



THE POTENTIAL RISE OF POPULISM AMONG THE INDONESIAN MUSLIM MIDDLE CLASS POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The economic and political insecurity faced by Indonesia's Muslim middle class may create opportunities for the rise of populism in Indonesia. This study aims to examine the potential for populism supported by Indonesia's Muslim middle class in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The critical political economy approach, specifically the class-based approach, has been used in this study. This article uses qualitative research methodology and draws on literary sources. The findings suggest the likely emergence of populist politics in Indonesia, triggered by the economic instability caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which severely affected the Muslim middle class. This has been exacerbated by long-standing socio-economic insecurity caused by unfavorable labor policies. Furthermore, the emergence of Indonesian populist politics is reinforced by the political polarization of the last decade. The mobilization of the vulnerable Muslim middle class by a charismatic leader could fuel the potential rise of populist politics in Indonesia.

Keywords: Populism, Muslim middle class, Covid-19 pandemic

Titulo en Español: *El crecimiento potencial del populismo entre la clase media musulmana de Indonesia tras la pandemia del COVID-19*

Resumen:

La inseguridad económica y política a la que se enfrenta la clase media musulmana de Indonesia puede crear oportunidades para el auge del populismo en el país. Este estudio pretende examinar el potencial del populismo sustentado en la clase media musulmana de Indonesia tras la pandemia de Covid-19. El artículo utiliza una metodología de investigación cualitativa y se basa en fuentes literarias. Las conclusiones sugieren la probable aparición de una política populista en Indonesia, desencadenada por la inestabilidad económica causada por la pandemia del COVID-19, que afectó gravemente a la clase media musulmana. Esto se ha visto exacerbado por la inseguridad socioeconómica de larga data causada por políticas de empleo desfavorables. Además, la aparición de la política populista indonesia se ve reforzada por la polarización política de la última década. La movilización de la vulnerable clase media musulmana por un líder carismático podría alimentar el potencial ascenso de la política populista en Indonesia.

Palabras Clave: *Populismo, clase media musulmana, pandemia de COVID-19*

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Indonesia's economy. Various economic indicators, such as a rising poverty rate, negative economic growth and the threat of recession, show the extent of the pandemic's impact³. Rising poverty is inextricably linked to a collapsing middle class, much of which depends on entrepreneurship and self-employment, including that of Indonesian Muslims⁴. Apart from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic fragility of Indonesia's Muslim middle class is also due to labour policies that have failed to benefit them over the past thirty years. Labour market flexibility policies have further contributed to the political and financial instability of this demographic group⁵. Throughout history, the vulnerability of the middle class, with the exception of those living in poverty, has often contributed to the rise of populist politics in various countries.⁶

In discussing populism, scholars have identified three primary approaches to its study. These include populism as a political style, populism as a discourse and populism as a political movement.

First, populism as a political style aims to elucidate the dynamics between populist figures and their supporters in order to mobilise support for political gain. When discussing populism, scholars have identified three primary approaches to its study⁷. In such cases, the relationship between political leaders and the public is tenuous and often advantageous. Populist political elites deliberately cultivate a tenuous and expedient relationship in order to garner sympathy and support from the public, either for electoral success or simply to assert political dominance.

Second, populism as a discourse is explained as the ability of populist actors to create confrontational narratives between elites and their mass supporters.⁸ The elite-mass narrative is often constructed by positioning the masses or ordinary people or "*wong cilik*" against the political elite. This confrontational narrative typically leads to an anti-status quo narrative. In this approach, populist narratives seek to reduce the political landscape to a binary division between the virtuous majority and the avaricious elite, unless such assessments are explicitly

³ Indonesia's Poverty Situation during the COVID-19 Pandemic", Smeru 22 July 2021, at <https://smeru.or.id/en/article/indonesia's-poverty-situation-during-covid-19-pandemic>; Umam, Ahmad Khoirul and Jazuli, Muhammad Rosyid: "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Indonesia's Political Economic Order", *Asia's Path Forward*, CIPE, 28 October 2020, at <https://policy.paramadina.ac.id/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-indonesias-political-economic-order/>.

