

Rural Social Movements and Popular Struggles under Jokowi's Presidency

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Abstract

The victory of Joko Widodo in the 2014 presidential election and the early phase of his first-term presidency brought some hope to Indonesian rural social movements. However, the structural constraints under oligarchic politics, the elite jockeying surrounding Jokowi, and the president's lack of willingness to support an agrarian justice agenda rendered the movements' strategy of intervention by state institutions and policies ineffective. This tension persuaded some sections of rural communities and activists to pursue a more contestational approach in advocating their rights, especially during Jokowi's second term (2019–2024). This article examines the prevalence of the logic of concessionary capitalism in Jokowi's rural policies, its devastating impacts on rural communities and the creative, sometimes impromptu, responses of rural social movements to dispossession and marginalisation. It also analyses the limits and gains made by the movements' actors and provides an overall assessment of state-rural social movement relations under Jokowi's presidency and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Indonesia, rural social movements, concessionary capitalism, movement strategies, Jokowi presidency, agrarian justice agenda, Covid-19 pandemic

Recent developments in Indonesian politics have produced unexpected results for marginalised rural communities and activists. The victory of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in the 2014 presidential election gave high hopes for advocates of agrarian justice (Riza 2014, Serikat Petani Indonesia 2014). However, this hope proved to be short-lived. Despite its initial reformist credentials, the Jokowi administration gradually capitulated to the entrenched interests of the oligarchic elites: politico-business elites benefitting from domination over state and

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economic resources. This dramatic shift intensified from the middle of the first term of Jokowi's presidency, from 2014 to 2019 (Hadiz 2017: 273) and has continued well into his second term (2019–2024). During the latter period, his administration, along with the Indonesian House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR*), strongly pushed for the passing of the neoliberal Law No. 11 of 2020 on Job Creation (known as the Omnibus Law), which promotes the ease of investment without regard to democratic processes or concerns from marginalised groups (A'yun / Mudhoffir 2020).

Against this backdrop, Indonesian rural social movements face ambivalent situations. In the early phase of Jokowi's first term, there were some promising signs that his administration would pay attention to rural community concerns. Indeed, the administration provided some space for the mainstreaming of land title policy, agrarian justice discourses and nationalist sentiments in maritime governance. Concurrently, his administration also accommodated some form of civil society participation by including several middle-class agrarian activists in top positions within state bureaucracy (Mudhoffir / Alamsyah 2018). Policy-wise, Jokowi implemented some concessionary policies, such as land titling and social forestry for farming communities (Murtadho 2022) and, for traditional fishers, the curbing of illegal fishing by foreign boats (Ambari 2015), among others. But these limited concessions were swiftly counterbalanced by Jokowi's accommodation of oligarchic elites through continued support for the expansion of plantation and mining companies throughout the rest of his first term.

This article probes the evolving relations between the Indonesian state under Jokowi's presidency and rural social movements. Rural social movements in this regard encompass a range of marginalised rural citizens and activists working on three interrelated sectors: agrarian, fishery and environmental sectors, with a focus on the agrarian movement, arguably the strongest movement among the three sectors.

For politically conscious rural citizens and activists, the overall picture of the rural sector under Jokowi's government, despite their initial enthusiasm for his reformist image, is a worrying one: rural dispossession and concessionary and clientelistic patterns of politics continue to prevail amid increasingly neoliberal and authoritarian policies. But in the midst of this challenge, rural social movements continue to find creative ways to resist the tide of dispossession and marginalisation.

The article begins with a conceptual framework for analysing the relationship between the state and rural social movements under Jokowi. It then examines the structural contexts of rural dispossession and democratic contraction in rural areas during his presidency, along with the fragmented response from rural social movements. Major problems faced by these movements and their strategies for addressing them are discussed next. The final section presents concluding thoughts on the progress and limitations of rural social movements during Jokowi's administration from 2014 to 2024.

Conceptual framework and methodology

In analysing the relationship between the state, political and economic elites, and rural social movements, this article begins with three premises derived from critical political economy. First, in capitalist societies, including those in Southeast Asia, state elites tend to support, directly or indirectly, the interests of the capitalist class and the general stability of the capitalist economy (Block 1977, Hameiri / Jones 2020: 23). Second, echoing a classic insight from key historical examples (Bellin 2000, Marx 1897), subordinated classes and groups, including impoverished rural communities, can influence state policies and societal trajectory. However, their ability to do so is constrained by the existing structural contexts. Third, the agency of rural social movements is complex: rural communities, agricultural producers and activists are socially differentiated and engage with structures of domination in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways (Bernstein 2010, Borrás 2010).

This framework allows for a nuanced analysis of the trajectory of rural social movements under Jokowi's two-term presidency. A highly popular and influential explanation of Indonesia's post-authoritarian transformation is the continuation of an oligarchic power structure (Robison / Hadiz 2004).¹ This interpretation, though powerful, sometimes overlooks the concessionary character of the contemporary Indonesian state, which grants policy and resource concessions as a form of accommodation of oligarchic interests and, simultaneously, appeasement for the masses.

A recent study has identified the way in which state-sponsored concessions of large-scale land allocations for oligarchic elites operate within the Indonesian context (Batubara / Rachman 2022). It can be argued that this concessionary logic also applies, albeit to a much lesser extent, to rural social movements. These ad hoc concessions, such as land titles, subsidies for fishers and a moratorium on palm oil plantations, can be viewed as a way to partially appease the demands of various rural social movements without challenging the oligarchic power structure. From this perspective, the dynamics of state-rural social movement relations during Jokowi's tenure can be assessed.

