

## Editorial

# The Indonesia Middle Class: A Conceptual Debate

The term “middle class” in the study of Indonesian society and politics has not reached a definitive meaning and understanding. Yet, this term has been often used in various publications, both academic and popular. This should encourage an academic initiative to define the meaning of middle class. The issue of the ambiguous understanding of the middle class has been mentioned by Ariel Heryanto (1999:11), who observed the dilemmatic position of the middle class in three premises: 1) conceptually, the middle class is positioned as an autonomous group within the relations of the state and the society, 2) observationally, the Indonesian middle class is assumed as the bourgeoisie, or as a group of *nouveaux-riche*s, namely a group within society arising from the momentum of economic growth, and 3) the middle class is presumed as an agent of change, showing the diversity of the characteristics of the society, such as being reactionary, pragmatic, apolitical, opportunist, critical and independent.

Besides the three premises, the context of the rise of the Indonesian middle class is also different from that of the rise of the Western middle class. In the Western experience, the rise of the middle class could be analysed through the two main approaches: Weberian and Marxian. The first approach saw the rise of the middle class due to exchanges of economic interest, while the latter approach saw it as a form of conflict between economic interests. Both approaches, however, share the same root, observing the middle class as a group arising in the Industrial Revolution resulting in specialisation of function and ownership of assets. The group is called a “class” as it has a rational, critical, independent and pragmatic character, resulting in a separate position from other societal groups. In the Weberian tradition, the middle class is called a group whose livelihood is derived from asset ownership and skills (Pattinasarany 2016). In the Marxian tradition, the middle class is regarded as petty bourgeoisie,

namely a group having ownership and use of means of production, but does not employ workers (Pattinasarany 2016).

Both ideas of the middle class show how mobilisation of status, material and capital by a group of society that is conducted independently is an important indicator of the middle class within a state. The rise of the middle class is the social indicator of a state's modernisation. Heryanto's arguments at least reflect, in a macro aspect, the "definitional confusion" of the Indonesian middle class. Other than that, another explanation of the issue is reflected from the lack of specific studies about the Indonesian middle class. In general, the term "middle class" has often been used liberally in various literacy products; however, this is not followed with various academic attempts to further elaborate its definition. The first attempt to be done is to trace the historiography of the development of the Indonesian society, especially the transition from feudalism to colonialism, independence up to the present day. It is also important to observe the history of the Ethical Politics, and the economic liberalisation, from agrarian-communal to agroindustrial-private.

In order to resolve the definitional confusion, this article intends to position the Indonesian middle class on two contexts: the middle class as an economic class, and the middle class as a political class. As a political class, the middle class was created by the Ethical Politics of the colonial era, resulting in the rise of an indigenous bourgeoisie, which later developed into a political intellectual class. Bourgeoisie and intellectualism are the initial capitals for the rise of the middle class in Indonesia (Jati 2017). The Ethical Politics and the economic liberalisation of early 20th century Indonesia brought various logical consequences to various socio-political changes in Indonesia. These socio-political changes were marked with the decline of the existing order of the societies, which was bound in patrimonialism, and the adoption of the values, principles and culture of modernism, within the framework of Dutch colonialism. Gradually, the influence of the aristocracy began to fade in the society, especially among the priyayi. The transformation from the middle "group" into a middle "class" can be dated to the National Awakening period, beginning with the rise of the Boedi Oetomo in 1908. Various other milestones, such as the Youth Pledge of 1928, the demonstrations of 1966, 1974, the Reformasi of 1998 and the volunteers of 2014 show that the middle

class remains as a highly active extra-parliamentary political group in the society.

As a political class, the middle class can be categorised into two forms: the middle class as an interest group, and as a pressure group. Both forms of political expression show the fluctuations of the Indonesian middle class' political expression, waxing and waning depending on incidental and accidental political moments. In general, the political character shown by the Indonesian middle class is pragmatic, opportunist and rational. The middle class tends to treat politics as a transactional arena, giving more importance to benefits gained rather than idealism. Other than the two categorisations, another aspect to be underlined is the shift in the form of political action, from collective to connective. The change marks the need of a wider vehicle of political expression, formerly based on spatial area, and now tending to encroach the cyber-spatial area.

