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Indonesia's Rising Middle Class: Tweeting To Be Heard

By Verra and Fitriani

Synopsis

Indonesia's level of intolerance is plunging as a middle class is burgeoning. This social group can potentially shape the country's future through social media with government support.

Commentary

INDONESIAN Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa told the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in May 2012 that Indonesia is still considered an open, tolerant and democratic society. However in June 2012, Jakarta based think tanks revealed that the country's level of tolerance is reaching its lowest point since Reformasi and democracy took place 14 years ago. During the same period Indonesia's middle class has grown exponentially. According to the World Bank, Indonesia's middle class is the third-largest in the world. Yet this powerful social group appears unresponsive toward the rising wave of religious intolerance in Indonesia. Social commentators believe this group has the potential to shape the country's future, with the government's support.

National Class Upgrade

In recent years, Indonesia's economy has grown constantly at above 5 percent per year and, as the economy grew, so have the levels of public income and the size of the middle class. Defined by the World Bank as those who are capable of spending between US\$2 and \$20 per day, Indonesia's burgeoning middle class comprises 56.5 percent of its 237 million populations, numbering 134 million people, a jump of 65 percent since 2003.

Indonesia's emerging middle class has proven to be a huge engine of consumption, of the latest and highest quality of goods and services. Indonesia's consumer spending is an important driver of the economy, accounting for 55 percent of GDP in 2011 (by comparison, China's consumer spending was only 35 percent). At the same time, they are also paying attention to various political and social issues shaping Indonesia - a process further boosted by the growing role of the numerous free press and social media networks. Indeed, up to May 2012, Indonesia was the fourth largest user of Facebook in the world and the number one Twitter user in Asia, generating 15 percent of the world's tweets. As many of these "plugged in" users are generally from the middle class, it is not surprising that their voice is often aired through these channels.

Downgrade of Religious Tolerance

However, despite their cyber activities, the middle class has not taken concrete political action in addressing

social injustices, including those related to the protection of religious minorities. Facing high demands on their professional and personal and family life, convenience has been one of the priorities for Indonesia's middle class. Therefore, when it comes to actually taking action beyond the cyber world, they are more likely to be passive spectators adopting a "wait and see" attitude, and behaving more like a silent majority.

Such silence over social injustices also reflects the reality that economic growth does not equate democratic maturity, especially when it comes to issues relating to human rights. An investigation conducted by the Setara Institute, a civil society organisation, showed that throughout 2011 there were 244 violations against freedom of religion, including restraining minorities from practising their religion, in particular the Ahmadis and Christians. The Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy Elsam also showed that there were eight cases of rights violations against Christians from January to April this year.

These incidences follow the growing trend of social intolerance. A recent survey by the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) found that nearly 70 percent of their respondents from 23 provinces preferred not to allow neighbours of different faiths to built places of worship around their locality. From its 2,220 respondents, the survey also showed that almost 80 percent objected to the idea of inter-religious marriage and more than 60 percent approved a policy that would require students to be fluent in Arabic.

Social media, the ombudsman

Despite the lack of concrete social action by the middle class, some of them have actually provided articulate critiques of various policy issues relating to such disturbing trends of growing intolerance. Indonesian journalist and twitter user @andreasharsono has managed to draw the attention of the international media and society to the worsening religious intolerance when his article on Indonesia as "No Model for Muslim Democracy" was published by the New York Times. Likewise, the cyber movement Indonesia Without Islamic Defender Front under #IndonesiatanpaFPI banner has managed to mobilised people in twitter and facebook to voice their opposition against violent vigilantes at a rally at Bunderan HI monument in the heart of Jakarta.

While these critiques are positive signs, the government is not absolved of its responsibility to solve the various social and political problems faced by Indonesia. After all, the middle class cannot act on its own. Since online openness works in tandem with democracy, one way to proceed is not by dismissing those critiques out of hand. Instead, the government should make good use of them while better engaging the middle class.

One possible venue ripe for such constructive engagement is obviously the cyber world, where state officials could be more responsive to the various concerns raised therein. With 94 percent of Indonesia's middle class connected by social network, cyber world could act as an ombudsman, an intermediary between the state and the middle class constituents. If nothing else, the middle class represents the largest voting social group. Consequently, listening to its democratic aspirations, and even acting on them, would likely prove an excellent way to bolster electoral support for the upcoming 2014 general elections.

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