

PERSPECTIVE

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Muslim Middle Class Support for Jokowi Wavers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A year after taking power, President Joko Widodo’s administration is facing tough challenges achieving the clean and efficient government that he promised voters during the 2014 electoral campaign. His lack of support in government circles, particularly amongst political parties, weakens his battle against a slowing economy and a corrupt bureaucracy, and against powerful oligarchs.
- The Muslim middle class, a key group of Jokowi supporters, appear to be losing faith in his government. Interviews with members of this group reveal that their grave concerns revolve around Jokowi’s inability to win party support, and the growing influence of powerful politicians such as Megawati (chairwoman of Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle/PDIP) and Surya Paloh (chairman of National Democratic Party/Partai Nasdem).
- Muslim middle class discontent is growing and many may soon entertain the idea of the president’s early disposal. Although his general popularity has recently grown somewhat, Jokowi needs to address the discontent found in this key group.
- In the long run, the completion of major infrastructure projects should benefit the president, and in the short term, Jokowi may be looking to simpler yet equally important policies to boost his popularity.



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INTRODUCTION

Inaugurated with high hopes of good governance on 20 October 2014, the performance of the Joko (Jokowi) Widodo presidency has since showcased a range of difficult challenges. He has had to fight a corrupt bureaucracy, a military whose power is slowly increasing, and a coterie of powerful oligarchs.¹ What has resulted so far is much flip-flopping and inconsistencies in his policies. The tug-of-war between his nationalistic approach and the need for Indonesia to be investment-friendly has also proven tricky to manage. The weak economy and the problems in dispensing pro-poor funds have also hurt his reputation.

Yet, his popularity bounced up from 41 percent in June to about 52 percent exactly after one year in office.

This article investigates the political sentiments of the Muslim middle class – a group whose votes proved quite instrumental in giving victory to Jokowi during the 2014 elections. It demonstrates that there is growing dissatisfaction and even resentment against Jokowi in this group. So far, he is seen as being incapable of delivering on his promises, and as having to struggle badly in implementing his policies. This article argues that it is crucial for Jokowi to address this discontent.

A [NEWLY] FREED CLASS

While they should be the ‘motor’ for societal improvement, the middle class is generally an ambiguous agent of change. They may theoretically have the potential to bring progress but often act for their own interests, or they stay passive. Indonesia’s middle class is no different. To be sure, a specific definition for this class has proven challenging to formulate. H.W. Dick (1985) has provided some indication about the Indonesian case. Middle class professions there range from: civil servants (including teachers and academics) to doctors, lawyers, journalists, business executives, other white collar workers and employers. Although income is an important variable, Dick stressed the importance of lifestyle and attitudes instead in determining “the underlying coherence of an urban middle-class culture”.²

This class has at certain points in Indonesian history proven capable of taking political action when sorely needed. Notably, elements of the Indonesian Middle Class (mainly intellectuals) were influential in the establishment of pioneering political/mass organisations in the 1920s and in bringing about the reform movement at the end of New Order authoritarianism in 1998. However, for much of the post-independence days since 1945, it was conditioned to take the back seat – particularly by the New Order government’s approach of prioritising economic development and pressuring people to leave politics to the government. In this period, as oppression got worse, a Renewal of Islamic Thought movement (1970s-1980s) appeared which

¹ Analysts have put these oligarchs in two groups: those who are for Jokowi, and those who are against him. Those who supported Jokowi in the election include: Jusuf Kalla (vice president), Megawati Sukarnoputri (PDI-P party leader), and Surya Paloh (head of NasDem and owner of MetroTV). Those placed against him include Hary Tanoesoedibyo – a media mogul and former vice-presidential candidate of National Conscience Party (Hanura Party). See for example: Ross Tapsell, “Indonesia's oligarchs strike back”, *Rappler*, 29 May 2015, (<http://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/indonesia/94681-indonesia-oligarchs-strike-back>)

² H.W. Dick, “The Rise of a Middle Class and the Changing Concept of Equity in Indonesia: An Interpretation”, *Indonesia*, No 39 (Apr. 1985), p. 74.

called for the abandonment of the idea of an Islamic state and called for people to “recognise the reality of New Order and undertake initiatives that could enhance their influence within its institutions”.³ This movement remains influential. It is also crucial to note that towards the end of New Order, Suharto did try to appear more Islam-friendly. He performed the *hajj*, allowed the hijab to be worn in public schools, allowed the establishment of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI/Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia), and encouraged Islamic banking.