⁴ "Hati-Hati, Kelas Menengah Rentan Jatuh Miskin Karena Pandemi", *detik Finance*, 15 April 2020 at <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200428071536-532-497901/hati-hati-kelas-menengah-rentan-jatuh-miskin-karena-pandemi>; Survei Dampak Darurat Virus Corona Terhadap Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, at <http://lipi.go.id/berita/single/Survei-Dampak-Darurat-Virus-Corona-terhadap-Tenaga-Kerja-Indonesia/22030>.

⁵ Tjandraningsih, Indrasari: "State-Sponsored Precarious Work in Indonesia," *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol.57, n° 4 (April 2013), pp. 403-419.

⁶ Hadiz, Vedi R. (2016): *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 37.

⁷ Aspinall, Edward and Mietzner, Marcus: "Indonesian Politics in 2014: "Democracy's Close Call", *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Vol. 50, n° 3 (September 2014), pp. 347-369; Mietzner, Marcus and Muhtadi, Burhanuddin: "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, n° 3 (July 2018), pp. 479-497; Moffitt, Benjamin and Tormey, Simon: "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style", *Political Studies*, Vol. 62, n° 2 (June 2014), pp. 381-397.

⁸ Hamid, Abdul: "Jokowi's Populism in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial Election", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 33, n° 1 (April 2014), pp. 85-109; Bouchier, David M: "Two Decades of Ideological Contestation in Indonesia: From Democratic Cosmopolitanism to Religious Nationalism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol 49, n° 5 (April 2019), pp. 1-21.



labelled as subjective. This clear characterisation of the approach adopts a symbolism of division within the political space⁹.

Third, populism as a political movement is usually constructed through multi-class coalitions and led by charismatic leaders¹⁰. Multi-class coalitions mean that the movement is supported by the poor, the middle class and the bourgeoisie or elite. The coalition is constructed on the basis of the 'people' narrative, which is common in cases of populism in Latin America and fascism in Europe¹¹. Populism has manifested itself through this approach, especially when discussing the phenomenon in Muslim-majority countries. In such contexts, multi-class coalitions are formed around the "ummah" narrative rather than the "people" narrative. This multi-class coalition, characterised by contradictions, has become¹². This multi-class coalition, characterised by contradictions, has become a defining feature of populism in Muslim-majority countries.

Many scholarly works show that the middle class has been a strong base of populism in many countries, although populism in terms of political movement has been identified as a cross-class coalition involving the poor, middle class even the bourgeois or elite¹³. A middle class becomes the backbone of populism because of its ability to form lumpen-intelligence groups¹⁴. The middle class usually has a relatively high level of education, but is confined to a lower level of the socio-economic and political structure. The middle class in the context of populism is primarily composed of urbanised individuals, but is plagued by a deteriorating atmosphere of social mobility. In developing countries, including Indonesia, the middle class is usually only marginally better off than the poor. They are in a very vulnerable position, vulnerable to falling into poverty. The middle class, educated but financially insecure, has emerged from the global economic modernisation movement¹⁵.

A religious interpretation can offer a fresh perspective on the social circumstances they encounter, as well as an alternative vision of the world that could support their interests and political aspirations. The rise of populist politics can be seen as the result of political-economic conflicts within the middle class, often illustrated by religious narratives and nativist concerns. In some circumstances, the vulnerable middle class can be associated with particular ethnic and religious groups alongside the established middle class. This gives rise to religious concerns and nativism, which are recognised as manifestations of identity conflicts, including religious identity.

The aim of this article is to address the dearth of research on populism in Indonesia, which overlooks the role of social class dynamics, by adopting a political movement approach. The political movement approach sees populism as a multi-class movement with strong support mainly from the middle class and mobilised by charismatic political leaders. As mentioned above, the Covid-19 pandemic has placed the Muslim middle class in Indonesia in a very

⁹ Panizza, Francisco (2005): *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London, Verso.

¹⁰ Hadiz, Vedi R. and Teik, Khoo Boo: "Approaching Islam and Politics from Political Economy: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Malaysia", *Pacific Review*, Vol. 24, n° 4 (2011), pp. 463-485; Hadiz, Vedi R. and Robison, Richard: "Competing Populisms in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia", *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 38, n° 4 (September 2017): pp. 488-502; Hadiz, Vedi R.: "A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 44, n° 1 (January 2014), pp. 125-143.

