



Democratic Political Articulation

The Intersection of Between Agrarian Issues and Democracy in Indonesia

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Abstract. The complexity of agrarian issues also affects the quality of democracy in Indonesia. However, most recent studies have not comprehensively discussed the relationship between the two. By taking references from agrarian and democratic studies, this paper discusses the relationship between agrarian issues and democracy in Indonesia, especially in the post-authoritarian era. Here, several arguments are put forward. First, the four main agrarian issues in Indonesia land grabbing, the rate of class differentiation in rural contexts, socio-economic disparities, and the quality of local democracy have a significant impact on the conditions and trajectory of Indonesia's democracy. Second, the dynamic agrarian movement also contributes to the deepening process of democracy. Finally, this paper discusses several possible political prescriptions and policies to address agrarian issues to improve the quality of democracy in Indonesia.

Keywords: Democratic · Political articulation · Agrarian issues

1 Introduction

Agrarian issues in their various dimensions always color the political discourse and policy directions in contemporary Indonesia. In the era of the national movement until the Old Order, the struggle for anti-colonialism and national liberation primarily relied on the solidarity of the peasants, tiny farmers, and farmworkers as one of the foundations of the struggle [1]. Under the authoritarianism of the New Order, which heavily exposed the legacy and spirit of agrarian populism in the past, attention to the peasantry and political-economic stability in rural areas also became one of the foundations of the New Order's pro-market developmental policies [2]. Agrarian issues also continued to haunt Indonesia during and after the Reformation era, with political openness facilitating more intense participation and mobilization of the peasants and their supporting activists [3]. At the same time, the latter faced challenges from the expansion of market interests, predatory elites, other forces, and illiberal [4].

However, there are not many analyzes that explicitly link the relationship and mutual influence between agrarian issues and the trajectory and quality of democracy.

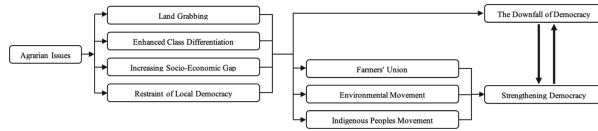


Fig. 1. The relationship between agrarian issues and democracy in Indonesia.

The democratization of a political entity such as the state is closely related to democratization in rural areas [5]. The transition process to democracy will also be hampered if authoritarian enclaves are still entrenched in several government areas, such as the legislative and judicial branches, and geographical areas, such as the regional government [6]. The contours of agrarian issues in Indonesia, ranging from overt conflicts such as the 1965 Politicide and land grabbing to more subtle processes of contestation and exploitation, such as increasing socio-economic disparities in rural areas, also have a significant influence on the quality of democracy in Indonesia. These problems are closely related to the quality of the living space and the rights of the affected citizens.

This article attempts to analyze the relationship between agrarian issues and democracy in Indonesia (Fig. 1). This article makes two central claims using references from agrarian studies and comparative social studies, especially comparative politics. First, various agrarian issues in Indonesia have influenced the quality and trajectory of democracy in Indonesia after the collapse of the New Order. More specifically, the four primary and pressing agrarian issues—land grabbing, increasing class differentiation among peasants, increasing socio-economic disparities in rural areas, and curbing several democratic political rights at the local level—contributed to the tendency to veer towards non-discrimination: liberal (illiberal turn) and the decline in the quality of Indonesian democracy.

Second, at the same time, with the increasing complexity of agrarian and democratic issues in Indonesia, contemporary agrarian movements, such as farmers' unions, environmental movements, and indigenous peoples' movements, have contributed to deepening and strengthening democracy in Indonesia. In other words, here, there are two processes running simultaneously and tug-of-war, namely the decline and deepening of the quality of Indonesian democracy about agrarian issues. This shows the importance of revisiting agrarian issues to understand the dynamics of politics and democracy comprehensively.

2 Research Methods

This study was conducted using bibliometric and descriptive evaluative analysis methods. The study population is primary data for journal articles from 2015–2021 taken from search results conducted in August 2021 through the Google Scholar database using the Publish or Perish application with the “abstract keyword” agrarian and democracy; the database obtained is 1000 articles, the data is exported in the format of Research Information Systems (RIS). The data is taken from the Publish or Perish application, then imported into the VOS viewer data management application. The next step is to extract the title and abstract by using the binary counting method and using a minimum of 10 times the emergence of a term [7]. The data processing results show that very little research on the impact of agrarianism and democracy has been carried out (see Fig. 2).

