



## Indonesian Peasants in the Constellation of Power and the Trajectory of Capitalism

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### Abstract

*As an agricultural nation, Indonesia has a paradoxical situation where its peasants have never been a dominant political force. This condition can be seen from the lack of regulations in favor of peasants, the rampant criminalization of peasants in land conflicts, to the absence of peasant-based movements and political parties. This article explains the position of peasants in the constellation of power and the trajectory of capitalism in Indonesia. The article concludes that peasants have always been in a marginal political position at various periods, starting from the feudal era to the era of capitalism introduced by the Dutch colonial government. This position continued in the era of independent Indonesia where peasants remained on the periphery of Indonesian politics which was dominated by the bureaucracy and military during the New Order and oligarchy during the Reformation era.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesia, power constellation, peasants, capitalism trajectory*

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## INTRODUCTION

Land conflicts that result in the criminalisation of peasants continue to occur in Indonesia. Some cases that can be mentioned include cases in Mukomuko (cnnindonesia.com, 2022), Garut (Ghani & Alhamidi, 2022), Pakel (Setyawan, 2021), Kumpeh Ulu (Tambunan, 2023), and others. Data from the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA) can serve as an illustration of agrarian conflict cases in Indonesia, which totalled 279 cases (in 2019), 241 cases (2020), 207 cases (2021), and 212 cases (2022)<sup>1</sup>. These agrarian cases have contributed to the decline in the quality of democracy in Indonesia after the New Order and the tendency to turn illiberal (Anugrah, 2019). This situation is a paradoxical picture considering that Indonesia is an agrarian country, but its peasants face the threat of conflict due to development programmes.

An interesting question that needs to be addressed is the reasons why peasants in an agrarian nation like Indonesia do not seem to have a strong bargaining position and the power to defend their interests in the face of capital penetration. Or in a simpler question, why are Indonesian peasants not a dominant political force? This question requires an investigation of the position and relationship of peasants with other social forces in Indonesia.

Yet the literature shows that in history, the peasant class in various countries was

<sup>1</sup> All data from the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA) is compiled from the Year-End Notes which can be downloaded at <http://kpa.or.id/catatan-akhir-tahun>.

able to play an important role in various rebellions and revolutions (Mousnier, 1970; Wolf, 1969). Peasants in Nusantara (Indonesia before 1945) often protested against the rapid social changes brought about by the penetration of Dutch colonial rule (Suryo, 1985). Meanwhile, in the current democratic era, peasants in some countries have become an influential political force through political parties, such as the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) in Bolivia which managed to make its leader Evo Morales president for three terms (Souverein, 2020) and the Boer Burger Beweging (BBB) which won the Dutch general election in 2023 (Corder, 2023), or through demonstrations such as those conducted by peasants in India to reject laws that liberalized agriculture (Quinquilla et al., 2022). In Indonesia, there is no dominant political party representing peasants and it is unlikely that peasant movements will be able to influence policy.

In answering this question, this article explains the position of peasants in the constellation of power in various phases of the development of capitalism in Indonesia. To do so, this article applies the concept of power constellations, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

## POWER CONSTELLATIONS

A constellation of power can simply be defined as the relationship between social forces in the political arena. This concept has been subject to extensive debate among social and political scientists. Barrington Moore is among them, who argues that conflict or opposition between social classes affects a country's political order (Moore, 1966). He used this view to criticize Talcott Parsons' view that cultural values underpin social order. Moore rejected Parsons' view that democracy (as a political order) is a product of middle-class culture or a product of industrialization. Moore's famous proposition for this is "no bourgeoisie, no democracy". For Moore, democracy is the political order produced by the revolution of the bourgeoisie. There is a constellation of power that occurs, which begins with the weakening of the economic and political power held by the traditional aristocratic class on the one hand, and the strengthening of the economic and political power of the merchant class (which is based on capital, not land) on the other. America and Britain are two countries that experienced democracy as a result of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. But in Germany and Japan, it was not the bourgeoisie but the aristocratic class that revolted, resulting in fascist regimes. Meanwhile, Russia and China experienced peasant-driven revolutions, resulting in communist dictatorships. The conclusion is that the formation of a political regime in a region is the effect of a revolutionary process supported by certain social forces.