¹¹ See Mudde and Kaltwasser, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

¹² See Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East, op.cit.*, p. 6.; Hadiz, *A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development, op.cit.*, pp. 125-126.

¹³ See Wang, *op.cit.*; Hadiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 125-127.

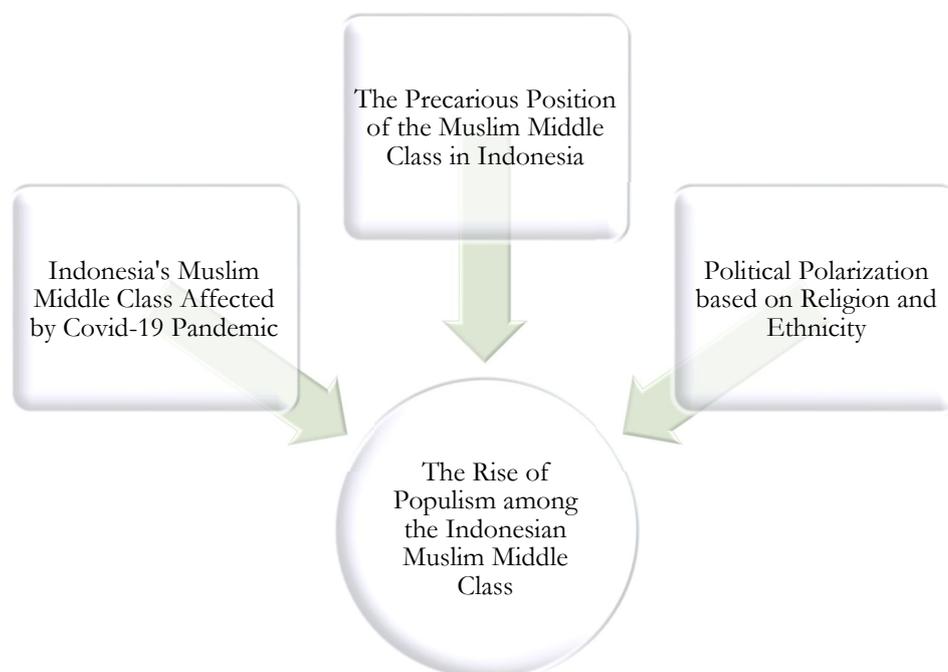
¹⁴ Roy, Oliver (1994): *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, p. 3.; Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky (2002): *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, New York, Columbia University Press.

¹⁵ See Roy, *op.cit.*; Hadiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-35.

vulnerable position. As this group is an important supporter of populism, we will primarily investigate their role in populism¹⁶. In particular, this research aims to explore three key elements. First, it examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Indonesia's Muslim middle class. Second, it examines the ongoing issue of the precarisation of Indonesia's Muslim middle class over the past thirty years. Finally, it examines political polarisation as an enabling factor in the rise of populism over the past decade.

This article argues that the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic will have a profound impact on the rise of populist politics in Indonesia, particularly with regard to the economically and politically vulnerable Muslim middle class. This class is growing rapidly, but remains vulnerable to marginalisation as a result of the impact of Covid-19 and unfavourable labour policies. The rise of populism in the last decade has been intertwined with the phenomenon of political polarisation, nuanced by religion and ethnicity, particularly within the vulnerable Muslim middle class. The enabling structural factors that support the possibility of the emergence of populism can be seen through the schema presented below.

Figure 1. Enabling structural factors led to the rise of populism among Indonesia's Muslim middle-class Factors driving the rise of populism among the Indonesian Muslim middle class



2. Research Methods

This research is qualitative in nature. Accordingly, the data in this research is based on literature studies from various credible sources, drawing on academic books, journal articles, reports and online news. The author analyses the data collected from these sources to support his argument that the rise of populism among Indonesia's Muslim middle class in the aftermath of the Covid-19 epidemic is always possible given many enabling structural factors. The critical political economy approach, particularly the class-based approach, was used as the primary framework in this study. In this study, the social and political dynamics of Indonesia's Muslim middle class has been the primary object of research.

