Politics of Difference: Ethnicity and Social Class Within The Indonesian Middle Class in Digital Era

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Abstract

Today the issue of ethnicity is considered ‘weaker’ compared to religious issues, particularly after the 2017 Jakarta Governor Election which was followed by the emergence of the so-called 212 Movement. Nevertheless, the fact shows that it’s as strong as ever. The issue of socio-economic gap between ethnic groups is complicated by digital divide between those with access to social media and those without. Information and opinion are mostly constructed by surveys conducted among those with access to internet or social media. As such, group differences are not marked by poverty per se like the previous era. Politics of difference has been dictated by new type of ethnicity, namely class-based ethnicity. In this article I would like to discuss this topic within the context of the changing Indonesian middle class and their approach to religiosity as a defining trait of their identity.

Keywords: consumption, ethnicity, middle class, Moslem.

Introduction

During the massive rally on December 2, 2016 which has been named the ‘212 Action’ [Aksi 212], a number of Sari Roti volunteers giving away free bread with carried signs that said, ‘gratis untuk Mujahid [free for Muslims],’ and the photos went viral. The people thought the bread manufacturer, Nippon Indosari Corpindo, supported the rally, but later the company ‘issued a public statement on its website, claiming that their bread products were not involved in the rally and were committed to preserving Indonesia’s motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity)” (Yulius, 2016). In spite of pro and contra following the episode, it is interesting to observe what the author said concerning the occurrence: ‘looking at how consuming bread has been used to signify religiosity reveals the production of middle-class

Islamic Indonesians’ identity through consumption and public piety... Since what we consume constructs our identity and even signals our political stance, consuming also becomes public—particularly how self has been represented in collective space...The Sari Roti debates demonstrate how middle-class Muslim Indonesians, who are familiar with social media, factor in their religiosity into their consumption decisions’ (Yulius, 2016). By linking religiosity to middle class and their consumption behavior, I believe the author has raised an issue of ‘new ethnicity,’ i.e., a class-based ethnicity, which might change...
the way we define ethnic identities in the future. In this paper I would like to discuss how digital technology has coalesced ethnicity and class to create a class-based ethnicity as an imminent politics of difference.

Digitalization, Class and Ethnicity

Digital technology has critically influenced the livelihood of the people and day to day operations by creating digital divide between those who could fully access the internet and those who could not, particularly in these areas: education, job opportunities, communication, politics, health information, government, community involvement, consumer satisfaction, and several other fields of life. Low-performance computers, limited broadband speeds and limited access to subscription-based content also widen the gap (Steele, 2019). As Carmen Steele (2018) said, ‘[d]ifferences in income and literacy are most significant contributors to the digital divide,’ but she also admitted that they could only explain part of the ethnic and racial disparities in our country and the world. For a further explanation, perhaps we should start with Christian Fuchs’ opinion that

‘The emergence of so-called web 2.0 and social media was both an ideology and a capital accumulation strategy: it promised huge new profits, which was a strategy to attract financial investors. It promised a participatory Internet of prosumers, which disguised the strategy of targeted advertising and the crowdsourced exploitation of digital labour that became prominent in the so-called “new web”. So, there were new strategies of capital accumulation and ideology aimed at reproducing the old structures of exploitation and capital accumulation.... On social media, we can say that users are producers of value objectified in data that is sold as commodity to targeted advertising clients of Google, Facebook, Weibo, Baidu, etc. They are digital workers in a social media-context.... [However, that] value does not automatically translate into profits because on average people only click on one out for 1000 presented targeted ads. So, the transformation of exploited labour that produces value on social media into profit is highly insecure. This insecurity is at the heart of the financialisation of social media. So corporate, targeted advertising-based social media at the same time advance the exploitation of labour – which means they deepen class division – and advance the insecurities and crisis-proneness of capitalism. That’s the antagonistic structural dialectic that capital accumulation in the capitalist social media age finds itself in.... Of course, there are important social differences between colonial exploitation, the exploitation of houseworkers and the exploitation of users. But all of them conduct low-paid or unpaid labour and are therefore a necessary constituent of the reproduction of contemporary capitalism and parts of the contemporary working class.’ (Anonym, n.d., bold is added)

With the above description, Fuchs provides us with a contemporary understanding about the continuity of class relations in the digital era.