Still, it is the reform era that brought about freedom and proliferation of Islamic expressions. Media freedom and increasing consumerism have ensured the growth of a Muslim middle class that is increasingly wealthy, politically literate, and yet possesses differing views about what the role of Islam in the state should be.

This article sheds some light on this class and demonstrates firstly that it has evolved to become a distinct group that is interested in and has a solid understanding of political issues. Secondly, narrowing the scope of discussion to the perception of President Jokowi, this article shows that this group – although in general supportive of him – is getting restless over his policy failures. They perceive him as weak and floundering under pressure. Thirdly, while there are elements willing to wait for the next round of elections to displace Jokowi if he does not improve, there are also those who could choose to topple him by force before the next polling day. The findings here detects urgency for Jokowi to disperse these doubts, if he is to avoid greater loss of support.

A CONSCIOUS MIDDLE CLASS

Indonesia’s Muslim middle class is growing in size and importance, making them increasingly important to study. Although identifying the precise range of income for this class is rather problematic,⁴ there is no denying that a definite group – with specific aspirations and behaviour – has been emerging. Around 85% of Indonesia’s 250 million population are Muslims and studies estimate that by 2020, there will be over 70 million Indonesians joining the middle class.⁵ While their consumerism and economic influence have been studied quite widely,⁶ less is known about their socio-political attitudes.

Although the largest number of supportive votes for Jokowi may actually have come from the poor, there are indications that the president realises that he needs to please the Muslim middle

³ Robert W. Hefner, “Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class”, *Indonesia*, No. 56 (Oct 1993), p. 8.

⁴ McKinsey aims at households with earnings of just US\$7500 per year at purchasing power parity rates. Another estimate is that there are around 18% of Indonesians (44 million odd people) living on \$4 to \$20 per day which can be recognised as Middle Class. See Joanne Sharpe, “Meet Indonesia’s middle class”, *The Interpreter*, 19 February 2014, (<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/02/19/Meet-Indonesias-middle-class.aspx>)

⁵ These estimates are from consulting groups such as The Boston Consulting Group and Morgan Stanley.

⁶ See for instance, Greg Fealy, “Consuming Islam: Commodified religion and aspirational pietism in contemporary Indonesia, in Fealy and White (eds.), *Expressing Islam, religious life, and politics in Indonesia*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008); and Noorhaidi Hasan, “The making of public Islam: piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere”, *Contemporary Islam* (2009), 3, pp. 229-250.

class as well. Before the 2014 polling day, pre-election discussions⁷ revealed a strong demand for a president who was a devout Muslim. Aware that doubts over his Islamic credentials had resulted from underhanded campaigns by his enemies, Jokowi counteracted by going on *umrah* shortly before polling day. The *umrah* trip was seen positively by Muslims and seemed to appease some of his doubters. Even after the election, Jokowi made efforts to respond specifically to Muslim middle class interests. His plans to build and improve *syariah* tourism and Islamic banking are good examples of policies that the Muslim middle class would strongly favour.⁸ It seems clear from how discussions held in this study developed that members of the Muslim Middle Class no longer have qualms about Jokowi's Islam-ness. This may reflect an overall positive sentiment from Muslims about him as a Muslim. These discussions were often focused on his general performance instead.

Interactions with respondents⁹ reveal that their socio-economic status has allowed them access to various media (print, electronic, and also social media), which in comparison to their less well-off counterparts, has shaped and influenced their thinking. Such access has moulded their interest in a wide range of issues. When asked about the issues they think were important in contemporary Indonesia, the answers they gave varied widely. On social issues, they pointed to problems in education, the influence of social media, and even parenting. On political issues, they showed a nuanced perception of the government, and in particular of Jokowi. Overall, they saw him as having good intentions and solid long-term programmes. However, they also emphasised the fact that so far, he had not brought much benefit to the poor majority. An NGO-worker expressed this sentiment:

“In the long term, Jokowi's programmes are good. Still, [negative] short-term effects (of his long-term programmes) are most directly felt by the vulnerable. This is what we feel, [although] we still hope Jokowi will improve.”