¹⁶ Hadiz, Vedi R. and Robison, Richard: "Political Economy and Islamic Politics: Insights from the Indonesian Case", *New Political Economy*, Vol. 17, n° 2 (April 2012), pp. 137-155; Wang, Hew Wei: "Middle Class Competition and Islamic Populism", *New Mandala*, 25 May 2017, at <https://www.newmandala.org/competitions-among-middle-classes/>.



3. Results

3.1 Muslim Middle Class Affected by Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the Muslim middle class in Indonesia. Currently, there is no concrete statistical data on the extent of the impact on this segment. However, existing statistics show how the Muslim middle class has been affected by the pandemic. The results of the 2021 census indicate that Muslims make up the majority (86.6%) of the Indonesian population. In Indonesia, 236.5 million people out of a total population of 272.3 million have converted to Islam¹⁷. As a result, an estimated 64.5 million of this majority will form the Muslim middle class by 2020¹⁸. As a result, almost a quarter of Indonesia's Islamic population will be middle class. Compared to the general growth of the middle class in Indonesia, the number of middle class citizens is expected to increase to 114 million by 2020, with an annual growth of 8 to 9 million people¹⁹. Specifically, the Muslim middle class will account for more than half of the total middle class in Indonesia, or 56.6%.

The Covid-19 pandemic has left Indonesia's Muslim middle class in a state of financial ruin. Economic indicators for this group show the impact in key areas such as employment, entrepreneurship and self-employment - sectors on which the middle class depends. For example, 15.6% of workers have lost their jobs, while 40% have seen their income fall. Secondly, in the case of entrepreneurs, 39.4% of businesses have ceased trading and 57.1% have experienced a fall in production. Thirdly, as regards self-employed persons, up to 40% have ceased their activities and 52% have experienced a reduction in production²⁰. The above data illustrates the severity of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the middle class. More than half of Indonesia's middle class, which relies on the three sectors mentioned above, has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. With the Muslim middle class accounting for 56.5% of the total middle class in Indonesia, it is fair to say that this group has been significantly affected by the pandemic compared to other middle classes. As mentioned above, Indonesia's Muslim middle class affected by the Covid-19 pandemic has become the enabling factor for the rise of populism, whether in the short or long term.

3.2 Precariousness of the Muslim Middle Class

The Indonesian middle class had reached a total of 74 million in 2013, and it is projected to consistently grow at a rate of 8 to 9 million per year. By 2020, this number is expected to double, reaching 114 million.²¹ This steady growth is also reflected in a 25% increase of the middle class between 1999 and 2020.²² In line with this trend, the Muslim middle class is experiencing a similar rise. Although there is no hard statistical evidence to support this claim, emerging socio-cultural indicators suggest an upward trend in the growth of Indonesia's Muslim middle

¹⁷ "Sebanyak 86,93% Penduduk Indonesia Beragama Islam Pada, 31 Desember 2021", databoks, at <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2022/02/12/sebanyak-8693-penduduk-indonesia-beragama-islam-pada-31-desember-2021>.

¹⁸ Rahman Riska: "Sharia Economy to Become 'New Wave' of Indonesia's Economy", *The Jakarta Post*, 30 October 2020, at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/10/30/sharia-economy-to-become-new-wave-of-indonesias-economy-vp.html>.

¹⁹ "Indonesia's Rising Middle-Class and Affluent Consumers: Asia's Next Big Opportunity", BCG, 5 March 2023, at <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2013/center-consumer-customer-insight-consumer-products-indonesias-rising-middle-class-affluent-consumers>.

²⁰ Survei Dampak Darurat Virus Corona Terhadap Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, *op.cit.*

²¹ Indonesia's Rising Middle-Class, *op.cit.*

²² Rakhmani, Inaya: "Mainstream Islamic Narratives and Their Divisive Consequences", Indonesia at Melbourne, 17 March 2017, at <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/mainstream-islamic-narratives-and-their-divisive-consequences/>.



class since the late 1990s. The proliferation of urban Muslim lifestyles infused with Islamic nuances is indicative of the rising trend of the Muslim middle class in Indonesia²³.