How could we establish a relationship between the continuity of class relations—through the emergence of digital labour—and the ethnic and racial disparities? Yong-chan Kim, Joo-young Jung, and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach (2007) have conducted a study on ‘the effect of ethnicity on internet connectedness’ by comparing four ethnic groups—whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians—in Los Angeles metropolitan areas, which are ‘embedded in specific spatial and temporal contexts.’ Their perspective, to some extent, is similar to Fuchs, who argued that, “all social space is not just organised in time, but also constituted in and through communicative practices’ (Anonym, n.d.). Kim, Jung, and Ball-Rokeach found out that, ‘[a]side from the physical characteristics of a place,
individuals who reside and congregate there collectively influence the area’s communication infrastructure,’ that is ‘likely to share particular internet-related goals, such as a desire for getting services in their native language, maintaining connections to people in their country of origin, and a desire for internet applications that are particularly popular in certain culture’ (Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2007: 296). In Kim, Jung, and Ball-Rokeach’s words, ‘[e]thnicity has an effect not only on the quantitative question of having internet access, but also with respect to the qualitative dimensions of the ICI – context/history, scope/intensity, and centrality.’ In relation to the issue of centrality, Kim, Jung, and Ball-Rokeach found out that ‘white [and Latino] respondents connected to the internet more for business and finance related goals, while Asians and African Americans connected more for entertainment related goals’ (Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2007:297). In term of reasons, whites differ from Latinos because they place internet as the central part of their lives ‘to reinforce their existing connections to social, economic, or cultural resources,’ while Latinos may do it because ‘internet might be the only way to have access to critical information, knowledge, or basic resources’ in their local environments. The African-American community showed ‘the highest level of attachment to their neighborhood.’ It may be possible that African-Americans are ‘more likely to go to their social and neighborly networks to achieve their everyday goals rather than developing skills to use new tools,’ i.e., the internet, which require the investment of economic and educational resources and time; particularly with their low level of income and education.

Clearly, in digital era class and ethnicity are closely intertwined in creating ethnic and racial inequalities, similar to the time before digital communications were introduced. Then, what is the difference between ethnic and racial inequalities before and in the digital era? Perhaps the Indonesian case could show the difference.

### Indonesia, Digitization, and the Emergence of Middle Class

McKinsey’s research and analysis of 20 selected markets in the world found that ‘Indonesia is in a nascent stage of digitization,’ but they also discovered that the country presents an intriguing paradox: ‘its digital denizens are among the world’s most active, and it has a vibrant startup ecosystem, but overall, the country lags in embracing the benefits of modern technology’ (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir, & Tan, 2016:4). In other words, ‘Indonesia’s connected citizens are techsavvy [i.e., time spent on internet 3.5 hours per day, time spent on social media 2.9 hours per day, 90% of internet users are facebook visitors; perhaps that is why Jakarta is widely considered the Twitter capital of the world (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir & Tan, 2016:9-10)], but Internet penetration is low’.

Indonesia’s internet penetration rate is ‘half of Malaysia,’ i.e., 34 % only. Moreover, ‘ICT infrastructure is weak and digital usage is uneven within and among various business sectors’ (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir & Tan, 2016:4); and according to McKinsey, ‘the availability of cheap labor and the poor quality of Internet access are key reasons for low digitization among Indonesia’s businesses’ (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir, & Tan, 2006:11). According to them, 73% of total users access internet via mobile (55 million users in 2014 with 32
millions of connected devices and 67 million users in 2015 with 39 units of connected devices) (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir, & Tan, 2006:5). With its third largest population in the world, Indonesia is also ‘the world’s third largest population of individuals without access to the Internet’ and since internet penetration strongly correlated to income per capita, ‘only the large population centers such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta have a penetration rate above 45%’ (Das, Gryseels, Sudhir, & Tan, 2016:9). According to Nurfaizlina Binti Haris, Indonesia’s ‘fixed line Internet bandwidth is a lot more expensive than mobile phone services;’ many Indonesians have ‘an access into the internet using their mobile devices’ after ‘the introduction of social networks (Facebook) and mobile broadband in 2006’ (Haris, n.d.:3).

The abovementioned situation indicates the growing number of Indonesian middle class, which at the same time points out to the continuing gap—if not a widening gap—between the rich and the poor, i.e., between those with access to internet and those who do not have the access. So, who is this Indonesian middle class? World Bank reported that ‘[f]ollowing a massive reduction in Indonesia’s poverty rate in the last two decades, one in every five Indonesians now belongs to the middle-class group,’

