



Indonesian Political Populism in the Agrarian Sector: Reinterpretation of Marginalization of the Agrarian Sector and the Agrarian Populism Movement

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the role of populist ideology in marginalizing the agrarian sector and the agrarian populism movement in Indonesia in the Reformation Era. Indonesia is an agricultural country, so such marginalization and the limited involvement of the agrarian movement is ironic. Development studies see the marginalization of the agrarian sector as a consequence of the reorientation of economic development towards the industrial and service sectors, mostly in urban areas. Studies like this often do not look at the political side of the marginalization. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the phenomenon in Indonesia utilizing Margaret Canovan's populist approach. The findings show the influence of political populism on the marginalization of the agrarian sector in the reformation era in Indonesia. Pragmatic, populist leaders exploited 'the people' as a political rhetorical tool to gain power without touching the agricultural sector where 'the people' reside.

Keywords: Populism, Agrarian, Development, Indonesia

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Introduction

This article discusses the relationship between populism and the process of agrarian marginalization in the structure of the Indonesian economy in the Reformation Era². In this article, populism is defined based on its two variants, namely political populism and agrarian populism. If political populism focuses on political aspects, then agrarian populism is sensitive to socio-economic aspects in villages and developments in agrarian issues (Canovan, 1981, 1982; Mudde, 2001). Agrarian populism emerged as a response to the expansion of capitalism in the agrarian sector (Canovan, 1981; Hicks, 1931; Roberts et al., 1990). Historically, agrarian populism was represented in two forms of movement: the peasant revolutionary movement in Russia and formal political movements

such as in America (Canovan, 1981). Therefore, agrarian populism is often recognized as a grassroots movement to respond to economic circumstances under a crisis (Canovan, 1981; Hicks, 1931).

Several studies have explained the relationship and impact of the agrarian populism movement on the dynamics of agrarian development. These studies show that populist parties or movements that exploit agrarian issues do not always positively impact the lives of farmers and rural communities. Even though it is in the name of the interests and desires of 'the people,' including the farming communities, the agrarian populism movement is often counter-productive to the socio-economic improvement of rural communities, especially farmers (Canovan, 1981). For example, in Thailand, the agrarian populism approach had a negative impact

² The agrarian sector in Indonesia in this article is rice-based agriculture.



on agriculture because it eliminated the competitiveness of its agricultural exports (Laiprakobsup, 2014). In Italy, the populist movement that articulated food and agricultural issues fueled nativism and authoritarianism (Iocco et al., 2020).

Regardless of its impact, the studies above show that the agrarian populism movement and the agrarian sector are interrelated. In the context of Indonesia, the agrarian sector has been the backbone of the economy for decades (Hill, 2000; Ruf & Gérard, 2001; Syuaib, 2016), but the agrarian movement has not been effective in strengthening the agrarian sector (Van Der Ploeg, 2013). This limited role raises questions considering the important role of the peasant

movement in fighting colonialism during the Indonesian revolution (Kartodirjo & Puradisastra, 1984; Scott, 1985; Tauchid, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the current study aims to examine the reasons for the marginalization of the agrarian sector in Indonesia and the absence of an agrarian populism movement. The findings can offer a new perspective in understanding the current relationship between populism and agrarianism in Indonesia. Simultaneously, the finding can explain one of the most important classes in the Indonesian economic structures: the farmer/peasant class. More specifically, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap related to agrarian studies in Indonesia, which are dominated by the following perspectives:

First, studies that frame agrarian issues related to food security and food sovereignty are instrumentalist in nature

and focus on food fulfillment in Indonesia (Hadiprayitno, 2010; Lassa & Shrestha, 2014; MacRae & Reuter, 2020; Neilson, 2018; Neilson & Arifin, 2012; Neilson & Wright, 2017).

Second, studies that explain the agrarian sector by utilizing a developmentalist approach explain Indonesian agriculture based on a structuralist perspective, positioning it in global political economy discourse (Arifin, 2004; Barichello & Patunru, 2009; Patunru & Basri, 2011; Syuaib, 2016; Van Der Ploeg, 2013; Wahyu Lolita et al., 2020; Warr, 2005). The developmentalist approach reads the dominance of the non-agricultural sector over the agricultural sector in Indonesia as a logical implication of changes in the direction of government economic policy. This view results in studies emphasizing the government's development ideology as the

main determinant of economic structure. Developmentalist studies also explain that the marginalization of agriculture is a natural phenomenon as developing countries move toward industrialization, where changes in development orientation using neoliberal market logic will shift the significance of agriculture in the country's economic structure.