Another indication of the growth of the Muslim middle class in the last decade is the spread of halal lifestyles in both production and consumption, followed by the expansion of Islamic banking, which avoids interest or usury²⁴. Undoubtedly, the rise of the Muslim middle class was partly fuelled by the New Order's industrialisation policies, which provided employment for many Muslims as industrial workers. However, it is worth noting that while the Muslim middle class is growing, it is also facing the vulnerability caused by the wave of precarisation. Precarisation refers to the process of socio-economic weakening of the working class caused by the absence of a protective labour system²⁵.

The wave of precarisation that has continued to affect the Muslim middle class over the last three decades has not only affected the formal employment sector, but also the informal employment sector. This trend was instigated by international financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which required Indonesia to adopt flexible labour market policies in order to receive financial assistance to cope with the Asian economic crisis of 1998. This policy was implemented through various regulations that facilitated the flexible labour market by accommodating the outsourcing system. The legalisation of the outsourcing system was formalised with the enactment of Law No. 13/2003 on Manpower²⁶. Due to the legalisation of the outsourcing system, the working class is facing socio-economic decline.

In the formal employment sector, precariousness is characterised by short-term contracts, outsourcing, apprenticeships, part-time work, piecework and on-call work. The informal employment sector, on the other hand, is characterised by part-time, temporary, seasonal, casual, independent, self-employed and multiple employment. This sector lacks regulation and protection, resulting in low wages and low productivity. At the national level, workers can be found in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, trade and services²⁷. Limited data at the national level suggests that precarisation in the formal labour sector has increased recently due to the introduction of outsourcing. Specifically, the percentage rose from 6.7% to 11% between 2001 and 2009, before falling slightly to 10.1% in 2010²⁸. This trend suggests that the precariousness of the Muslim middle class continues, even as it grows. In addition to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the vulnerability of the Muslim middle class is also contributed to by its persistent precariousness, which is likely to have been an enabling circumstance for the rise of populism.

3.3 Political Polarisation in Indonesia Based on Religion and Ethnicity

In addition to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing uncertainty among the Muslim middle class, the conditions of political polarisation in Indonesia over the past decade also reinforce the potential for the strengthening of populist politics. The conditions of

²³ Hasbullah, Moeflich: "Cultural Presentation of the Muslim Middle Class in Contemporary Indonesia", *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 7, n° 2 (March 2014), pp. 1-58.

²⁴ Hasyim, Syafiq: "From Political Islam to Islamic Lifestyles : The Changing Public Face of Islam in Indonesia", *Perspective* (November 2023), at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-89-from-political-islam-to-islamic-lifestyles-the-changing-public-face-of-islam-in-indonesia-by-syafiq-hasyim/>.

²⁵ Standing, Guy (2011): *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 7-13.

²⁶ Tjandraningsih, *op.cit.*, pp. 405-407.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Matsumoto, Makiko and Verick, Sher: "Employment Trends in Indonesia over 1996-2009: Casualization of the Labour Market during an Era of Crises, Reforms and Recovery", Employment Working Paper, n° 99, 2011, at https://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/working-papers/WCMS_166299/lang-en/index.htm.



polarisation are evident in the results of the 2019 presidential election, where Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin, the 2019 president-elect, received a majority of votes from the pluralistic Muslim and non-Muslim electorate across eight provinces in Indonesia. Below are detailed percentages of Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin's gains in areas with both pluralist Muslim and non-Muslim voters.

Table 1. Comparison of Percentage of Vote Acquisition in Pluralist Muslim and Non-Muslim Voter Bases

No.	Province	Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin	Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno	Difference
1.	Lampung	59,34%	40,66%	18,68%
2.	Central Java	77,29%	22,71%	54,58%
3.	East Java	65,79%	34,21%	31,58%
4.	West Kalimantan	57,50%	42,59%	15,00%
5.	Central Kalimantan	60,74%	39,26%	21,48%
6.	North Sulawesi	77,24%	22,76%	54,48%
7.	Nusa Tenggara Timur	88,57%	77,14%	77,14%
8.	Papua	90,66%	9,34%	81,32%

Source: Data processed from Hanan (2020); Puskapolui (2019)²⁹In comparison to Jokowi and Ma'ruf Amin, Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno garnered support from Muslim voters with a predilection for strong political Islam stances (conservative muslim). The following is a breakdown of the vote share for Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno in districts with a high Muslim population and a strong political Islamic orientation in eight Indonesian provinces.