Several policies were specifically identified as failures. Many respondents pointed to the implementation of the Healthcare and Social Security Agency (BPJS Kesehatan/Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial Kesehatan), the universal healthcare scheme that has faced many administrative hurdles, and that has been frustrating for those at the receiving end. Another policy receiving attention was the lifting of fuel subsidies, while some also drew attention to the criminalisation of the anti-corruption agency (KPK/Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi).

⁷ The author conducted these discussions in April 2014 as part of a study on the Indonesian elections. Respondents were 83 cadres of Islamic parties (Prosperous Justice Party/PKS, National Mandate Party/PAN, National Awakening Party/PKB, United Development Party/PPP, Crescent Star Party/PBB) in Malang and Surabaya. The main purpose of the study was to understand the political aspiration of these cadres.

⁸ See for example: “Indonesia hopes Islamic tourism drive can draw more visitors”, *The Straits Times*, 22 February 2015 (<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-hopes-islamic-tourism-drive-can-draw-more-visitors>); and “Jokowi: Indonesia Bisa Jadi Pusat Keuangan Syariah”, *tempo.co*, 14 June 2015 (<http://bisnis.tempo.co/read/news/2015/06/14/087674896/jokowi-indonesia-bisa-jadi-pusat-keuangan-syariah>)

⁹ This article is based on Focus Group Discussions with 60 respondents from the Muslim middle class in Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Malang. They were invited to this study based on their income of more than Rp. 5 million (USD 361) per month and the fact that they were car-owners. These requirements were designed to target the middle range of the middle class in Indonesia. For comparison, minimum wage for these cities were Rp. 2.710.000 (approx. USD 195) for Surabaya, Rp. 1.882.250 (approx. USD 135) for Malang, and Rp. 1.302.500 (approx. USD 94) for Yogyakarta. Many of them were teachers, university lecturers, and entrepreneurs.

The lifting of the fuel subsidies was seen as a good policy overall, although respondents raised concerns over whether the plan to replace the subsidies with direct financial assistance to the poor could be done effectively. They were also generally concerned about the effect of the rapid fluctuation of fuel prices on the needy. Even while expressing their frustration, respondents demonstrated understanding of the challenges facing the implementation of these policies. One restaurant owner had this answer:

“There is no coordination between the central and local governments. I think it is important to have good synergy between the central and local governments in allocating the subsidies for the interest of the poor.”

Their answers also suggest a realisation that Jokowi faced many limitations and challenges, such as how party dynamics within his own PDIP (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan/Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) had severely limited his actions. His late nomination and the lack of party support for his candidacy were quite well-known among respondents. Aside from this, Jokowi was also seen as frail when compared to the big power holders around him. Some responses from a university lecturer and two entrepreneurs respectively described these concerns:

“What I am afraid of is that he does not have a network at the national level. The fear is that he is actually ‘steered’, whether it is by conglomerates or whoever else. Jokowi is nice, but being nice only is not enough to be president in Indonesia.”

“A leader should be firm. When he is under pressure from his political party, he has to have firmness.”

“The support from PDIP is not solid. There is intrigue, and Jokowi is not free. Support from the party for Jokowi does not exist. Jokowi has volunteer supporters, but these have also fallen in numbers as they have their own interests.”

The answers painted a picture of a middle class that was conscious of political issues and dynamics, and that was assessing the Jokowi administration closely. While casual chats with poor Indonesians (such as market vendors and pedicab drivers)¹⁰ would typically reveal deep frustration over how the lifting of fuel subsidies had caused uncertainties in fuel pricing, these respondents supported the policy instead and understood that there would be subsequent price fluctuations. They highlighted instead the complication in shifting the subsidies to the poor as a problem. Similarly, bad coordination between governmental departments as well as managing the vested interests of Jokowi’s backers were emphasized as a major problem for his administration. Further discussions showed however that this show of understanding is dependent on Jokowi improving his performance in the near future.

¹⁰ Based on earlier definition on the Middle Class by McKinsey, poor Indonesians are those who earn below USD 4/day.