In seeing the marginalization of agriculture in the structure of the Indonesian economy, the developmentalist approach is biased and deterministic and is often trapped in development jargon, such as the Development Paradox or Engel's Law (Arifin, 2004). The economic perspective in this approach does not leave room to view the agrarian phenomenon as a political space. This gap warrants further investigation, especially in explaining the absence of an agrarian



populism movement when the agrarian sector continues to be marginalized, and various other types of populism continue to emerge. Therefore, this article aims to answer (1) why the agrarian sector is increasingly marginalized in Indonesia's economic development context, (2) to what extent political populism influences this marginalization, and (3) why the agrarian populism movement is so limited in addressing these dynamics.

This study uses secondary data from relevant documents and sources to answer the research question. Each data is analyzed with sensitivity to the discursive construction of agrarianism developed over time. This analysis requires a sensitive reading of the hegemony of discourse surrounding ideas, concepts, and categories

related to agrarianism, through which agrarian phenomena are interpreted, produced, and reproduced (Hajer, 2006).

This article is divided into several sections. The first section discusses populism and places the meaning of populism in the context of this article. The second part explains the agrarian historical background in Indonesia's political economy structure and explores the trend of marginalization of the agrarian sector in Indonesia that has been occurring for a long time. The third part discusses the influence of the dominance of political populism on the role of the agrarian sector in the structure of the Indonesian economy, as well as explains why the agrarian populism movement cannot address agrarian marginalization. The fourth part concludes the study.



Defining Populism

Populism is synonymous with the idea of 'the people' in the political system (Berlin et al., 1968; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). However, the meaning of populism is often ambiguously and elusively constructed and is heavily dependent on the context in which populism emerges (Taggart, 2000). In the United States, populism is defined as a peasant political movement (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2001) or a phenomenon of right populism such as Donald Trump (Anselmi, 2017). In Latin America or Western Europe, populism is associated with charismatic populist leaders and movements based on socialism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Weyland, 2017). In Russia and several countries of the former Soviet Union, populism is closely related to 'the narodniki,' a cultural movement of urban intellectuals

who mobilized the peasant masses (Andrzej Walicki, 1969; Mudde, 2001; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Difficulties in understanding populism have required scholars to define populism based on several approaches, namely the ideational approach, the socio-cultural approach, and the political strategy approach (Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The ideational approach understands populism based on the dichotomy of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite.' Populism is also understood as 'a thin-centered ideology,' which depends on other, more solid forms of ideology (thick-centered or full ideologies), such as fascism, liberalism, capitalism, or socialism (Mudde, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).



In contrast, the socio-cultural approach emphasizes the role of socio-cultural context in the acceptance of populism. The relational definition of populism that emphasized by this approach believes that the acceptance and development of populism cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and politico-cultural contexts in society (Ostiguy, 2017). Indirectly, the socio-cultural approach requires sensitivity to discursive processes in reading socio-cultural and politico-cultural constructions formed in society (Laclau, 2005).

Unlike the two previous approaches, the political strategy approach emphasizes the role of actors in the working of populism. It relies on personalistic leadership that obtains direct, unmediated, and non-institutionalized support from large masses of unorganized followers (Weyland,

2017). Therefore, this approach emphasizes the importance of actors' political strategies in social movements (Mouzelis, 1985; Weyland, 2017).

The political strategy approach is often used in the study of Indonesian populism and has produced studies on certain populist political figures (Aspinall, 2015; Masaaki, 2009; Ziv, 2001), the use of populism in the electoral context (Ahmad, 2020; Hamid, 2014; Margiansyah, 2019; Mietzner, 2009, 2015; Setijadi, 2017), populism in the context of democracy and prosperity (Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Lay & Praktikno, 2011; Mustofa, 2019; Rahmawati, 2018), and actors and political movements of Islamic populism (Jati, 2017; Jayanto, 2019; Mudhoffir et al., 2017; Savitri & Adriyanti, 2018; Shukri & Smajljaj, 2020).

The dominance of the above approaches limits the scope of populism studies and the



issue coverage. For example, studies have yet to focus their studies on the agrarian context. Therefore, this article uses another approach that can read and explain populism and agrarian approaches in Indonesia without losing sensitivity to political aspects. This approach to populism was offered by Margaret Canovan, who differentiated populism based on two approaches: political populism and agrarian populism.

Political populism, as a perspective, emphasizes the political aspects in explaining populism. In this case, populism is divided into four. First, populist dictatorship is an approach used by charismatic leaders in building dictatorships, such as Caesarism, Bonapartism, and Peronism. Second, populist democracy is an approach used as a practical political ideology in applying the democratic value of 'government by the

people.' Populist democracy is usually represented by holding referendums, popular initiatives, or recall procedures (Canovan, 1981, 1982).