Further, this framework's emphasis on social differentiation among activists and rural communities makes it possible to examine the strategies and internal changes of rural social movements in Indonesia. The fragmented nature of their activism can be explained by differences in social background and political orientation of rural social movement actors, diversity in local (and national) political scenes in which these actors operate and conflicting strategies in engaging the state. Nonetheless, the value of this fragmented activism for progressive politics should not be discounted. Here, I analyse the impact of fragmented rural activism, its weaknesses and the gains made through varied movement strategies.

1 For another structuralist but more eclectic account of oligarchy in Indonesia, see Winters 2011.

Methodologically, data gathering for this article is based on extensive field visits to different districts and cities of Indonesia between 2016 and 2019, including personal observation of relevant events and activities, as well as in-depth interviews with activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community members. Additional interviews were conducted online during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and on-site in 2023. To further substantiate and triangulate the data obtained from the fieldwork and interview materials, a wide range of secondary data was consulted, especially newspaper articles, media reports and scholarly sources.

Rural political economy under Jokowi's presidency

Before delving into the details of Indonesia's rural development and social movements under Jokowi's administration, it is necessary to explain the structural conditions that Jokowi inherited at the onset of his presidency. Decades of rural capitalist development under the authoritarian New Order regime had left the Indonesian rural world with certain enduring characteristics: extensive, profit-oriented state ownership and control over forest areas (Berenschot et al. 2022b, Peluso 1992), state-sponsored expansion of corporate plantations (Lucas / Warren 2013: 12), large-scale development projects, like dams, affecting rural communities (Aditjondro 1998, Lucas 1992), inequality in class structure – especially between wealthier villagers and landless agricultural workers as well as smallholders (Habibi 2023, Hart 1986; Pincus 1996) and a fishery sector dominated by foreign companies and their Indonesian intermediaries (Scarpello 2020: 125).

Considerable elements of this legacy continue to characterise post-authoritarian rural Indonesia (Bachriadi / Wiradi 2011, McCarthy / Robinson 2016). For example, by 2017, 95.76 per cent of state-issued forest concessions had been granted to corporations, while only 4.14 per cent had been granted to alternative forms of communities – mostly villages, but also associations of small-scale farmers (Damarjati 2018).² Simultaneously, post-authoritarian democratic reforms opened up new political spaces for rural communities and movements to demand redress for past grievances, as well as equal citizenship and social justice. This led to the emergence and mobilisation of vibrant social movements and coalitions for the rural marginalised, such as peasant unions and local environmental movements, many emerging out of years of local struggle after the fall of Suharto (Anugrah 2019b). Statistically speaking, agriculture remained an important economic sector: in 2014, agricultural activities provided em-

2 What is considered to be “small-scale farmers” can also vary from one region to another.

ployment activities for 54.8 million people, approximately 34 per cent of the total employment share (Patunru / Respatiadi 2017: 5–7).

During the presidential campaign of 2014, Jokowi burst onto Indonesia's national political scene based on his reputation as a popular regional politician – as mayor of Surakarta and governor of Jakarta – willing to make policy breakthroughs (Hamid 2014, Mietzner 2015). His easily accessible communication style and welfare scheme policies, coupled with his profile as a successful businessman-cum-political outsider, attracted significant support from key rural social movements and activists.³ Major peasant movements with strong constituencies, such as the nationwide Indonesian Peasant Union (*Serikat Petani Indonesia*, SPI), the Indonesian branch of an international farmers' union La Via Campesina and the West Java-based Pasundan Peasant Union (*Serikat Petani Pasundan*, SPP), supported Jokowi's candidacy in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections particularly because of his promised land title policy (*Serikat Petani Indonesia* 2019, Sitorus 2019). So did a number of volunteer groups staffed and led by former student activists (Hurriyah 2019, Septia / Suswanta 2022). Furthermore, Jokowi managed to retain some popular appeal in the eyes of rural voters, at least during his first term (Suroyo / Jefriando 2019).

This support, however, did not translate into decisive action on Jokowi's part to curb the power of the politico-business elites benefitting from rural resource extraction. Quite the contrary: during his first term, Jokowi's administration made concessions to the oligarchic elites and key political brokers and refused to express clear solidarity with victims of rural capitalist expansion. In several cases, such as local farmers' resistance against the expansion of PT Semen Indonesia, a state-owned cement company in the Kendeng Region (Central Java), and the state-sponsored construction of a new international airport in Sukamulya (West Java), Jokowi did not adopt a definitive stance in support of the affected farmers, nor did he implement policies designed to address their grievances (Fahriza 2017, Zahrah 2016). His agrarian policies – land titling legalisation, conflict settlements and social forestry – were, in essence, an expanded version of the policies of his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014), which centred around the neoliberal notion of formalisation of land titles as a pathway for market citizenship for the rural poor.⁴ However, these policies did not address the issue of inequality in land ownership or the domination of rural areas by corporations.

Jokowi's policies scored a little better in the fisheries sector. During his first term, he promoted maritime nationalism by cracking down on illegal fishing by unregistered foreign boats and fishers with the help of his maverick Minister

3 Prior to his entry into politics in 2005, with his victory in the mayoral election in Surakarta, Jokowi had a successful business career as a furniture exporter.