LOSS OF INTEREST, LOSS OF PATIENCE

The Muslim middle class had shown particularly strong support for Jokowi long before his presidential candidacy.¹¹ While some support may have been lost along the way to the other candidate, Prabowo;¹² Jokowi and his team managed to sway things back by polling day. However, this study suggests that this support is in danger of deteriorating. Respondents who did not vote in the elections or who supported Prabowo understandably voiced their disappointment with Jokowi's performance. Yet, even those who voted for and volunteered for his campaign have also expressed increasing impatience over his performance. The following quotes from a teacher and travel agency owner respectively show the doubts and dissatisfaction that they felt:

"I am not among those who voted for Jokowi. However, I think it is too early to evaluate him. Let us give him two years to see how he realises his ideas. We have to be able to compare between the weaknesses and strengths. If there are more weaknesses, then I agree to bring down Jokowi."

"I voted for Prabowo although I was part of Jokowi's success team. This is because after the presidential debate, I felt that the president would not be Jokowi, but the people behind him. The one doing the work is not Jokowi, the thinker is not Jokowi, but the people behind him."

As contrast, below are quotes from his supporters—a teacher, an entrepreneur, and an NGO-worker, respectively:

"So far we still see him as positive. If after two years he is unsuccessful, we may wish to topple Jokowi-Jusuf Kalla."

"We have only had him for six months. Previously, the six-month assessments for SBY, Megawati and Gus Dur were even worse. I would just let him work. I dare not assess. But if he messes up, and is not pro-people, I will take to the street."

"Our responsibility is to support. If we want to evaluate, let us do it in the last six months of his administration, and judge him in the 2019 elections. If he is bad then let's not vote for him. No need to take to the streets."

THE COSTS OF DISCONTENT AND POSSIBLE AVENUES FOR A COMEBACK

Even among these who showed more understanding of Jokowi's situation, there is growing impatience at how slowly things had been moving. Patience seems to be getting even thinner among those whose livelihood has been hit by the oil price fluctuations. There is willingness

¹¹ See for example Markus Junianto Sihaloho, "Joko a Favourite for President among the Middle-Class: Survey", *Jakarta Globe*, 21 March 2013.

¹² See for example James M. Lindsay, "Hello, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo: President of Indonesia", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 July 2014, (<http://blogs.cfr.org/lindsay/2014/07/22/hello-joko-jokowi-widodo-president-of-indonesia/>), and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja "Jokowi out to woo back middle class", *Asiaone.com*, 29 June 2014 (<http://news.asiaone.com/news/asia/jokowi-out-woo-back-middle-class>).

to stage street demonstrations *a la* 1998, suggesting that trust of government institutions, particularly the presidency, is weakening.

Undoubtedly, the Jokowi administration has been keeping itself busy. The numerous major infrastructure projects, the development of a maritime network across the archipelago, and the cleaning up the bureaucracy are ongoing. The decreasing support for the president among the Muslim middle class may take some time and policies to reverse. What is worth noting is that although there was no particular strong Islamic tone in the discussions, Islam-focused policies were still favourably seen by this class. While certain *syariah*-focused plans may gain the president some Muslim middle class sympathy in the long run, specific improvements in important areas may ignite a quicker comeback in their support. For instance, the continuing KPK (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi/Corruption Eradication Commission) saga could provide a momentum for support if Jokowi takes the KPK's side and stops the effort to amend the law on the KPK.¹³

On the economy, as many members of the middle class are entrepreneurs, clearer policies on investments which may affect their businesses positively would be welcome. Overall, Jokowi urgently needs to be a firmer leader than he has appeared to be so far.

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¹³ Jokowi's sole nomination of Budi Gunawan as the police chief at the start of his administration was controversial as Gunawan had been named a graft suspect by the KPK. In what appeared to be revenge against KPK, the police built up criminal cases against several top KPK leaders, leaving the anti-graft body extremely weak. The Indonesian parliament has proposed several amendments to the law on KPK, which may weaken the commission further. See: "Lima pasal dalam RUU KPK yang disusun DPR", *BBC online*, 7 October 2015, (http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/10/151007_indonesia_ruu_kpk_limahal)