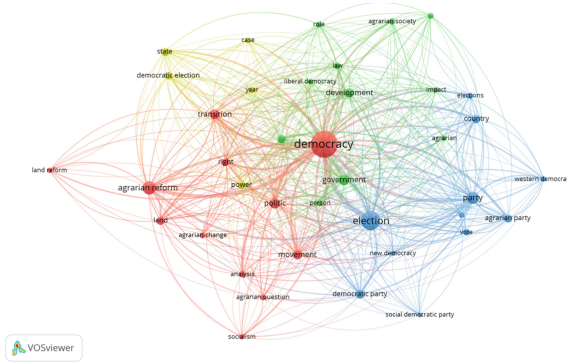


Fig. 2. Results of data analysis using VOS viewer.

To analyze the relationship between agrarian issues and broader political dynamics, the researcher uses Henry Bernstein’s classical formulation model of four critical questions of agrarian political economy—who owns what (ownership structure), who does what (work relations), who gets what (production and income), surplus-value from the agrarian production process), and what is done with the surplus-value (the process of accumulation and misappropriation of surplus-value)—is the initial perspective that needs to be used to analyze the impact of agrarian issues on the political process. However, that alone is not enough [8]. We know from classical macro historical studies of the peasants and revolution that the peasants can mobilize for social transformation. About the process of democratization and deepening of democracy, several critical studies conducted by several scientists’ politicians, such as Frances Hagopian, John Sidel, and Adaner Usmani, made two important findings. First, control over land-based economic assets facilitates dominant political influence and the hijacking of state resources, such as government budgets and political office. Second, land tenure-based oligarchy is one of the biggest obstacles to democratization [9, 10]. In short, these studies show a close relationship between agrarian issues and political dynamics, especially in terms of the conflicting interests of the expansion of capitalism with the working classes (classes of labor), in rural areas and the articulation of democratic politics [11].

A more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between agrarian issues and democracy is also needed because of the increasingly expansive process of accumulation through dispossession (ABD) in the era of neoliberal capitalism through various practices, ranging from the commodification and privatization of natural resources to expropriation under the pretext of conservation [12]. Historically, the process of capitalistic accumulation has had far more significant political implications in the Southeast Asia region [13]. In this regard, Indonesia is a crucial case study as a young, middle-income democracy with a long history of rural political upheaval. A deeper reading of agrarian and democratic issues is needed to understand and respond to the rising trend of contemporary authoritarian populism closely related to agrarian change and rural politics [14].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Four Agrarian Issues and Their Impact on Indonesian Democracy

Based on the analytical lens described previously, this section will describe how Indonesia's four main agrarian problems contribute to the decline in the quality of democracy and bring Indonesian democracy to a more illiberal direction based on various sources and illustrative empirical examples. Here, the four agrarian problems certainly do not appear suddenly. These problems are symptoms or symptoms of a broader structural problem, namely the inequality of control of rural resources in the form of an oligarchy that operates in a capitalistic political economy and its various political implications [15].

The oligarchy significantly influences Indonesian politics. What needs to be further questioned is what kind of social formation forms and maintains oligarchy, especially in rural areas, and the impacts of oligarchy on Indonesian democracy. To answer this question, we need to look at the behavior of two political forces, namely state actors (the bureaucracy and the political elite) and the capitalist class, which operate via corporations, and their impact on political dynamics in rural areas.

Both state actors and the capitalist class operate within the historical context of the development of capitalism in Indonesia, marked by various deepening capitalist social relations processes. Rural areas and farm households are one of the primary loci of the deepening process [16, 17]. The state is also involved as a regulator, and an actor in ensuring the expansion of capitalism in rural areas runs smoothly and massively. This phenomenon was very clearly seen during the New Order era, evidenced by the issuance of a series of laws and policies that facilitated large-scale capital investment by State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) and private companies in people's agricultural lands [18]. Several laws and regulations born during the New Order era facilitated large-scale capital investment in rural areas related to foreign and domestic investment, investment in forest resources, and the use of Cultivation Rights (HGU) as operating permits for corporations in rural areas.