4 For a discussion on Yudhoyono's agrarian policies, see Rachman 2011: 67–79. A major inspiration for this land titling policy was the work of Hernando de Soto, the Peruvian neoliberal economist.

of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti (Beech / Suhartono 2018). This policy, along with Pudjiastuti's strong persona, proved massively popular with Indonesian public and domestic and international media outlets. The realities on the ground, however, were more complex. On paper, the minister's reform package, which included not only combating illegal fishing but also increased subsidies, credit, insurance programmes and a ban on industrial trawl fishing, was a good start, but the potential impacts of these sound policies were countered by market expansion in fishery and coastal sectors (Warren / Steenbergen 2021: 8–9). Fishers' rights activists also expressed their scepticism of the actual working and impact of Pudjiastuti's reforms.⁵

In his second term, Jokowi advanced his foreign investment-oriented developmental agenda even further by collaborating with the national parliament (DPR) to formulate and issue the Omnibus Law. This law aimed to promote a business-friendly economy at the expense of democratic oversight, labour rights and environmental protection (A'yun / Mudhoffir 2020). This legislative attempt, initiated in late 2019, faced massive opposition from various civil society groups across the nation, including reformist NGOs, trade unions, rural social movements, university student activists and politically disgruntled vocational high school students. These groups participated in what was dubbed as the largest student-led demonstrations since the downfall of authoritarianism in 1998, under the slogan *#ReformasiDikorupsi* ("The Reform Era Has Been Corrupted"; Kaligis 2020). The amorphous nature of these protests and the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia in 2020 slowed down protest activities, but the protesters managed to maintain some momentum until the first anniversary of the movement, partly due to continuing public dissatisfaction and civil society criticisms of the Jokowi government's haphazard handling of the pandemic.⁶ Afterwards, the momentum for the anti-Omnibus Law movement largely dissipated, although various local farmers' protests for land rights and solidarity initiatives to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic continued throughout Jokowi's second presidential term (Ma'ruf / Anugrah 2022).⁷

It would be amiss, however, to attribute this problematic shift solely to Jokowi's personal agency. One must take into account the structural factors behind this phenomenon. As explained in this article's framework, both Indonesian state elites and oligarchs are committed to maintaining the smooth functioning of the country's capitalist economy and its oligarchic politics, albeit tied to liberal democratic moorings. In this arrangement, intra-oligarchic competition might occur, allowing subordinated classes and groups to momentarily capitalise on

5 Interviews with activists from KIARA, an NGO working on fishers and coastal communities, in Jakarta December 2018–January 2019.

6 Online interviews with activists participating in the 2020 anti-Omnibus Law protests in Jakarta, September 2020.

7 Some examples of these solidarity initiatives were food donation, community kitchens and food banks, among others.

this political opportunity and secure some concessions.⁸ Jokowi's initial ascent to national politics can be seen as an opening arising from this intra-oligarchic rivalry, an opportunity that was quickly seized by activists, NGOs and social movements hopeful of his track record as a political newcomer. His humble beginnings as a local capitalist differentiated him from other established political figures (Pausacker 2019).

Though limited, this intra-oligarchic schism – culminating in the 2014 presidential election – provided some space for civil society actors and lower-class movements to piggyback on Jokowi's electoral success. But early on, Jokowi was trapped within oligarchic politics and the cartelised political party system (Muhtadi 2015). Unlike Yudhoyono, Jokowi as a newcomer lacked the experience and political capital of his predecessor, making him more susceptible to the pressures from national oligarchs and the world commodity boom. These structural constraints, combined with Jokowi's ambivalent agency as a reformist figure who eventually played the oligarchic political game and the sporadic nature of pressure from agrarian movements, explains the partial inclusion in Jokowi's first term of an agrarian justice agenda, such as the formalisation of land title and social forestry schemes in numerous districts and villages (but without land redistribution or settlements of corporate-led agrarian conflicts).

As a result, the domination of national oligarchs in Indonesian rural politics and development remained largely unchallenged throughout Jokowi's presidential reign. A number of factors can help explain the contours of this domination. First, capitalist expansion in rural Indonesia is concessionary in nature because private companies, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and political elites with business interests in rural areas still dominate the ownership and management of rural resources. This includes large palm oil and mining companies (Koalisi Bersihkan Indonesia 2018, The Gecko Project and Mongabay 2017), big SOEs such as Perhutani and PT Semen Indonesia, and New Order-era linked elites. Second, this economic dominance begets immense political power. Oligarchic networks influence national and local elections through campaign financing and quid-pro-quo deals with politicians who will then issue policies in favour of oligarchic interests (Jaringan Advokasi Tambang 2019).⁹ Third, these mechanisms of oligarchic consolidation lead to the intensification of extra-economic coercion, typically in the form of violent land grabs and conflicts, to dispossess smallholders of their land and livelihood. The Consortium for Agrarian Reform (*Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria*, KPA), a major land rights NGO, reports that between 2015 and 2020 there were 2,291 cases of agrarian conflicts between state and/or corporate entities and rural communities, twice the number of

8 For a theoretical account of political opportunity structure for social movements, see Tarrow 2011.

9 JATAM has published another analysis and database on this topic for the 2024 general elections on this webpage: <https://pemilu.jatam.org/> (accessed 2 July 2024).

cases under Yudhoyono's two-term presidency (2004–2014; CNN Indonesia 2021). In short, these indicators demonstrate the success of oligarchic preservation throughout Jokowi's presidency.

Rural social movements: Mobilised, yet fragmented

Facing this challenge, rural social movements have struggled against this structure of domination in multiple, sometimes hit-or-miss ways. In the early days of Jokowi's first term, the "honeymoon period" between the president and his civil society allies, community organisations and agrarian activists pursued a moderate form of critical intervention in state programmes and institutions. This included the appointment of several long-time agrarian activists into state institutions such as the Presidential Staff Office (*Kantor Staf Presiden*, KSP) and the National Human Rights Commission (*Komnas HAM*), as well as grassroots participation in the implementation of land titling and social forestry schemes in various rural areas (Anugrah 2019b).