2 and ‘[a]nother 45 percent are part of an aspiring group who are no longer poor or vulnerable to poverty, [but] members of this “aspiring class” have yet to reach the level of economic security and lifestyle of the middle class’ (Boediono, 2017). They calculated that, Indonesia’s middle class counts ‘at least 52 million people whose consumption accounts for 43 percent of total household consumption’ (Boediono, 2017). They ‘grew the fastest in absolute terms in metropolitan areas: by 25 percentage points in metro peripheries, 23 percentage points in metro cores and 22 percentage points in single-district metros’ because those areas ‘provide better economic opportunities,’ while in non-metro rural areas ‘only a little more than 1 in 10 Indonesians were in the middle class’ (The World Bank, 2018:42–43). According to the report, ‘[t]wo-thirds of people living and working in metro cores are employed in formal, wage-paying jobs, compared with only 31 percent in non-metro rural areas, where unpaid family work and self-employment are more common’ (The World Bank, 2018:43). Moreover, ‘[i]n metro cores, almost four in five jobs are in manufacturing or services;’ similarly, ‘[a]verage monthly earnings are more than 90 percent higher in metro cores than in non-metro rural areas’ (The World Bank, 2018:43–44). Even though ‘[m]ost migrants who successfully entered the middle class seem to have migrated to metro cores before the 2000s,’ it was predicted that ‘the prospects of middle-class entry for newer entrants into urban peripheries have remained robustly high, as urban peripheries have retained the advantages of proximity to the prosperity of metro cores while avoiding their costs’ (The World Bank, 2018:44).

There is no standard definition of the middle class. In Indonesia, middle class is defined using Asian Development Bank criteria which is population with daily per capita expenditure between $2–20 per day

2 According to World Bank, Indonesia’s middle-class in 2001 was only 5 percent of the total population (The World Bank, 2018).
Based on ADB definition, middle class could be categorized into three groups: lower middle class—population with $2–4 expenditure a day (30.9%); mid middle—population with $4–10 expenditure a day (10.8%); and upper middle—population with $10–20 expenditure a day (1.1%) (Afif, n.d.:8). Their education levels varied as such: 32% university level with degree, 7% university education without degree, 33% secondary education, and 28% less than secondary (Afif, n.d.:12).

While Salim, as quoted by Afif (n.d.:7), argued that ‘[c]onsuming class is individuals with net income of $3,600,’ which means that only a little more than 1.1% of Indonesian middle class is the consuming class, Taiwan Excellence suggested that ‘Indonesia’s middle class market is experiencing an average consumer growth of 4.7% per year, demand for improved technology products, internet penetration rate is 40% (104 million), so it is estimated that by 2020 will be 136 million’ (Atmoko, 2018). Nonetheless, we could safely conclude that the majority of Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem is at lower middle level with $2–4 expenditure a day.

**Indonesia’s Moslem Middle Class: ‘New Ethnicity’?**

In the last few years, we see the public emergence of the term ‘Indonesia Middle Class Moslem.’ Some would argue that, since the majority of Indonesians are Moslem (87.13% or 207,176 million people in 2010), it is appropriate to talk about Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem. But, does it mean that Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem differs from other Indonesian middle class? If yes, in what ways? If middle class should be measured by professionalism, how should we place middle class Moslem into that equation?

Hasanuddin Ali and Lilik Purwandi from Alvara Research Center, for example, on February 2017 published an article titled ‘Indonesia Middle Class Moslem: Religiosity and Consumerism.’ They defined middle class Moslem as ‘a group of population who has both purchasing power and a degree of religiosity’ (Ali & Purwandi, 2017:7). They conducted a survey with 1,200 respondents (586 male and 613 female) in six cities, namely Greater Jakarta area, Surabaya, Bandung, Makassar, Medan, and Semarang, asking their affiliation (NU 59.7%, Muhammadiyah 11.8%, Al Wasliyah 1.9%, FPI 0.3%, LDII 0.3%, and none 26%), religious activities (attending majelis ta’lim more than once a week 34.4%, once a week 36.6%, and once to twice a month 16.5%; committing daily praying frequently 53.6%; very frequently 32.6%, rather frequently 10.7%, rarely 2.6%, and very rarely 0.5%), source of religious information (TV 68.4%, sermon [pengajian] 54%, broadcast on messaging app. 17%, article on social media 14.1%, and articles on websites 13.9%), donation (ZIS/local mosque 100%, directly to the needy 40.5%, zakat institution 20.9% [i.e. 31.5% to Dompet Dhuafa, 23.9% to Rumah Zakat, 12.7% to Rumah Yatim, 6.5% to Baznas, 2.8% to YDSF, and 2.8% to Nurul Hayat], their monthly expenditures (daily needs 43.7%, installment 9.8%, savings

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3According to Hasanuddin Ali & Lilik Purwandi, ‘Java Island has the largest proportion of Muslim population, reaching 95.64%;’ followed by Sumatra (87.12%), Sulawesi (80.89%), Kalimantan (78.23%) Bali - Nusa Tenggara (40.42%), and finally Maluku - Papua (37.13 %) (2017:3).
12.6%, insurance 7.3%, charity 5%, investment 3%, phone/communication 5.4%, and entertainment 7.5%), and awareness of sharia and hajj savings (74.1% and 69.6%).