The Reformation Era provided openness and political change that allowed mobilization and articulation of peasant demands, but at the same time, there was a deepening of capital expansion and market relations in rural areas [1]. Just look at the structure of land tenure and village resources in the last two decades since the Reformation. In 2000, 25 large-scale companies, some of the cronies of former president Suharto, still controlled more than 223 Forest Concession Rights (HPH), covering 27 million hectares of forest land [19]. Then, between 2010–2014, although the amount of agricultural land tended to be the same (between 36–38 million hectares), ownership and control of the land are still dominated by state-owned enterprises and large-scale private companies [20]. In more or less the same period, namely between 2000–2012, investors managed to acquire 9.5 million hectares of land in Indonesia—one of the most extensive global records [21].

The number of large plantation companies operating in Indonesia is quite fantastic. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics show that as of 2016, there were 1.592 plantation companies in Indonesia, and half of them were oil palm plantation companies [22]. In several sectors, such as the large-scale food and biofuel industry, seed, and

sugar, corporate actors also continue to play a role. The state continues to be the leading proponent of corporate expansion, as evidenced by government subsidies to corporate actors [23]. Such collusive relations between the state and the capitalist class further exacerbate converting agricultural land to maximize profit accumulation.

With such a political configuration, it is not surprising that land grabbing in Indonesia has increased sharply. The Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA) noted that in ten years (2004–2014), there were 1,500 open agrarian conflicts involving one million farming households and covering more than 6.5 million hectares of land [24]. This trend has continued from the 1970s to the 1980s. It is a consequence of the massive issuance of HGU permits. Looking at the trend, we can predict that land grabbing will continue to increase in the future.

The issue of class differentiation among farmers is also important to discuss. Contrary to popular and romantic assumptions that imagine the peasants as a homogeneous and harmonious entity, the accumulation of land and rural resources ultimately encourages the process of class differentiation among farmers [25]. The trend over the three decades shows that the absolute number of landless farmers and smallholders is increasing, as is the inequality of land tenure structures among farmers.

Equally important, the issue of political democracy in rural areas has also emerged as a severe problem. Although in general, there are no changes in the rule of law or policies that change the rules of the game of political democracy—for example, in terms of electoral contestation at the local level—significantly, cases of repression and intimidation, as well as restraints on civil and political rights by actors state and corporate affairs, continue to occur, both through the state's coercive apparatus and thuggery. Here, we cannot dwell only on the issue of the legal-formal rules of the game because the impact of political repression and intimidation ultimately has a real negative impact on efforts to mobilize and advocate for agrarian movements at the local level. Indeed, such restraints are episodic and unsystematic. However, these actions have become a trend that worries farmers, activists, and agrarian movement activists in many places [26]. Not to mention the issue of campaigning in various high-cost regional elections (*pilkada*), this condition opens up collaborations between extractive industries, such as coal mining, which requires business licenses and regional head candidates who need donors for their campaigns and reduces the chances of candidates from social movements to win elections [27].

The combined effect of the various problems above, which are interrelated, ultimately affects the quality and trajectory of Indonesian democracy at the local level. The economic-political configuration that tends to favor political elites and business actors is increasingly perpetuating their power, coupled with the strength of the agrarian and peasant movements. It is still challenging to consolidate amid a deepening class gap, making local democracy, both in terms of contestation and electoral politics and broader political dynamics and institutions, tend to benefit the elites and reduce the space and possibility for agrarian movement activists to make political breakthroughs. Using a Bernsteinian perspective, the explanation above shows that the capitalist class and state apparatus controlling various rural production and distribution resources such as land and natural resources enable them to extract surplus-value from the rural sector and dominate the political arena to win their interests. Sometimes the limitation of democratic

space is carried out in repressive ways. In short, contemporary agrarian issues also hurt the quality of Indonesian democracy.

3.2 How the Agrarian Movement Answers the Problem of Indonesian Democracy

Another question that is also important to answer is the response of the agrarian movement to agrarian issues and democracy in Indonesia? To answer this problem, we need to look at the dialectical relationship between the agrarian movement and the democratization process in Indonesia. Although its influence tends to be limited, the agrarian movement has contributed positively to the process of democratization and deepening of democracy in Indonesia [30].