Third, reactionary populism is used to mobilize conservative groups, or those with ignorance and prejudice. This populism is used to counter the progressive and enlightened views of more educated and liberal elites. Fourth, politician populism is an approach pragmatically used by politicians by exploiting the ambiguous definition of 'the people' to mobilize as many supporters as possible without having to commit to certain policies or ideologies. This fourth type of populism is widely used by Indonesian politicians, where 'the people' are often exploited as rhetorical tools and elite political maneuvers (Canovan, 1981, 1982).



Unlike political populism, the agrarian populism approach can be a tool in reading the populist movement, which is identical to the peasant movement, farmer's radicalism, and intellectual agrarian socialism. While political populism is utilized as a political tool and is not identical to movements in rural areas, agrarian populism is sensitive to socio-economic aspects in villages and the development of agrarian issues (Canovan, 1981, 1982; Mudde, 2001).

Agrarian populism originated from two movements at the end of the 19th century in the United States (the US People's Party) and in Russia (the *narodniki* or *narodnichestvo*) (Richard Hofstadter, 1969; Roberts et al., 1990). Although they have different forms of movement, they both use peasants as the moral source of the struggle against the capital elites (Andrzej Walicki, 1969; Canovan, 1981;

Mudde, 2001). This peasant movement originates from the same anxiety in facing modernization, especially in facing a free-market economy that hugely impacts rural life (Canovan, 1981, 1982).

Based on the agrarian populism approach, the farmers' movement emerged as a stance on expanding agricultural capitalization. Populism movement was born from the peasant class as their agrarian political resistance against the concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of the rich (Canovan, 1981, 1982; Hicks, 1931; Roberts et al., 1990). In developing countries, this movement is often led by radical intellectuals, who idealize the peasantry and their traditions. It can take shape through the institutionalization of farmers' movements through formal political channels. In any case, agrarian populism is inseparable

from applying indigenous socialist values, which uphold the idea of equality and justice for the peasant class (Canovan, 1981). This definition of agrarian populism differs from political populism, which often capitalizes on the peasant class for the pragmatic interests of populist actors.

Indonesia's Agrarian Sector and a Brief Overview of Its Political Economy

This section explains the dynamics and historical background of the agrarian sector development within the Indonesian economic structure in two political periods: the New Order and the Reform Eras. Explaining the dynamics of the political economy in the New Order Era is necessary to understand the political-economic structure of Indonesia today.

New Order Era

Agriculture was one of the priority sectors during the New Order Era to achieve food self-sufficiency and meet domestic needs. At the beginning of the era, agriculture became a reference in interpreting welfare discourse, prioritized as one of the main bases of the national economic development strategy, with a growth rate of more than 5.7% from 1978 to 1986 (Arifin, 2004).

It is important to note that such development depended on the context of political constellations outside the agrarian sector, including the global political-economic structure³. There was a phase of deconstruction and ignorance by policymakers as they considered the

3 One example is the Green Revolution policy, which shows how the agrarian sector is relatively independent in the structure of the Indonesian economy (Bachriadi & Wiradi, 2011; Gollin et al., 2018).



agricultural sector insignificant to the economy's structure⁴. This phase had implications for the contraction of agricultural growth rates below 3.4 percent in 1986-1997 and a decline in the contribution of agriculture to the economic structure from around 50% (the 1960s) to 20.2 percent (1988) and 17.2 percent (1996) (Arifin, 2004).

Ignorance about the role of the agrarian sector also had an impact on the number of workers, which continued to decline from 73% (1961) to 50.1% (1990) (Hill, 2000). The agrarian sector also experiences discrimination in land use because the land available for smallholder

agricultural activities is left over from industrial activities. As a result, the average land holding by farmers continued to decline from 0.99 Ha (1973) to 0.83 Ha (1993) (Bachriadi & Wiradi, 2011). This discrimination also decreased the agrarian sector's contribution to GDP by up to a third compared to the mid-1960s, when the industrial sector's contribution increased more than threefold (Hill, 2000).

The degradation of the agrarian sector in the New Order era was exacerbated by economic liberalization policies, which provided opportunities for foreign capital to participate in exploiting Indonesia's agrarian resources (Sutaryono et al., 2014). Through the signing of the Letter of Intent (LoI) in October 1997, the MEFP on 11 September 1998, as well as Indonesia's ratification of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) from the World Trade Organization (WTO),

4 While the agricultural sector's contribution continued to decline, the government increasingly focused on developing other economic sectors, such as industry, services, or mining. The priority of developing the non-agricultural sector increased the contribution of these sectors to the Indonesian economy (Arifin, 2004). The consequence of this development logic orienting toward profit and growth was the negligence of the seemingly less profitable agricultural sectors.

agricultural liberalization has become increasingly stronger with the elimination and reduction of tariffs and subsidies. With this liberalization, the players in the sector, especially farmers, are increasingly pressured to consume new agricultural technology products from agribusiness transnational corporations (TNCs) and large importers from developed countries (Setiawan, 2006).