The above results might be linked to Munawir Aziz’s observation that the growing of Moslem middle class in Indonesia has been ‘supported by a positive trend on the sharia economy market,’ and we could track ‘the increasing economic circulation in the market with sharia label’ to the ‘rapid development of the sharia bank in Indonesia’ (Aziz, 2016). He connected sharia economy trend to the emergence of creative businesses from fashion, culinary to sharia-based tourism that starts to flourish in several regions to serve the Moslem middle class market. In relation to that, he also sees that digital media has worked as ‘a promulgation field’ which is very significant to reach and deliver certain messages to Moslem middle class, particularly after 1998 Reformation Movement when the political climate opened up the ‘freedom to express our identities in the public area.’ Therefore, for Aziz, Moslem middle class is ‘an important niche that possesses incredible potencies, from economical access, life style, knowledge and political alignments’ (Aziz, 2016).

According to Wasisto Raharjo Jati, motivated by their desire to be recognized as modern Moslem with modern symbols, middle class Moslem improvised, which resulted in middle class Moslem who holds onto sharia as their guidelines in values and norms (Jati, 2015:140). Accordingly, ‘social piety’ becomes the main objective of the construction of middle-class Moslem in Indonesia; even though in the process it experiences ‘branching out’ due to the difference between two perspectives, Islamization and Post-Islamism, in interpreting Islam popularity (Jati, 2015:150). Islamization group supports the formalization of religion by obtaining the power to influence, while the Post-Islamism group takes a scriptural path to popularize Islam as a ‘nation-state.’ The later group’s goal is to create ‘a big house’ for Moslems which is based on Moslem values, norms, and behaviors, or what Jeremy Menchik called ‘Godly nationalism,’ that is a conviction of theological teachings as a national bonding (Jati, 2015:150). Jati sees ‘popularizing Islam’ as a response to the need for a room of cultural and religious expression that was being coopted by the New Order military and bureaucrats. Within those two perspectives, Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem has clustered into various ideological based groups which then compete with each other under the name of Islam (Jati, 2015:152). For him, the Arabization phenomenon in the Islamic community, through language adoption, clothing style, as well as some physical appearances of moustache and beard, is part of their dynamic behaviors in searching for qibla to redefine their Islamness (Jati, 2015:153).

Putting Ali and Purwandi’s study within Jati’s conceptual framework, we could then recognize ‘the need for pleasure’ in the process of worshipping which Jati called as an ‘anomaly’ in observing middle class Moslem’s piety and godliness (Jati, 2015:154). Ali and Purwandi focuses on questioning how much middle-class Moslem consumes products that symbolize Islam as a part of being Moslem. Clearly, as a common platform, in doing so they would be visualized as a pious Moslem. Sharia consumerism among middle class Moslem, for Jati, is an indication that Islamic
teachings is still at the scriptural level, because sharia is just an ‘icon’ to persuade people to become a ‘modern’ Moslem middle class (Jati, 2015:161). If we return to the abovementioned daily expenditures which indicate that the majority of Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem is a lower middle class, it could probably explain why consumerism becomes ‘a lifestyle’ for all Indonesia’s middle-class Moslem. As Anna Tarkhnishvili & Levan Tarkhnishvili said, ‘Upper middle class, made up of professionals distinguished by exceptionally high educational attainment as well as high economic security. It consists mostly of “white collar” professionals whose work is largely self-directed. Most of them are highly educated. These professionals typically conceptualize, create, consult, and supervise. Upper middle-class employees enjoy greater autonomy and are more satisfied with their careers than non-professional middle class individuals. The lifestyles and opinions of the upper-middle-class become increasingly normative for the entire society. Lower middle class consists of semiprofessionals. These are people in technical and lower-level management positions who work for those in the upper middle class. They have lower educational attainment, considerably less workplace autonomy and lower incomes. A group of authors are fair using the following description for the lower middle class: “They enjoy a reasonably comfortable standard of living, although it is constantly threatened by taxes and inflation.”’ (Tarkhnishvili & Tarkhnishvili, 2013:25, bold is added)

When the lifestyles and opinions of the upper middle class become a norm, the other strata could only follow. That’s why the lower middle class could enjoy a reasonably comfortable standard of living, albeit quite unstable. They adopted the upper middle class lifestyles regardless of their ‘low’ economic capacities. Seeing class distinction as the core determinant for middle class Moslem grouping, we could safely say that Moslem identity is just an ‘ethnic factor’ that has been created for the purpose of distinguishing a certain group from the general Indonesian middle class. Hence, is the beginning of what I will call class-based ethnicity.