The historiography of the contemporary agrarian movement begins in post-1965 from the 1970s, the period when several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education and Information (LP3ES), Mitra Tani, Bina Desa, and other institutions which is the network of the three institutions to carry out advocacy work and organizing alternative economies in rural areas [28]. However, even though these institutions promote alternative development works in rural areas, their agrarian political vision is still limited to moderate criticism of the developmentalism of the Order. New instead offers a more radical and fundamental critique.

More confrontational resistance began to occur in the 1980s, when large-scale land conflicts between citizens and state actors, corporations, and international financial institutions began to erupt and various legal aid institutions (LBH), NGOs, and student action committees began to erupt and engage in efforts to advocate for the rights of citizens in the conflict. This can be seen, for example, in advocating for several land conflict cases, such as the Kedung Ombo Dam case in Central Java and the Cimacan golf course in West Java in the 1980s and 1990s [29]. This period also marked the beginning of efforts to build alliances between middle-class activists and all peasants and marginalized villagers as well as various farmer unions, which manifest in the form of local farmers' unions, such as the West Java Peasants Union (SPJB) or North Sumatra Peasants' Union (SPSU), as well as agrarian movement coalitions, broader ones, such as the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA) [30].

Efforts to gain land rights (the primary aspiration of the peasants) and build a new mass political tradition (the primary aspiration of the activists) were a challenge for the authoritarian New Order regime, which also experimented with political openness. At least, from the 1980s to the 1990s, what happened was a long effort where various models of activism, ranging from legal and political advocacy on land rights, the formation of farmers' unions to demonstrations, intersect and reinforce one another. This wave of agrarian activism also strengthened and became part of many pro-democracy movements demanding regime change. However, overall, the impact of the agrarian movement on the overthrow of the New Order regime, although necessary, tends to be limited because its mass base and activities are concentrated in rural areas and provincial cities.

Meanwhile, the most critical political crises and moments, such as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the inability of the New Order regime to deal with them, actually occurred in the center of government and the big cities [31]. Therefore, at the end of the New Order era, a cross-class coalition and power-urban-based social forces (students,

workers, activists, and leaders of religious groups) dealt the final blow to the New Order. The agrarian movement did contribute to the struggle to overthrow authoritarianism. However, the constellation and political direction made the struggle for land rights and other peasant rights merely footnotes rather than the main demands of the pro-democracy agenda.

Somewhat more encouraging developments appear to have occurred in the post-Reformation era of democracy. Political change and openness provided sufficient space for a more assertive and militant political articulation of the agrarian movement [2]. In 2001, for example, the Pasundan Peasants Union (SPP) carried out a massive mass action in Jakarta [2]. This action succeeded in winning the enforcement of a Consultative Assembly Decree People (Tap MPR) Number IX/2001 concerning agrarian reform and natural resources whose mandate is to strengthen the implementation of the mandate of agrarian reform, as stated in Law Number 5 of 1960 concerning Basic Regulations on Agrarian Principles [32]. Then, early 2000 marked the political momentum where local farmers' unions in various places began to emerge as a forum to fight for the resolution of agrarian conflicts and land rights [33].

The peasant unions adopted various strategies to advance their agenda in its development. Direct action strategies, such as mass mobilization, demonstrations, and in some cases, land occupation, remained the primary weapon of many farmers' unions and other local agrarian movements. In addition, some forms of political strategy, particularly electoral mobilization and negotiations with local elites, were also adopted to strengthen and win the struggle. Many local farmers' unions and other agrarian organizations such as SPP, Bengkulu Farmers Union (STaB), Batang Regency Farmers Association Forum (FPPB), Nahdliyin Front for Natural Resources Sovereignty (FNKSDA), to the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), are involved in various types of electoral battles, from village head elections (*pilkades*) to *pilkada*, with varying degrees of success [34].

In recent years, farmers' unions have also begun to organize alternative economies to support political work and structure the rural economy based on the principle of collectivity. The development of production cooperatives to manage the production process and distribution of agricultural products, for example, is one of the common strategies adopted [35]. Credit unions based on the agrarian movement have also begun to form to meet alternative financial needs outside the institutions of large banks, some of which already have rotations access quite fast [36]. Some farmer groups are also experimenting with organic or natural farming to break the chain of dependence on agricultural corporations [36]. There are also farmer unions that have built and sustainably run social institutions, such as educational institutions from elementary schools (SD) to vocational high schools (SMK) built by SPP [4].