In the fishery sector, fisherfolk organisations such as the Federation of Fisher Unions in the Archipelago (*Federasi Serikat Nelayan Nusantara*, FSNN) and the North Sumatran Fisher Alliance (*Aliansi Nelayan Sumatera Utara*, ANSU), community leaders and solidarity activists lobbied the Jokowi government for more subsidies and regulation against big fishing businesses.¹⁰ One could say that some modest gains were made in the agricultural and fishery sectors. In his first term, Jokowi managed to issue 24.6 million land titles (CNN Indonesia 2020). Furthermore, by the end of 2018, his administration had issued more than 5,000 social forestry permits covering an area of 2,173,063 ha where close to 498,000 households lived (Fisher et al. 2019: 152).

This claim of success, however, should be regarded as another manifestation of concessionary capitalism for a number of reasons, as will be demonstrated. Primarily, in praxis, there was little attempt to overturn past and current waves of corporate land grabbing and absentee ownership, whether through a moratorium of the issuance of commercial lease rights and other forms of forest exploitation rights for plantation companies or through state-enforced redistribution of corporate land. The so-called gains of the Jokowi government appeared insignificant compared to the continuing expansion of corporate power and the oligarchic hijacking of democratic processes in rural areas. Data from palm oil conflicts in four provinces (West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, Riau and West Sumatra) show that most communities in conflict with palm oil companies fail to get proper resolution or compensation (Berenschot

¹⁰ Interviews with representatives from fisher organisations and NGOs in Jakarta, Central Java, and Serdang Bedagai, January–February 2019. Observation of a public discussion on fisher rights in Jakarta, 17 May 2019.

et al. 2022a), evidence of the hollowness of Jokowi's land title policy, which his administration labelled as an "agrarian reform" agenda. Secondly, while land titles and social forestry permits may offer partial economic security for smallholders, indigenous people and other rural dispossessed communities, these schemes also have the potential to transform their land into a potential cheap resource for market expansion. These concessions, essentially, serve as a means of facilitating rural capitalist development. Thirdly, despite the increasing political influence of rural social movement actors, state authorities continue to retain significant power within these schemes, a perspective that is shared by members of the agrarian justice activist community.¹¹

The limited gains of this strategy of reforming the state from within forced a wide range of agrarian, fisher and environmental movements to rely on their traditional mass mobilisation and community advocacy tactics, including protests, land occupation and advocacy for agrarian justice concerns (Anugrah 2019b). The corporate and state backlash against the redistributive demands of these movements eventually resulted in the resurgence of collective actions and contentious politics, occurring concurrently with the accelerating rate of rural dispossession. Echoing past episodes of rural activism under the New Order and in the early days of democratic transition, a series of rural protests and advocacy efforts took place under Jokowi's two-term government. Some well-publicised rural protests include those in Tulang Bawang (Lampung), Sukamulya (West Java), Kendeng region (Central Java) and Wadas (Central Java), among others. Cases of politicised legal actions against community members and activists, a process infamously known as "criminalisation" (*kriminalisasi*) in the Indonesian political lexicon – including the arrests of community leaders in Tulang Bawang, anti-mining activist Heri Budiawan (known as Budi Pego) in East Java and villagers from Wadas and Pakel – also garnered significant attention from activist and media circles. In Bali, the renowned anti-reclamation movement successfully created and sustained a cross-class coalition for the environmental protection of the Balinese coast, uniting fisherfolk, activists, artists, middle-class professionals, local businesses and traditional community leaders through a shared Balinese identity (Tans 2021). These well-known cases are just the tip of the iceberg. In the palm oil sector alone, community protests against unjust practices by palm oil companies led to "the arrest and imprisonment of community leaders" in countless cases (Berenschot et al. 2022: 44).

However, internal fragmentation renders the disruptive politics of these movements less effective. As mentioned above, rural social movements and their community bases diverge along lines of social class, ideological orientation, livelihood source, institutional makeup and experience of struggle, among other factors (Borras 2010, Habibi 2023). The roots of this fragmentation lie

11 Interviews with farmer communities and agrarian activists in Bulukumba, May–June 2016 and Bengkulu, mid-April to mid-June 2017, and agrarian activists in Bantaeng, 16–18 December 2019.

in the sporadic nature of local agrarian struggles and the continuing influence of middle-class activists in these struggles since the New Order period (Bachriadi 2010). Consequently, Indonesian rural social movements are highly fragmented institutionally. Major players include a few national-level unions or confederations of peasant and fisher movements and NGOs, followed by smaller and local movements and organisations (Anugrah 2019a; 2019b). Moreover, the policy preferences of these movements are often formulated and mediated by middle-class activists who later become “civil society elites” (Johansson / Uhlin 2020) – essentially, high-level policy activists. As a result, the formation of a nationwide, united organisational front of rural social movements led by the rural lower-classes remains an elusive endeavour. In its absence, rural communities and grassroots activists must rely on ad hoc national coalitions and networks (White et al. 2023: 74–75).

Throughout Jokowi’s presidency, this fragmentation deepened due to disagreements over movement strategies for engaging the state and the gap between civil society elites working on rural policies and their mass base. As mentioned previously, a number of senior agrarian activists decided to join the Jokowi administration with the goal of pushing for pro-agrarian reform policies (Lay / Eng 2020). An insider’s view of institutional activism by these civil society elites highlights the relative success of their efforts to influence the state in recognising customary forest rights for *adat* – indigenous – communities (Affif / Rachman 2019). This claim, however, should be taken with a grain of salt, as the participation of these institutional activists in state institutions did not necessarily stem from a process of democratic deliberation with a wide range of rural social movements. Furthermore, the actual leverage of this institutional activism is disputable; it remains unclear to what extent this type of activism led to visible policy changes and whether it delivered on its promises. In any case, this policy entrepreneurship was eventually met with scepticism by grassroots and younger agrarian activists, who remain embedded in day-to-day organising activities and local political struggles.¹²

Another schism occurred when a few leading activists and NGOs, including KPA, joined the Global Land Forum (GLF) in 2018. The GLF is an international forum on land policy organised by the International Land Coalition, a coalition of organisations working on land governance.¹³ The GLF was held in Bandung, the site of the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference, to evoke the spirit of anti-colonialism. While KPA argued that the GLF is a democratic forum in which civil society actors should participate, other activists disagreed. They pointed to the GLF’s early ties with the World Bank and donor institutions in

12 Interviews with young agrarian activists and scholars in Yogyakarta, 24–26 July 2019. Phone interview with activist A, 24 April 2020.