**Table 1. The Differences in the Trajectories of the Change in the Constellation of Power in Britain, Germany, and China according to Barrington Moore**

England	Germany	China
Peace between crown & aristocracy → capitalist agriculture → destruction of peasantry (via Enclosure Movement) → emergence of strong bourgeoisie → convergence of interests between aristocracy & bourgeoisie → bourgeois-aristocratic alliance → parliamentary democracy	Peasantry poses threat to aristocratic & bourgeois interests → bourgeoisie & aristocracy are independently too weak to suppress threat → aristocratic-bourgeois alliance turns to the state to protect their economic interests → autonomous, mildly authoritarian state emerges → economic crisis strikes & regime is unable to reform → fascist leader brings about revolution from above → fascist dictatorship	Weak commerce → no bourgeoisie → powerful peasantry → strong agrarian bureaucratic state → peasants become dependent on state rather than aristocracy → state infuriates peasants via arbitrary extraction → peasant-led revolution from below → communist dictatorship

Sumber: (Moore 1966)

Moore's position has been criticized by a number of works such as Skocpol (Skocpol, 1979) and Rueschemeyer, Stevens and Stevens (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992) for being too focused on the internal dynamics of domestic social forces. Instead, the role of the working class and external factors, such as international market pressures, can also shape the constellation of power in a country. Skocpol, who analyzed the social revolutions that occurred in France, Russia and China, found that the fundamental features that triggered the revolutions were military disorganization, administrative disorganization and peasant uprisings. Meanwhile, Rueschemeyer et al argued that the working class was the most consistently pro-democracy force.

Broadly speaking, the above arguments conclude that the political regime in a country is the result of a constellation of power among existing social forces. These constellations shape the specific social formations in a country, and influence the creation of political institutions. The characteristics of social forces in a country are thus a historical and sociological process, not a natural and automatic process as postulated by modernization theorists. Using this constellation of power perspective, democracy can be understood as the outcome of power struggles.

More precisely, the relationship between existing social forces forms what Poulantzas refers as the condensation of balance of social forces. The regime and institutional changes within a state or changes in the mechanisms of organizing and regulating economic and political power occur when there is a change in the balance of forces. But these changes are highly dependent on social forces' resources, strategies, and struggles. This approach directs research toward identifying the types of interests and conflicts that occur across different social forces.

A number of studies on the development of capitalism in Southeast Asia have used this power constellation approach to explore the dynamics of the political economy. This approach is often referred to as the Murdoch School, which seeks to explain how social change has taken place<sup>2</sup>. It focuses on the nature and significance of capitalism as a force that has led to massive social transformations. Robison's *The Rise of Capital* was a pioneer of this approach.

## **THE TRAJECTORY OF CAPITALISM IN INDONESIA**

Capitalism is the most important revolutionary force for the world's population since the 16th century. It shattered social, economic, political, and ideological structures and replaced them with new structures built according to the capitalist production process (Robison, 1982). This process of transition from feudalism to capitalism involved a change in the power constellation among the existing social forces.

The changes in the constellation of powers that led to changes in social and economic structures such as those that occurred in West Europe are not automatically the same as the changes experienced by other countries, such as Indonesia. Bulkin explained that there are several different characteristics and developments between what happened in Europe and outside of it. First, the defeodalisation process. Unlike in Europe, the defeudalisation process in Indonesia maintained the old aristocratic position and status due to colonial economic and political interests. Second, is the role of the middle class. There was no role for a middle class that came from the society to drive the economic activity as in Europe. Third, the process of state

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see (Carroll, Hameiri, and Jones 2020).

formation. In Europe, state formation was the result of a long process of society's growth. While in colonized countries like Indonesia there was intervention from the colonizing country (Bulkin, 1985).

In short, the capitalism that developed in Indonesia was not the same as that in Europe. Capitalism in Indonesia originated in a colonial form, based on external political domination, trade and the plantation economy. Whereas in Europe, capitalism first took the form of industrial capitalism that served the domestic market (Robison, 1982). This difference in the beginning of capitalism then resulted in the characteristics of capitalism that were formed later. Kunio termed the capitalism that occurred in Indonesia, as well as in other countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia as ersatz capitalism. There are two factors that he believes make ersatz capitalism different from pure capitalism as it developed in Europe. At first, there is too much government intervention that hampers the dynamics of the capitalist system. This situation also led to the emergence of rent-seekers among bureaucrats so that the real entrepreneurs could not develop. Secondly, there was insufficient technological development, which prevented self-sustaining industrialization in Southeast Asia. Capitalism developed more in the service sector, rather than in the industrial sector, which, if anything, acted more as comprador capitalism (Kunio, 1988). In the end, the development of capitalism in these Third World countries failed, as it failed in growing a real bourgeoisie (Budiman, 1988).