Table 2. Comparison of Vote Gains Percentage in Muslim Voter Bases with Strong Views on Political Islam (Conservative Muslim)

No.	Province	Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin	Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno	Difference
1.	Aceh	14,41%	85,59%	71,18%
2.	West Sumatra	14,08%	85,92%	71,84%
3.	South Sumatra	40,30%	59,70%	19,40%
4.	West Java	40,07%	59,93%	19,86%
5.	Banten	38,46%	61,54%	23,08%
6.	South Sulawesi	42,98%	57,02%	14,04%
7.	South Kalimantan	35,92%	64,08%	28,16%
8.	West Nusa Tenggara	32,11%	67,89%	37,78 %

Source: Data processed from Hanan (2020); Puskapolui (2019)³⁰

²⁹ Hanan, Djayadi: "Identity Politics in the 2019 Indonesian General Elections: Its Significance And Limitation", *JWP (Journal of Political Discourse)*, Vol. 5, n° 1 (March 2020), pp. 15-25; 2019 Presidential Election Results, at <https://www.puskapol.ui.ac.id/hasil-pilpres-2019>.

³⁰ Hanan, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.; Puskapolui.ac.id, *op.cit.*



Political polarisation is not limited to religious identity, but also occurs on the basis of ethnicity. This was observed in the 2019 presidential election, where candidates received significant support from specific ethnic groups. The significant variation in support was not only divided by the province with a voter profile based on religious factors, but also by ethnic elements. A comprehensive description of political polarisation based on ethnicity is provided in the following table.

Table 3. Percentage of Support for Joko Widodo-Ma’ruf Amin and Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno Based on Ethnicity Element

No.	Ethnicity	Jokowi-Ma’ruf Amin	Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno	Difference
1.	Java	67%	33%	30%
2.	Sunda	36%	64%	28%
3.	Batak	65%	35%	30%
4.	Minang	10%	90%	80%
5.	Betawi	32%	68%	36%
6.	Madura	42%	58%	16%
7.	Bugis	46%	54%	8%

Source: Data processed from Hanan (2020)³¹

The above data shows that Jokowi and Ma'ruf Amin, the president-elect in 2019, who are typically supported by pluralist Muslims and even non-Muslims, gained majority support from Javanese and Batak ethnic groups. On the other hand, Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno, who attract the support of Muslims with strong political Islam views (conservative muslim), gained majority support from Sundanese, Minang, Betawi, Madurese and Bugis ethnic groups³². It is well known that populism in Indonesia is essentially characterised by the issues of religion and ethnicity. The pronounced political divide along religious and ethnic lines has provided fertile ground for the rise of populist politics.

Pertaining to the middle class Muslim, the dispersed, vulnerable middle class Muslim population in which has strong base views in political Islam (conservative muslim) including in Aceh, West Sumatra, South Sumatra, West Java, Banten, South Sulawesi, South Kalimantan, West Nusa Tenggara and having particular ethnicity at once covering Minang, Betawi, Madurese and Bugis has been and will always be an enable factor to the rise of populism. The above identity polarisation has been and will continue to be potentially co-opted by populist political actors to gain electoral support.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Vulnerability of the Muslim Middle Class Amidst Economic Growth

In the midst of the economic decline experienced by Indonesia's Muslim middle class as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Indonesia is simultaneously experiencing a remarkable quantitative rate of economic growth. Although the rate fell at the start of the pandemic, it has since risen significantly. Moreover, the rate of growth suggests that Indonesia will be able to withstand the threat of a global economic recession³³. However, the fact that economic growth continues to

³¹ Hanan, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Pertumbuhan Ekonomi Tumbuh 5,44%, Indonesia Aman Dari Resesi", Kominfo, 6 August 2022, at https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/43499/pertumbuhan-ekonomi-tumbuh-544-indonesia-aman-dari-resesi/0/artikel_gpr.



improve while poverty continues to decline does not necessarily guarantee immunity from the threat of rising populism. On the contrary, populism is on the rise in countries with high economic growth rates and low poverty rates. The globalisation phenomenon of neoliberalism has the potential to cause the emergence of populism within a vulnerable middle class³⁴.