13 The GLF’s event programme and list of participants can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/4aa27kms> (accessed 2 July 2024).

Northern countries in the 1990s, and its close cooperation with the Jokowi government. The People's Alliance Against Eviction (*Aliansi Rakyat Anti Penggusuran*, ARAP), a loose coalition for land rights, countered KPA's assertion, suggesting that the GLF, rather than being a democratic forum, was a vessel for neoliberalism that lent a veneer of democratic decorum to Jokowi's market-oriented land policy (Prasetyo 2019).

In brief, given the political constellations surrounding Jokowi's government, the activists' attempt to transform rural politics from within largely failed to materialise. It is no surprise that this experiment left a bad aftertaste for some sections of Indonesian civil society. Roy Murtadho, a noted agrarian activist and researcher, declared that the activists' participation in state institutions and state-sponsored forums such as the GLF had been useless and urged them to resign from their positions (Bhawono 2020). What rendered this strategy of institutional activism less effective than desired was the absence of a coordinated two-pronged strategy that combined state-level policy engagement with society-level mass mobilisation pushing a redistributionist agenda. Despite ongoing rural dispossession and fragmented civil society opposition, rural social movements and communities continue to resist marginalisation and to launch various initiatives to improve their livelihoods. It is thus imperative to examine the local landscapes in which these movements operate and the types of experiments they undertake.

Movement strategies and experiments in local politics

As has been well established in various scholarly and activist accounts, Indonesian local politics and development trajectories after authoritarianism have become a contested realm of competing social forces. Political decentralisation and the introduction of competitive elections for local administrative heads and members of parliament at the provincial and district levels have not led to a more competitive market economy, as imagined by neoliberals, or to a more substantive democracy at the subnational level, as desired by civil society actors. Instead, established politico-business elites from the New Order regime – in other words, local oligarchic networks – have successfully capitalised on this new political landscape (Hadiz 2010, McCarthy / Warren 2009: 7–8). Resource-rich regions, in particular, have increasingly become sites of intense political competition and tension since the onset of democratisation. Since 1998, local political and economic elites have often held the upper hand in shaping the course of rural politics and development (Buehler 2010: 273–277). Nonetheless, this dominance has been checked by the institutional constraints of Indonesia as a unitary state, the inability of local elites to monopolise private economic

resources and the relative economic independence of Indonesian local citizens (Buehler 2018). These limitations on local elite dominance provide considerable space for rural communities and actors to advocate for their interests.

Moreover, contemporary Indonesian rural society is characterised by three key features. First, money politics and clientelism are pervasive in Indonesian local politics. Recent studies show the prevalence of vote buying and other forms of clientelistic practices, such as exchanging votes for goods or even social welfare programmes through informal networks of intermediaries, as defining characteristics of Indonesian electoral politics, especially at the local level (Aspinall / Berenschot 2019, Muhtadi 2019). Secondly, rural households depend not only on traditional agricultural activities but also on a diverse range of non-farming economic activities, from small-scale trading to seasonal jobs in urban areas (Neilson 2016). This is also true for fishing communities, where local fisherfolk, while primarily relying on traditional fishing as their main source of income, also engage in other economic activities such as selling fish products and working as migrant workers abroad.¹⁴ The increasing urbanisation of Indonesia's peripheral regions and provincial towns, coupled with the expansion of infrastructural development and resource exploitation, suggests that this trend will continue. Third, demographically, rural smallholders and workers across agrarian sectors are aging. A study by the Center for Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS) indicates that a significant proportion of Indonesian farmers are 45 years or older (Wicaksono 2022). Another statistics shows that 37 per cent of farmers are over 54 years old (Wiyono 2022). Meanwhile, younger rural residents are more inclined to take up jobs in different sectors, often in urban contexts.

These factors have also influenced the formation of rural social movements and their strategies for fighting for their rights and improving their livelihoods during the Jokowi presidency. These political, economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural strategies manifest in a variety of forms, some of which will be discussed in the following sections.

Political and cultural strategies

In local politics, rural social movements and communities employ numerous strategies, depending on their respective material circumstances. These responses, to use Albert Hirschman's (1970) classic typology, can be categorised into three types: "exit" (leaving one's community in search of a better life), "voice" (expressing dissent and/or promoting one's agenda), and "loyalty" (supporting

¹⁴ Interviews with fishers in Kendal and Demak, Central Java, 24–30 January 2019 and Serdang Bedagai, North Sumatra, 5–6 February 2019.

the existing arrangement). Exit strategies involve migratory activities such as working abroad as migrant workers or as urban workers and small-scale traders in the cities. Here, I focus on the “loyalty” and “voice” responses of these movements, which translate into the following electoral strategies: supporting candidates who are receptive to movement demands and brokering patronage with them (loyalty), and fielding their own candidates and promoting their own agendas in elections (voice).