Anders Uhlin (1998) in *Oposisi Berserak* (the more interestingly titled Indonesian translation of Indonesia and the 'Third Wave of Democratization') observed in more depth the activism of political movements occurring on the eve of the New Order's demise. The middle class, initiated by students and activists, became an important actor in propelling democracy in a massive scale from the grassroots, bringing their demands to the political elites. However, there are important prerequisites to fulfil in gathering political power from the grassroots, namely 1) the existence of a "common enemy" to fight, as in general the Indonesian middle class tends to blur the boundaries between black and white, and 2) the issue has significance to the daily realities of the middle class society. These two are the prerequisites for the Indonesian middle class to become engaged in political activism.

Compared to various studies on the socio-political characteristics of the middle class, studies of the Indonesian middle class from the economic viewpoint tend to dominate. This is due to the economic parameters of the Indonesian middle class being able to be described more objectively and clearly, in the aspects of definition, genealogy and class membership, i.e. using the indicators of income and spending. However, these economic indicators also depart from various social changes in the dynamic society.

It is interesting to re-read Wertheim (1999), noting that social changes resulting in societal changes are marked by the adoption of the Western lifestyle (Wertheim 1999:137). Westernisation resulted

in the rise of the *mestizo* (a societal group with a focus on lifestyle instead of fulfilment of utility), which also marked an important indicator of the Indonesian middle class as a quasi-middle class. The rise of the *mestizo* was also an important implication of the rise of two forms of middle classes during the colonial era, namely the pariah capitalists, and the westernised intellectual of bureaucrats and intellectuals (Soetrisno 1984). The wave of modernisation in the society was marked by economic modernisation and education for the indigenous population, creating a new societal group in Indonesia, and at the same time resulting in the decline of the influence of the royalty in the society. The weakening grip of the indigenous kingdoms in the patron-client system was balanced with the adoption of Western colonial culture. This was a major trigger in the fading of imaginary social stratification boundaries in the society. At the same time, it gave rise to a classification of the society into groups based on control of assets and material, resulting in a diverse society. Thus, the term of “middle class” was created to refer to the transitional group with a better standard of livelihood compared to the extant populace. Here, the standard referred to the imaginary socio-political demarcation of the middle class, based on symbols and assets. Both reflected their privileged status as a group in the society compared to other societal groups. They were located in the “middle”, between the state and society at large, bridging these two actors. However, they also attempted to transform into an autonomous entity, separate from the state and society.

The context of the diverse society is the embryo of the context of the rise of the Indonesian middle class. The character of diversity is marked by the control of assets and material, both in the economy and in intellectuality. Both were important sources of the mobilisation of social status in society. The context of the diversity of the new society had an important impact in the form of massive competition in the public sphere. The construction of social cohesiveness in the society was replaced with a collectivity based on interests. The condition often occurs in post-colonial states, resulting in a status quo arena of power between societal groups.

The post-1965 debacle was a crucial point in the development and changes of the Indonesian society. The most important change was the creation of a new society due to the intervention of state economic growth. This development caused the redefinition of the

middle class as a societal group whose creation was an impact of the government's economic policy (Lev 1996). In other words, as a socio-economic group, the Indonesian middle class was created through the externalisation of economic growth, as a group of *nouveaux-riches*. The implication is a sociological membership identifiable as young professionals, bureaucrats, students, housewives and other functional groups. In order to maintain the functional aspect in the economy, consumption of secondary and tertiary commodities supporting social status becomes important. The need to support social status is known as *lifestyling* (Pambudy 2010). The context of *lifestyling* is what later develops as the dominant discourse in the current definition of the middle class.

It remains a challenge for socio-political academics in Indonesia to reformulate the study of the politics of the middle class, through comprehensively defining the term. At least, it is important to balance the definition of the middle class as economic and political groups, so as to prevent confusion in the use of the term "middle class" in the study of Indonesian society.

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