What can be evaluated from the progress of the agrarian movement in Indonesia, especially in the last two decades after the Reformation? At the very least, we need to evaluate the achievements of the contemporary agrarian movement in two domains, namely the political impact of the agrarian movement's mobilization efforts and the policy changes it causes.

The findings of several historical and quantitative studies need to be used as references to evaluate the agrarian movement achievements in the first realm, the. Frances

Piven and Richard Cloward underlined in their historical study of contemporary social movements in the US and the Ottomans. In their quantitative study of the role of the working class in democratization since the first half of the twentieth century, it is the “disruptive action” of marginalized social groups that makes authority and power-holders are willing to negotiate, accommodate some demands “from below”, and ultimately encourage a broader process of political democratization [37]. Several key works in democratization studies also show that historically the collective action of all working people was one of the factors that forced the elite to pave the way for the democratization process [38].

The agrarian movement in Indonesia also shows a similar pattern. Various mobilization efforts carried out by the agrarian movement, especially in its disruptive forms, such as demonstrations, land occupations, theatrical actions, to debates with security forces and local officials, forced the elite to listen and accommodate some of the movement’s demands which in turn expanded the democratic space at the local level. The accommodations may be small concessions or victories. However, the overall effect of these accommodations is the expansion and deepening of democratic space at the local level—one thing that could be said to have been absent throughout the New Order era. It can be said that this is a fairly fundamental change.

However, we still need to provide several notes for these achievements, because practically, there has been no radical change in the realm of agrarian policy, especially in terms of inequality in land tenure and rural production resources. Some policies referred to as “agrarian reform policies,” such as land titling (which started in the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration) and social forestry, are more moderate than radical. The legalization of individual land ownership by farming households without collective control from the community itself is prone to paving the way for transforming people’s land into a land market dominated by large corporations [36].

Then, schemes such as social forestry also can reduce political issues regarding forest land management to mere technical issues—a process that Tania Li calls “rendering technical” [39]. Schemes that can target agrarian issues more fundamentally are not only focused on the implementation of land certification and social forestry but also require the implementation of many other policies, such as the resolution of cases of agrarian conflicts and land grabbing, control over corporate activities, and suppression of investment in the regions. The rural areas, a moratorium on the issuance of HGU permits, and government assistance for collective farm production and distribution schemes driven autonomously by the agrarian movement.

In other words, the influence of the agrarian movement on agricultural policy in post-New Order Indonesia—despite myopia and the hallucinations of some of its activists—still seems limited. The agrarian movement has made many significant achievements, but the impetus for implementing one main agrarian movement agenda, namely agrarian reform from below with significant redistribution elements, is still very limited. The benchmark is clear: so far, there is no agrarian reform agenda commensurate with the campaign and implementation of agrarian reform in the Old Order era in terms of scope, speed of implementation, and socialist-populist spirit. At the national level, the agrarian

movement is more successful in encouraging a policy to be discussed by policymakers and related parties but has not been very successful in ensuring that the policy is implemented properly and consistently.

However, at least in some aspects, we can say that the agrarian movement has contributed positively to deepening and improving the quality of Indonesian democracy, especially at the local level. First, the agrarian movement returned the discourse on agrarian and ecological justice and agrarian reform into Indonesian politics. Second, the agrarian movement's various mobilization and advocacy efforts have also increased citizen participation, especially among the agricultural working class, in local democratic processes.

Third, through mobilization and advocacy efforts, the agrarian movement helps counter authoritarian tendencies at the local level. Fourth, by raising agrarian issues and the rights of farmers and other marginalized villagers, the agrarian movement enriches the discourse on democracy in Indonesia beyond the conceptualization of liberal democracy, which emphasizes only civil and political rights. Thus, the agrarian movement also contributes to democratizing class relations in Indonesia, where electoral democracy is still heavily characterized by oligarchic and patron-clientelistic political processes and sharp socioeconomic disparities [40].

4 Conclusion

There is a close relationship between agrarian issues and the future of democracy in Indonesia. The results of this study can say that the “ghost” of agrarian issues continues to overshadow the trajectory of democracy in the future. The agrarian movement can respond to the challenges of the socio-ecological crisis and the deconsolidation of democracy that has been increasing recently. However, the agrarian movement requires more advanced policy and political prescriptions to carry out this task. The presentation in this article is one of the few initial steps to spark a debate that can help us answer that question.

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