Loyalty strategies have been pursued by diverse peasant and fisher unions and community members throughout Jokowi's tenure. As mentioned above, in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections some peasant unions, such as SPP and SPI, decided to support Jokowi's candidacy and mobilised their members as voting blocs. At the local level, peasant communities and agrarian activists pursued a similar strategy, for instance by mobilising support for a particular district head candidate in exchange for local government protection for their advocacy activities. This was exemplified in the 2016 Bulukumba District Head election in South Sulawesi Province.¹⁵ Between 2018 and 2020, other local unions in East Java Province, Jambi Province and Rembang District, to cite some examples, followed a similar strategy (Hardiyanto 2018, Seputar Muria 2020, Syafe'i 2020). A similar pattern is evident in fishing communities. In Kendal and Demak, for instance, fisher leaders supported candidates for provincial and national parliaments in the 2019 elections based on their ability to provide state resources, such as fishing net subsidies, and to represent fisher interests.¹⁶ In these instances, the candidates' party affiliation mattered less than their personal connections and working relationships with the rural voters. As Masnu'ah, a female fisher leader from Demak, said, “I no longer judge the political parties that [the candidates] represent; now I assess the candidates directly.”¹⁷ In the context of Indonesia's current party system, which has seen a weakening of programmatic ideologies in recent years (Ufen 2013: 49–50), such an approach is understandable.

A more advanced effort by rural social movements to voice their agenda is by placing and promoting their own candidates in elections. Of particular interest in this context are the electoral achievements of the Alliance of Indigenous People of the Archipelago (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*, AMAN), Indonesia's leading indigenous people's organisation, which has been fielding its own cadres in multiple local and national elections since 2009 (Sadikin 2017). In 2019, 34 AMAN delegates won seats in the DPR and some other regional parliaments (Salabi 2019). Another creative example of movements voicing their concerns is the collaboration between WatchDoc, an independent documentary production house, and environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace Indonesia

15 Interviews with agrarian activists in Bulukumba, May–June 2016.

16 Interviews with fishers in Kendal and Demak, 24–30 January 2019.

17 Interview with Masnu'ah in Demak, 29–30 January 2019.

and the Mining Advocacy Network (*Jaringan Advokasi Tambang*, JATAM), along with various communities and coalitions. Just a few days before the 2019 general elections, WatchDoc released “Sexy Killers”, a documentary exposing the collusive links between coal companies and Indonesian political elites, as well as the devastating impacts of such corruption. It sparked a national debate and over 1,000 community screenings (Hazan 2019).¹⁸ The documentary’s trenchant criticism of both presidential candidates – Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto – backed by data from JATAM, led to public speculation that it was a covert campaign by some sections of the Indonesian environmental movement to encourage voting abstention in the 2019 presidential election (Purningsih 2019). In any case, the documentary screenings catalysed a broad public debate, including among typically apolitical middle-class professionals and workers.¹⁹

These bottom-up political strategies by rural communities may not yet present a viable alternative to money politics and clientelistic practices in Indonesian local politics, let alone seriously challenge the oligarchic arrangement. Nevertheless, these examples illustrate well-considered attempts to move away from elite-centred and short-term political transactions, especially in politically conscious rural communities. Moreover, these attempts increase the representation of such communities within an elite-dominated political landscape. Size also plays a role: it is more feasible for these communities and movements to achieve small victories in local rather than national politics.

In this way, Indonesian rural social movements, like those of the urban poor (Savirani / Aspinall 2017) and organised workers (Caraway / Ford 2020), employ diverse electoral and political strategies to engage with the state. At the same time, their two pathways of political engagement (loyalty and voice) confirm Edward Aspinall’s (2013: 103) observation that the avenues and influence of the lower classes in post-authoritarian Indonesia are confined to fragmented activism and electoral pressure.

Economic strategies

In the economic realm, several movements and communities have experimented with solidarity economy initiatives. By “solidarity economy”, I refer to a blend of economic ideas and practices based on community interests and the democratisation of labour relations (Kawano 2021, Malleson 2014). While the size, profitability and geographical scope of these solidarity economy experiments

18 “Sexy Killers” is available on YouTube and has gathered more than 37 million views as of February 2023; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1B7vg4I-To>. In 2024, WatchDoc released another documentary on corporate-driven land conflicts in Indonesia, entitled *Tanah Moyangku* (“Colonial Debris”), but it achieved much more limited success, with fewer than half a million views as of July 2024.

19 Observation of the public screening and discussion of “Sexy Killers” at a corporate office in South Jakarta, 20 April 2019.

remain modest compared to capitalist firms, they provide the seeds to challenge the oligarchic arrangement in Indonesia's rural political economy. Although solidarity economy is a relatively new concern²⁰ for many rural movements and communities, these experiments span the full range of solidarity economy institutions. Here, I highlight three key examples of solidarity economy institutions: rural cooperatives, credit unions and community-run social institutions such as schools.

As explained by David Henley (2007), Indonesians have an ambivalent attitude towards cooperatives, seeing them as both a repository of romanticised indigenous values of cooperation and solidarity and an inefficient, unprofitable and corrupt economic unit. While this is certainly the case with some types of cooperatives, such as the top-down, elite-controlled Village Unit Cooperatives (*Koperasi Unit Desa*, KUD) groomed during the New Order period, recent experiments with cooperatives have scored some notable success. A good case in point is the Muara Baimbai Cooperative (KSU Muara Baimbai) run by fishers in Sei Nagalawan village in Serdang Bedagai District, North Sumatra. Founded as a merger of two earlier cooperatives in 2012 (Saragih 2017), KSU Muara Baimbai has proven that a rural cooperative can be profitable, sustainable and organised democratically. Starting as a humble cooperative it expanded its activities into several business units, such as seafood products, mangrove conservation, and, the most profitable one, beach eco-tourism, all staffed and organised by the local fishers. Thanks to the cooperative, fisher families in Sei Nagalawan have been able to reduce their dependence on loan sharks, increase their household income and generate up to IDR 100 million per month for the cooperative (approximately IDR 4–9 million in dividends per family) from the eco-tourism business between 2016 and 2018 (Arumingtyas 2018, Ucu 2018, UNDP Indonesia 2018). At the same time, Sei Nagalawan residents continue their contentious political activism, such as organising a major anti-trawl fishing protest in Medan with other fishing communities in 2018.²¹