The globalisation of the neo-liberal economic system has the potential to lead to significant levels of social inequality, accompanied by the expansion of a young, well-educated middle class facing job insecurity. This insecurity manifests itself in various forms, including lower wages, job insecurity and weak legal protections that allow middle class workers to be fired at any time³⁵. Under these conditions, the rise of populism is aided by the dysfunction of the state in performing its duties, as evidenced by its inability to establish a corruption-free government. In addition, the rise of populism in countries experiencing high rates of economic growth is often fuelled by the failure of the state to meet basic public needs, including education, health care, equitable law enforcement and efficient public administration³⁶. This problem exacerbates the frustrations of the middle class.

Based on this explanation, the potential for the emergence of populism among the politically and economically vulnerable Muslim middle class is significant. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected this segment of society, resulting in a weakened political economy due to labour policies that do not favour the working class. Therefore, the vulnerable Muslim middle class forms the initial basis for the rise of political populism. Populism can emerge within vulnerable Muslim middle class communities in the form of identity-based sentiments, as seen in the 2017 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election³⁷. The sense of inferiority and vulnerability among the Muslim middle class can lead them to blame economically established groups, including non-Muslim and non-indigenous ethnic groups.

4.2 Political Polarisation as a Catalyst for the Rise of Populism

Indonesia's recent political divide has allowed populist actors to exploit issues of religious identity and ethnicity³⁸. Data from the last decade shows the division of the population along these lines. As a result, areas with specific religious patterns have proven to provide significant political support for certain actors. In addition to religious affiliation, there is also a clear alignment of very strong political support from certain ethnic groups to certain political figures, as shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3. In both national and local electoral competition, this has been and will continue to be an opportunity for populist actors to exploit.

In the local context, vulnerable middle-class Muslims, economically frustrated by a series of unprotective labour policies over the past three decades, can easily have their religious

³⁴ Carroll, Toby; Hameiri, Shahar and Jones, Lee (eds.) (2020): *The Political Economy of Southeast Asia*, 4th ed., Vol. 46, Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy, Cham, Springer International Publishing, pp. 159-160; Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*, *op.cit.*, pp.35-36.; Hadiz, *A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development*, *op.cit.*, pp. 9-10.; Hadiz and Robison, *Competing Populisms in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia*, *op.cit.*, pp. 495-496.

³⁵ See Standing, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11.; Yasih, Diatyka Widya Permata: "Jakarta's Precarious Workers: Are They a 'New Dangerous Class'?", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, n° 1 (January 2017), pp. 27-45; Tjandraningsih, *op.cit.*, pp. 404-405.

³⁶ Carroll, Hameiri, and Jones, *op.cit.*, pp. 167-168.

³⁷ Mcbeth, John: "Indonesia's Election: A High-Stakes Endgame as Prabowo Appeals to Islam and People Power", *Asialink.Unimelb.Edu.Au* (2004), at <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/asialink-dialogues-and-applied-research/commentary-and-analysis/indonesias-election-a-high-stakes-endgame-as-prabowo-appeals-to-islam-and-people-power>; Prasetyawan, Wahyu: "Populism or Identity Politics: Explaining Electoral Politics in Indonesia", *Kyoto Review*, n° 37 (2018), at <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/populism-identity-electoral-politics-indonesia/>; Fachrudin, Azis Anwar: "Questioning Prabowo's Alliance with Islamists", *New Mandala* 15 March 2019, at <https://www.newmandala.org/questioning-prabowos-alliance-with-islamists/>.

³⁸ Hanan, *op.cit.*, pp. 15-25.



and ethnic sentiments shaped and filled. Populist political actors have the potential to politicise anti-Muslim sentiments, which intersect with ethnicity, to continue to gain political support. In the run-up to the 2019 presidential election, polarisation has essentially emerged, as evidenced by the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. The polarisation was between the indigenous Betawi and the non-indigenous Chinese. The Betawi then become supporters of Prabowo Subianto, the candidate who has strong support from Muslim hardliners (conservative muslim) in 2019 presidential election or see Table 2 in more detail.

