevant to research or study.⁵

FINDING & DISCUSSION

A. Indonesian Middle Class Society in Pushing for Democracy and Substantial Political Change.

The middle class is generally understood as a group of people who are between the lower and upper classes, both in terms of economy, education, and social aspirations. In Indonesia, the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) defines the middle class based on criteria such as income, consumption expenditure, and education level, which indicate access to better resources.⁶

⁵ Kadeni, N. S. (2020). Peran UMKM (usaha mikro kecil menengah) dalam meningkatkan kesejahteraan masyarakat. *Equilibrium: Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi dan Pembelajarannya*, 8(2), 191-200.

⁶ Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Indonesia. (2020). Klasifikasi Sosial Ekonomi di Indonesia.

The middle class in Indonesia is often seen as a driving force in the process of democratization and social change. Along with economic development, the Indonesian middle class has grown significantly, both in terms of numbers and social roles. In theory, the middle class is often associated with characteristics that lead to political stability, active participation in politics, and support for democratic principles. However, in the Indonesian context, the role of the middle class in politics tends to be complex and often ambivalent.⁷

According to experts, such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, the middle class is a social group that is between the working class (proletariat) and the upper class (bourgeoisie). In the context of modern capitalism, the middle class consists of various layers such as professionals, civil servants, small businessmen, and individuals with high education and skills. Economically, they have access to adequate financial resources and often have aspirations to improve their social status.

In the introduction to the book "Marxism, Middle Class and Politics; A Debate", Iqra Anugrah reveals two approaches in understanding the middle class. In this case, Iqra tries to explain the origins and character of the Middle Class using the mainstream approach (Talcott Parsons and Max Weber) and the approach from the Marxists themselves.⁸

There are three main approaches that study the middle class, the first is the social stratification approach. This approach tries to see the process of differentiation of individuals and groups in society in a hierarchy that tends to be static. This approach was introduced by Talcott Parsons, who defined social stratification as the ranking and classification of individuals in a social system based on a number of criteria, namely membership in a kinship unit, personal character quality, life achievements, ownership, authority and power

Jeremy Bentham argued that nature provides happiness and an end. Humans always try to increase happiness and reduce their misery. Good is happiness and evil is misery. There is a close relationship between good and evil with happiness and misery. The task of law is to maintain happiness and prevent evil. Specifically, to maintain utility. Bentham felt this living in a period of social, political, and economic change that was raging throughout Western civilization. The industrial revolution, the rise of the middle class in England, and the revolutions in France and America, had given Bentham deep reflective thinking.⁹

⁷ Loekman, Soetrisno, *Pergeseran Dalam Golongan Menengah di Indonesia*. (Yogyakarta: Prisma, 1985).

⁸ Hussein, Muhammad Zaki, "Marxisme, Kelas Menengah dan Politik; Sebuah perdebatan" (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Indopress, 2023). h, 40.

⁹ Darusman, M. Yoyon & Wiyono, Bambang, *Teori dan Sejarah Perkembangan Hukum*. (Tangerang: Unpam Press, 2019). h, 105.

There are several relevant theories to analyze the role of the middle class in politics in Indonesia:

1. Modernization Theory

Modernization theory states that the middle class tends to support democracy because of their involvement in the formal economic sector and higher education. This theory was expressed by Seymour Martin Lipset in his works which stated that democracy and the middle class have a causal relationship, where economic growth gives rise to the middle class which then encourages democratic values.

2. Social Class Theory by Karl Marx and Max Weber

Karl Marx highlighted that the middle class has an ambiguous role in social change because of their position sandwiched between the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. Max Weber added that the middle class has stronger bargaining power because of their education and expertise, which can be used to support or reject existing political power.

As for Max Weber, he relies on the multidimensional assumption of the character of social classes and the relations between them, emphasizing the aspect of life chances. Furthermore, the liberal approach popularized by the World Bank explains that the degree of social class can be measured by income and the middle class for Indonesia is those who earn IDR 1.2-6 million per month

The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) noted that the number of middle-class people in 2024 reached 47.85 million people or around 17.13 percent of the total population of Indonesia. The number has decreased compared to the period before the COVID-19 Pandemic. In 2019, the portion of the middle-class population was still 21.45 percent or around 57.33 million people and fell to 19.82 percent (53.83 million people) in 2021.¹⁰

Karl Marx himself stated in his Manifesto that the middle class society is:

“The middle class – the small proprietors, the small traders, and the small rentiers, the artisans and the peasants – they are all slowly sinking into the proletariat, partly because their small capital is inadequate to operate on the scale of Modern Industry, and they are being squeezed out by the competition of the big capitalists, partly because their special skills are made worthless by the new methods of production. In this way the proletariat is recruited from all classes of society.”

¹⁰ Putra, Dwi Aditya. “*Nasib Kelas Menengah Rentan, Pemerintah Harusnya Turun Tangan*” <https://tirto.id/nasib-kelas-menengah-rentan-pemerintah-harusnya-turun-tangan-g3ov>, diakses pada: Rabu, 11 November 2024, 13.42 WIB.

Concept and Theory of the Middle Class in the view of Karl Marx, this social class is determined by the relationship with the means of production. In the context of capitalism, it is often considered an ambiguous class, including professional workers, managers and small businesses that do not fully own the means of production. In addition, Max Weber's view defines class not only based on economics but also social status and authority. The modern middle class includes professionals, small businessmen, and employees who have access to education and stable jobs, which distinguishes them from the working class.