State capitalism is a term frequently used by scholars to explain the character of capitalism in Indonesia, especially during the New Order and post-Reform era. The New Order state is seen as playing a decisive role in economic development and protecting financiers. The state acted as an investor (by accumulating capital through ownership of financial resources and investing in various business sectors through state companies) and as a regulator (planning, making regulations, and implementing policies) (Hiariej, 2012). The role of the state as an agent of development has expanded rapidly during President Joko Widodo's administration since 2014, when the state has endeavored to massively improve physical infrastructure and the business climate in order to invite investment into Indonesia (Kim, 2022).

## **INDONESIAN PEASANTS IN THE CONSTELLATION OF POWER**

Peasants as a social force existed before capitalism was introduced in Indonesia. They were the lower class of the feudal society structure consisting of kings, nobles or landlords, and merchants. These peasant groups performed production labour, the results of which were shared with the kingdoms. The Dutch then came and changed this culture by transforming the relationship between social forces into a beamtenstaat. The formation of the beamtenstaat was in line with the Dutch interest in capital accumulation, which initially took the form of mercantile capitalism practiced by the VOC into plantation capitalism. Thus, there was a change in the socio-political power in Nusantara which was controlled by Dutch companies and the government, which represented capitalism. Meanwhile, the nobles transformed into colonial bureaucrats. The arrival of the Dutch created agricultural labour as a new class in the structure of Indonesian colonial society. It can be concluded that since feudal and colonial times, peasants in Indonesia have always been marginalized. Peasants are a group that is always in a subordinate position to the dominant power, namely from the kings and nobles in feudal times and from the Dutch beamtenstaat in colonial times.

After Indonesia's independence in August 1945, there was no single domestic

force that was able to become an economic force. Therefore, Moore's thesis of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" did not exist in the newly independent Indonesia. The political elite in the Indonesian government at the time realized that they had to create domestic entrepreneurs to run the indigenous-based Indonesian economy, but their attempts were unsuccessful.

The government issued two laws aimed at the interests of peasants, including Law No. 2/1960 on Production Sharing Agreements (UUPBH) and Law No. 5/1960 on Basic Agrarian Regulations (UUPA). Both laws have the intention of reforming land and production relations in the agricultural sector so that the mechanism of control of productive economic assets (land), commodity exchange, wage payments, taxation, and production systems (capital intensification) can be more advantageous to peasants (Dillon, 2000). These two laws are efforts made to carry out agrarian reform in Indonesia that can be the basis for the formation of a new Indonesian society, where farmers become an important class in the constellation of power. However, in practice, these laws were not implemented, instead the state facilitated large investors to seize and control the land (kontrassurabaya.org, 2017).

The New Order period was characterized by the destruction of communist groups, accompanied by the repression of the opposition, especially liberals and Islamists. During this period the state became further consolidated and became a major force in Indonesia's power structure. The bureaucracy and the military represented the state as the main elements of political power, in addition to the Golkar group, which became the regime's political vehicle. Jackson termed the New Order state as a bureaucratic polity, where the state became the accumulation of power and removed the role of society from politics and governance (Jackson & Pye, 1978). On the other hand, this period was also characterized by the prominent role of Chinese entrepreneurs as a capitalist class who benefited from the state but whose position was highly dependent on the state.

The 1998 Reformation created space for various social groups like peasants to gain political power in Indonesia. However, they were unable to capitalize this space due to the weak organizational base of their movement. Therefore, the aspirations of peasants to push for the realization of agrarian reform were again marginalized, just like during the New Order era (Sujiwo, 2010). Institutional change as an implication of reform did not change the prevailing political power structure in Indonesia, where business groups, politicians and bureaucrats are still the dominant forces (Hadiz & Robison, 2004). The alliance of these three is referred to as the oligarchy that dominates Indonesian politics today.

The bargaining position of peasants in post-Reformation Indonesian politics continues to be weak, as it was in previous eras. In actual terms, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), there were around 40.64 million workers in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sector in February 2022. This number accounts for around 29.96% of the total workers in Indonesia (Kusnandar, 2022). The weak bargaining position of peasants in the constellation of power has made peasants in Indonesia only a commodity by becoming a vote base in general elections (Khudori, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above short explanation, this article concludes that peasants in Indonesia have always been in a marginal political position in the constellation of power from feudal, colonial, to independent Indonesia. Indonesian peasants have

always been subordinated by dominant forces in the historical trajectory such as kings and aristocrats, colonial states, state apparatus, and oligarchs in the Reformation era. This disadvantaged position in the constellation of power explains why peasants are often denied legal protection in various agrarian conflicts. The legacy of New Order authoritarianism also has a profound impact on the weakness of the movement or the absence of successful peasant-based political parties, as is the case in many other countries.

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