Some local cooperatives in other regions also perform quite well. Puspita Bahari, another fisher cooperative in Demak region, Central Java, has gained a reputation as a profitable cooperative specialising in fish products and as a promoter of gender equality (Kholisdinuka 2021). In Bulukumba, the Salassae Rural Self-Governing Community (*Komunitas Swabina Pedesaan Salassae*, KSPS) has been successful in building a farmer cooperative promoting anti-corporate organic agriculture.²² Obviously, these successful local experiments should not blind us from acknowledging that promoting rural cooperatives is a challenging endeavour, as cases of failed and stalled cooperative experiments in other places

20 Interview with Anwar "Sastro" Ma'ruf, a long-time labour and agrarian activist, in Jakarta, 19 July 2017.

21 Interview with Sutrisno, co-founder of KSU Muara Baimbai, in Serdang Bedagai, 2 February 2019.

22 Interview with Armin Salassa, KSPS founder, in Bulukumba, 15 June 2016.

attest.²³ Nevertheless, these contemporary success stories of rural cooperatives show viable models for creating solidarity economy.

Besides cooperatives, rural social movements have successfully established other solidarity economy institutions, such as credit unions and community-run schools. Credit unions have flourished in West Kalimantan Province and Blitar District, among other areas (Fernando et al. 2015, Hasani 2019). In Blitar, the Pawartaku Credit Union, closely linked to the Aryo Blitar Farmers Association (*Paguyuban Petani Aryo Blitar*, PPAB), secured total assets of IDR 3.8 billion, with 70 per cent of this amount, or IDR 2.4 billion, circulating among members in the form of loans as of 2019 (Hasani 2019). Another impressive achievement is in the Eastern Priangan region in West Java – specifically the districts of Garut, Ciamis and Tasikmalaya – where SPP, a leading peasant movement in the region, has been operating its own community-run and -funded school system since the early 2000s. This system includes several elementary, middle and high schools.²⁴ These schools offer quality education for the children of SPP members and demonstrate the potential for democratising social reproduction activities such as education.

Once more, these successful cases are outliers, but they provide illustrative and, hopefully, inspiring examples of alternatives to concessionary capitalism and oligarchy in Indonesia. This is because, in the absence of feasible solidarity economy institutions, smallholders may find market-based commodity transactions an attractive proposition, a solution that contributes to the deepening of capitalist relations from below and its many problems (Hairong 2017).

These examples also demonstrate that rural social movements that prioritise the implementation of solidarity economy initiatives are capable of delivering tangible economic benefits for their members. More importantly, these experiments can serve as a buffer in times of crisis. This was demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when leading rural social movements and NGOs organised an alternative food supply network in the form of community kitchens, food banks, solidarity barns and even food barter in the Greater Jakarta Area and the provinces of Banten, West Java and Yogyakarta, among others (Ma'ruf / Anugrah 2022). Finally, these examples demonstrate effective strategies for integrating rural youth into movement activities. Through observation of SPP's activities, for instance, it was evident that graduates of its schools proceeded to higher education and subsequently assumed role as young organisers within their respective SPP branches.²⁵ Another example is SPI's cooperative in Medan, which has been able to operate its own coffeehouse, staffed by young student activists (Serikat Petani Indonesia 2017). Despite the success of these local solidarity economy initiatives, challenges persist in terms of their replication

23 Interviews with agrarian activists in Bengkulu, mid-April to mid-June 2017.

24 Interview with SPP peasant members in Ciamis, 25–27 June 2019.

25 Observations of SPP's union meetings and informal gatherings in Ciamis, 25–27 June 2019.

and integration with ongoing political struggles beyond their immediate vicinities. The expansion of these experiments can facilitate the continuous process of enhancing democratic practices in resource-rich contexts through the active participation of those rural communities that are most affected by extractivist development (Riofrancos 2017).

Recent trends: Religious eco-socialism and new political parties

In addition to the more conventional strategies discussed above, there are emerging strategies and modalities in the Indonesian rural social movement landscape. Two developments, in particular, deserve a closer look: the rise of religious eco-socialism and the possibility of building political parties that comprise both rural and urban social movements. These modalities have gained greater momentum, to varying degrees, in response to the accelerating rate of agrarian dispossession under Jokowi's tenure.

We shall commence with an examination of the first modality, religious eco-socialism. While environmental degradation and the declining quality of rural livelihoods have been significant concerns for religious organisations and leaders in Indonesia, these concerns are often interpreted through a reformist lens, viewing them as a consequence of inadequate regulations, actors or behaviours, a lack of attention from policymakers or corruption by companies and state elites. Religious eco-socialism challenges this perspective, proposing that the current socio-ecological crisis is a direct result of capitalist development.

The Nahdliyin Front for Popular Resource Sovereignty (*Front Nahdliyin untuk Kedaulatan Sumber Daya Alam*, FNKSDA) is an example of a social movement that consists of traditionalist Muslim (*Nahdlatul Ulama*) activists and rural communities. It has been active in formulating a synthesis of Islamic and socialist values and advocating for the victims of land grabbing and other agrarian conflicts.²⁶ Similarly, young activists belonging to Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's largest modernist Muslim organisation, have established a comparable social movement, called Muhammadiyah Green Cadres (*Kader Hijau Muhammadiyah*, KHM). This movement combines environmental advocacy with criticism of capitalism.²⁷ A more modest Protestant group, Green Chris-

26 Observation of the second national congress of FNKSDA in Semarang, 24–25 October, 2018. See also French (2022). Traditionalist rural-based Muslims, in Indonesian context, seek to preserve traditional local Muslim rituals and scholarship, revere the authority of local religious leaders (kyais) and promote the indigenous Islamic boarding school education known as pesantren.