The characteristics of the middle class in Indonesia are seen from the economic, social and political aspects. In terms of economy, the middle class in Indonesia is defined based on income and consumption patterns, with the ability to purchase goods and services such as property, vehicles, and education or health services. The World Bank defines the middle class as individuals with daily expenses between USD 2-20. Furthermore, from the social side, they have better access to higher education and formal employment, are more integrated with modern culture and global values. Finally, from the political side, the middle class tends to be more politically aware and have active involvement in public issues. They are often the main driving force in civil movements and reforms.¹¹

In practice, the Indonesian middle class shows quite diverse political behavior. In the Reformation era, the middle class played an active role in driving political actions that led to the fall of the New Order. However, in recent years, most of the Indonesian middle class tends to take a pragmatic stance in politics. The middle class in Indonesia often shows ambivalence in politics. On the one hand, they support democracy and reform, but on the other hand, they do not hesitate to support authoritarian political stability if it is considered to be able to maintain a favorable business and economic climate.

B. Indonesian Middle Class Society in Promoting Democracy and Substantial Political Change

The role of pragmatists in political and economic contexts often focuses on maintaining economic stability while foregoing deep political transformation. This group tends to support policies that maintain the status quo, emphasizing economic growth, investment, and social stability as top priorities. They believe that drastic political change can disrupt markets, reduce investor confidence, and trigger social instability.

¹¹ Izzah Umdatul, Iva Yulianti, *Kelas Menengah: Teori, Masalah dan Kritik*. (Surabaya: CV. Jauharoh Darusalam, 2019). h, 69.

In practice, these pragmatists often ally themselves with state bureaucracies, business people, and economic elites to create an environment conducive to investment and trade. An example is the development model in East Asian countries such as China during Deng Xiaoping's reform era, which prioritized economic liberalization while maintaining tight political control.¹²

However, too much focus on economic stability can neglect demands for democratization, human rights, and social justice. This often triggers tensions between progressive groups who want broader political reforms and pragmatists who see economic stability as the main foundation for long-term development.¹³

In this case, the relevance of the middle class in politics and statehood in Indonesia includes:¹⁴

1. As an Agent of Change

The middle class in Indonesia plays an important role in various political events, namely:

- a. The 1998 Reform Movement: The middle class (Professional and Intellectual Students) became the main driving force in demanding the fall of the New Order and the transition to democracy.
- b. Modern Civil Movement: Anti-corruption demonstrations, environmental issues and rejection of policies that are considered not in favor of the people are led by the middle class.

2. Balancer of Democracy

The educated middle class is often a force that pressures the government to implement Good Governance; they can be a balance between the political elite and the lower classes.

3. Consumers and Economic Motors

As the largest consumer class, they are the main driver of national economic growth, the middle class's spending power drives the property, education and technology sectors.

4. Vulnerability to Populism

¹² Aughton, Barry. *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*. Cambridge, (MA: MIT Press, 2007) h. 34.

¹³ Rodrik, Dani. *One Economics, Many Recipes: Globalization, Institutions, and Economic Growth*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). h. 23.

¹⁴ Kurnia Effendi, *Mempersoalkan Kelas Menengah Baru Indonesia*, <https://mapcorner.wg.ugm.ac.id/2017/02/mempersoalkan-kelas-menengah-baru-indonesia/> . Di akses pada Selasa, 19 November 2024. Jam 14.58 WIB.

Although educated, some of the middle class in Indonesia are vulnerable to populist narratives. This can be seen in the context of electoral politics which often uses religious, ethnic and cultural issues to attract their support. The political mindset of the middle class is sometimes inconsistent, depending on their economic and social interests.

Not only that, there are several challenges faced, including:

1. Economic inequality: Although the number of the middle class has survived, many of them are vulnerable to falling back into the lower class due to economic instability, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Political Participation: There is a tendency for political apathy among some of the middle class who feel that politics does not provide direct benefits to them.
3. Political Polarization: Identity Politics continues to be a threat that divides the middle class, both on social media and in the real world.¹⁵

Among the relevance and challenges above with politics in Indonesia today, there is the role and challenges of the middle class in the future. This role can be seen from the middle class which is the hope and as the main agent in fighting for substantial democracy, namely democracy that emphasizes human rights, social justice and the eradication of corruption. In addition, as an investor in education, the middle class has an important role in preparing the next generation that is competitive in the global era

CONCLUSION

The role of the middle class in Indonesian politics is dynamic and complex. On the one hand, they are a force that drives democracy, but on the other hand, they also tend to be pragmatic in their political attitudes. This ambivalence is caused by economic interests and stability being the main priorities of the middle class, along with their dependence on the global economy. Although potentially a progressive force, the involvement of the middle class in politics is often influenced by economic and stability considerations. This creates ambivalence in their political attitudes, so that they can support both democracy and authoritarian regimes according to economic and social interests. The middle class has a significant role in shaping the face of politics and the state in Indonesia. They are the main drivers of democracy, agents of social change, and balancers between the elite and the lower classes. However, the fragmentation of identity politics and the challenges of economic inequality are obstacles that

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Izzah Umdatul, Iva Yulianti, h. 71.

must be overcome so that the middle class can continue to contribute to realizing political stability and social welfare in Indonesia

The middle class needs to increase political awareness and develop a more solid collective identity. This is important so that they are not divided by the fragmentation of identity politics that can increase their influence in politics. In addition to supporting more progressive policies, the middle class can also play a role in socio-economic empowerment at the local level. Through various initiatives, they can open opportunities for lower-class people to participate in activities.

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