Religiosity as A Class-Based Ethnicity and A ‘Current’ Politics of Difference

Similar to other ethnicities, a class-based ethnicity requires an intrinsic bonding as strong as its original one—kinship. Religion binds its adherents like a family. It means the function of religiosity is more or less equal to that of kinship. However, unlike kinship which is embedded within blood relationships, religiosity is created through beliefs and faiths. As such, if ethnicity becomes a signifier of difference due to the dynamics of human interaction, religiosity starts to work as a marker of difference when people measure the other based on their own beliefs and faiths. The following statement and description explain the process:

‘… the country [read: Indonesia]’s Muslim majority has embraced more overt signs of religiosity and shifted toward Arab-style devotion: flowing clothes and veils, Arabic names and Middle Eastern devotional architecture…. “In Indonesia, Salafi ideology has penetrated urban and rural, civil servants and villagers,” said Din Wahid, a theologian at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University. “They see corruption all around them and say that it is only Shariah and restoring a caliphate that will be able to fix society.” … “Salafism is a magnet for people because it’s very simple and easy to understand,” said Mr. Ulil of the Liberal Islam Net. “It gives the impression that it’s based on prophetic, pure scripture while others, like us, are not authoritative.” … When Zaenal Abidin started building a Salafist community on the outskirts of Jakarta in 1998, three families joined him. Now there are 300, many of them middle-class government employees, who send their children to Mr. Zaenal’s Islamic school. “We
were colonized for so long by Christians, so we have an inferiority complex,” he said. “But this is a country with the world’s largest number of Muslims, so we must show our true Islamic nature.” … Even Mr. Lukman, the religious affairs minister under Mr. Joko, tries to thread the needle on the role of faith in Indonesian society. “Indonesia is not officially an Islamic state,” he said, sitting in an office decorated solely with Muslim art. “But Indonesia is also not a secular state.” (Beech & Suhartono, 2019, bold is added)

The above description indicates how an identity as a Moslem middle class was created based on religious beliefs, a Salafism, for the purpose of showing the so-called ‘true Islamic nature’ and to fight an ‘inferiority complex’ of having being ‘colonized for so long by Christians.’ This is clearly an ethnicity. Today, the situation could be described as follows:

‘... he [Jokowi]’s now facing growing dissatisfaction among the middle-class for his failure to lift economic growth to seven percent—a key promise of his 2014 campaign. Had he reached that target, it would have created “decent employment,” said Muhamad Chatib Basri, a former finance minister. While the national unemployment rate has fallen to a two-decade low, more and more educated youth are finding it difficult to land well-paid jobs, he said.’ (Aditya & Abraham, 2019, bold is added)

Briefly, the above statement about the growing discontentment among Moslem middle class could be considered as simply to justify the emergence of the so-called 212 Movement in 2017. But, if we look carefully at its underlying issue about ‘decent employment’ and ‘well-paid jobs,’ that statement is clearly targeting economic disparities of ethnic-based majority and minority which has long been established since before the Indonesian independence, namely between indigenous and non-indigenous, as well as between those who were economically weak and dominant; albeit now between the ‘poor’ Moslem majority and ‘rich’ non-Moslem minority. It strongly implies that the economic issue between Moslem versus non-Moslem identities is just a new form of the class-based ethnicity.

urban lifestyle. Unfortunately, according to some Moslem intellectuals, the present situation is not economically promising, because of technological disruption which created not only a new way of doing business, but also a high degree of uncertainty about the future economic development. It is reflected in the following statement:

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Conclusion

Ethnicity in today’s digital era becomes a very complex issue. A digital technology has not only created a dichotomy between those with access and those without access, but has also differentiated between ‘the aspiring class’ and ‘the consuming class’ among its users. Those differences have complicated the way an ethnic group constructs their group boundary. The so-called ‘ethnic culture’ is now difficult to apply to any ethnic group, because we might find those with access or without access across all ethnic groups, and this strengthens the differences between ‘the have’ and the ‘have not’ rather than between ethnic groups. Clearly, digital technology has emphasized the material side of class issue through changing a group’s consumption decisions or behaviors into what is known as ‘popularism’ and ‘consumerism’. However, how religiosity, in this case Islam, becomes part of those ‘new’ consumption decisions is not yet evident, so a further study is highly recommended.

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