27 Online discussion with KHM members, 10 May 2020. Modernist urban-based Muslims, in contrast to their traditionalist counterparts, are more puritan and reformist, calling for the return to Qur'an and Hadith as major sources of Islamic teachings and embracing modern knowledge and education. This dichotomy, however, has been much less pronounced.

tianity (Kristen Hijau) was founded in 2017 by a group of young activists with the aim of promoting environmental and social justice from a progressive Christian perspective (Mansur 2017).²⁸ Despite their relative youth and modest size, these movements have the potential to become significant players in the mainstreaming of agrarian justice issues within Indonesia's religious communities.

The second modality, arguably a more recent phenomenon, points to the possibility of building political power through autonomous political vehicles. The formation of two new progressive political parties, the Indonesian Green Party (*Partai Hijau Indonesia*, PHI) and the Labour Party (*Partai Buruh*, PB), represents an exciting development in Indonesian politics and activism. PHI originated from urban and environmental activist groups and adopted ideas from Western green parties, advocating for socio-ecological justice issues such as environmental sustainability, human rights, climate change and anti-oligarchic politics (Van Klinken / Permana 2022). In contrast, the PB has a longer history, originating in 1999 when its forerunner of the same name participated in the first post-authoritarian elections. The PB has a more populist, working-class social base, which includes the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Unions (*Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia*, FSPMI) and SPI.²⁹ Workers from unions affiliated with the PB have also participated in numerous local elections. Despite the considerable challenges it has faced, the PB has managed to qualify as a participant in the 2024 general elections (Savirani 2023). It remains to be seen how these parties will expand their political influence. In particular, it is important to observe how the PB will perform in the 2024 elections and whether they will make a decisive break with conventional elite politics, given that the labour and farmers' unions behind PB have limited funding for the party. Furthermore, as Muhammad Ridha (2023) points out, the left-wing faction in PB has yet to win the hearts of the mass base of the party and challenge the party leadership's collaborationist attitude towards the ruling class.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the challenges faced by Indonesian rural social movements under Jokowi's presidency and the strategies they employ in dealing with them. The election of Jokowi as a relative outsider with local government experience and a reformist reputation initially gave strong hope for proponents of rural social justice and communities affected by years of dispossession and conflicts with state and corporate authorities. This hope, for a brief period, led to enthusiasm, especially among long-term activists –

28 Recently this group has been inactive and its members turn their activities into studies of Christian texts from progressive and leftist perspectives.

29 Personal conversation with a PB activist in Jakarta, 19 January 2023.

some of whom were regarded as civil society elites – who subsequently joined the Jokowi government as bureaucrats and policy brokers.

However, this strategy of permeating state institutions proved to be ineffective in implementing a rural redistributionist agenda and restraining the power of capital. Jokowi soon succumbed to the old political elites and oligarchic pressure surrounding him. Given the lack of organisational connection with his voters, from a movement perspective he revealed himself as just another opportunistic Indonesian politician predominantly interested in maintaining his power and pushing for developmentalist policies. In this context, Jokowi had to make large concessions to oligarchs who control rural resources, a decision that has had a detrimental impact on democratic rights and the livelihoods of the rural marginalised communities. In contrast, his concessions to ordinary rural households appear insignificant. This exemplifies the logic of concessionary capitalism at its most egregious.

This political configuration had two implications. First, it led to the maintenance and expansion of the oligarchic arrangement in rural areas. Second, the gap between civil society elites engaged in reforming Jokowi's agrarian policies and the mass base of agrarian movements that still pushed for contestational oppositional politics vis-à-vis the state deepened the fragmentation within Indonesia's already fractured rural social movements. The recent passing of the Omnibus Law – later revised as a Government Regulation in lieu of the Law (*perpu*) on Job Creation – is indicative of the increasing power of the oligarchy network that opposes peasant, fisher and environmental movements and communities.³⁰ Overall, political shifts and land and commodity booms under Jokowi's two terms have resulted in increasingly illiberal and oligarchic politics towards rural social movements. The latter have not been able to form a united front against social inequality and the existing power structures.

Despite this, not everything is doom and gloom. Democratic decline during Jokowi's tenure has forced rural communities and their activist supporters to reflect about their strategies and tactics, rejuvenate their oppositional, mobilisational politics, and improvise. The past and recent experience of struggles, coupled with experiments in the fields of political participation and solidarity economy building even during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggest the continuing vibrancy of Indonesian rural social movements amid fragmentation and occasional repression. This reminder is worth remembering in order to avoid a fetish for political defeat prevalent in some sections of contemporary left and progressive movements globally (Manoel 2020). The increasingly diversified and urbanised economic structure of Indonesian rural areas also opens up new opportunities for more inclusive political participation.³¹

30 On the Omnibus Law and its recent revisions see Yahya 2023.

31 On this, see for example a recent observation on Indonesian village politics by Berenschot et al. 2021.

The advent of post-Jokowi politics may present even greater challenges, especially in light of the growing disillusionment with Jokowi's reformist politics. However, it also offers opportunities for rural social movements and communities to reclaim control of their fate. This can be achieved by acknowledging the limitations and futility of reformist politics, learning from past experiences, and charting a more autonomous and anti-oligarchic political path.

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