In the 2017 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election, the vulnerable Muslim middle class was susceptible to being mobilised to criminalise the Chinese non-Muslim candidate, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok in the Jakarta election. This was because of his comments, which were seen as harassing to Muslims³⁹. The vulnerable Muslim middle class was easily mobilised by his rival Anies Baswedan to gain electoral support by campaigning on anti-Chinese sentiment or the jargon of 'time for indigenous or Betawi prosperity'. Betawi economic prosperity was Anies Baswedan's core issue to win sympathy from the Betawi ethnic groups. This strategy successfully defeated his rival Ahok, who was jailed for two years. There is no doubt that political polarisation has been and will continue to be fertile ground for the rise of populism. This was evident in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election, and is likely to be repeated in Indonesia's local and national elections.

4.3 Mobilisation by Charismatic Leader

Apart from structural factors such as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the precarious status of the Muslim middle class and political polarisation, the ability of charismatic leaders to mobilise the politically vulnerable Muslim middle class is a non-structural factor that can fuel the rise of populist politics. The ability of charismatic leaders to mobilise massive support, particularly at election time, plays an important role. At least this was successfully done by Anies Baswedan, the elected governor of Jakarta in 2017, and Prabowo Subianto in the 2019 presidential election. The above two figures have successfully mobilised the vulnerable Muslim middle class by campaigning on religious and ethnic sentiments.

In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the mobilisation of religion plus anti-Chinese rhetoric⁴⁰ were the key strategies of Anies Baswedan to gain massive support from the indigenous ethnic group called Betawi, who have been economically marginalised by the development of the modern capitalist system dominated by the Chinese groups. The wealth of the 'pribumi' or indigenous Jakartans has become a political platform in the governor's race. He brought prominent clerics groups not only to get electoral support but also masses support to bring his rival the incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok to jail due to his hate speech of "harassing muslim". This action successfully gathered masses of around 500,000 people in the national monument Obelisk or Monas with the final verdict of two years imprisonment.

Besides Anies Baswedan, another charismatic figure who has successfully mobilised the vulnerable muslim middle class was Prabowo Subianto, a former army general and son-in-law of former president Soeharto. In the 2019 presidential election, Prabowo has also successfully garnered massive support from clerical groups called the National Movement of Fatwa Guards-Ulama (GNPF). Previously, the GNPF also supported Anies Baswedan in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. During the election campaign, Prabowo Subianto also expressed xenophobic sentiments. This rhetoric basically referred to the first candidacy in the 2014 presidential election, where his rival Joko Widodo was labelled as part of the foreigner force or 'kekuatan asing'. Prabowo was successful in gaining the support of Islamists, although

³⁹ See Wang, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ Mietzner, Muhtadi, and Halida: "Entrepreneurs of Grievance: Drivers and Effects of Indonesia's Islamist Mobilization", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 174, n° 2-3 (2018), pp. 159-187.



he was ultimately defeated. Prabowo Subianto was the candidate who most openly mobilized religious and anti-Chinese resentment⁴¹. The ability to mobilise the masses is undeniably becoming a non-structural factor contributing to the rise of populist politics.

5. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a negative impact on the economic situation of Indonesia's Muslim middle class. This situation has been exacerbated by the trend towards precarisation that has prevailed for at least the last three decades. State-sponsored precarisation through labour market flexibility policies has made the middle class, especially the Indonesian Muslim middle class, vulnerable to economic and political insecurity.

Unfortunately, this vulnerability has been accompanied by political polarisation along religious and ethnic lines in recent years. As a catalyst for the emergence of populist politics, the mobilisation capacity of populist political actors is also a causal factor in the emergence of sectarian populist politics in Indonesia.

While some literature suggests that populism often emerges from cross-class coalitions, the middle class has consistently been identified as a key factor in the rise of this political movement. This research aims to contribute to the academic understanding of populism in Indonesia, which has so far been dominated by a non-class perspective. The research is limited by the lack of data on the factors that stimulate populist mobilisation in Indonesia. Further studies are needed to elaborate on the structural factors that contribute to the rise of populism, particularly in Indonesia.

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⁴¹ Soderborg, Seth and Muhtadi, Burhanuddin: "Resentment and Polarization in Indonesia", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, n° 3 (October 2023), pp. 1–29.



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