Politically, the 30 September Movement in 1965⁵ also impacted the development of the agrarian sector during the New Order era. The coup took casualties of hundreds of thousands of lives in villages or farming communities and resulted in the following implications:

5 The 30 September Movement (G30S) produced a discourse that accused the leftist movement, especially the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), as the masterminds in the coup attempt in 1965. This belief was rejected by John Roosa. He stated that PKI was represented only by several PKI leaders who collaborated with several senior armies as coup initiators. Therefore, PKI was not the only actor. In general, the 30 September Movement showed an attempt at a coup from Soeharto to Sukarno. G30S became an important point in Soeharto's efforts to take over the power from the leader of the Indonesian Revolution, Sukarno. Apart from that, this coup marked the downfall of the leftist ideological discourse and movements in Indonesia. This tragedy also became a starting point for new imperialism in Indonesia, which became stronger due to the free market system and capitalism (Roosa, 2006).



1. The exclusion of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and President Sukarno from the Indonesian political stage.
2. The downfall of all leftist ideological political power.
3. The efforts to reorganize all social forces and reintegrate Indonesia into the capitalist world economy.
4. The strengthening of anti-communist discourse gave rise to movements counter-productive to the spirit of anti-imperialism and colonialism in Indonesia.

As a result, the pro-Western movement continued to proliferate and lock the stream of Indonesia's political and economic policies at the international level (McGregor & Kammen, 2012). Therefore, when all leftist ideological power was fully excluded in the New Order Era, the agrarian

sector became increasingly marginalized, overshadowed by the pragmatic, growth-oriented economic system.

Reformation Era

The economic structure that marginalized the agrarian sector continued during the Reformation Era. During this era, democratic consolidation was unable to provide democratic space for all Indonesian citizens, including ensuring the basic political and economic rights of those engaged in the agrarian sector. The logic of development that followed the neoliberal economic system is discriminatory towards agriculture. In this era, the percentage share of agriculture in Indonesia's GDP declined gradually from 15.6% in 2000 to 12.72% in 2019. In addition, the number of agricultural workers decreased from 45.3% in 2000 to 30.5% in 2018 (Bank, 2019).

The agrarian sector also continues to face challenges, such as the increasingly limited agricultural land area due to the rapid land conversion. Other economic sectors dominated and displaced the agrarian sector without protection from the government. In President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) administration (2004-2014), the promise of agrarian reform ironically led to a national development model that was anti-agrarian, with implications including denying people access to natural resources, increasing agrarian conflicts, loss of food sovereignty, and environmental damage (KPA, 2014).

The pragmatic development logic continues and is strengthened during President Joko Widodo's administration (2014-present). Under President Joko Widodo, the government issued Act Number 11/2020 on Job Creation as an Omnibus

Law to encourage the creation of a conducive climate for foreign investment. Many believe that the Job Creation Act can accelerate the conversion rate of agricultural land for non-agricultural economic purposes. For example, with its derivative regulations, i.e., Government Regulation (PP) Number 26 of 2021 concerning the Implementation of the Agricultural Sector, the government has relaxed regulations on converting rice fields for national strategic projects.

Neoliberal policies in the Reformation Era exacerbated injustice and inequality in land ownership and control, making farmers increasingly isolated from their main production base (Wardhani, 2020). The Job Creation Act has also worsened farmers' conditions through agricultural liberalization policies, such as importing rice cheaper



than local rice (Setiawan, 2006). In this condition, the government is often absent in eliminating price gaming involving large traders and rice millers with large capital, whose practices include hoarding rice during difficult times (Arifin, 2004). The liberalization of food imports shows how the government no longer cares for small farmers' interests (Hendriyanto, 2020).

Based on the description above, it can be understood that the agrarian sector in Indonesia bears the accumulated burden spanning a long history. The marginalization of the agrarian sector today is a continuation of the development logic built in the New Order, which is detrimental to farmers' lives (Fauzi, 2008). This fact raises the question of why this condition prevails, considering the agrarian sector has been the backbone of the Indonesian economy for a long time. This condition also raises

questions about the absence of a critical agrarian movement that can fight for farmers' welfare. These questions are answered in the following sections, arguing that agrarian marginalization in Indonesia is not only about the economy but also politics, especially related to the populist leadership.

Populism in the Reformation Era: Pragmatic Leadership in Indonesian Politics

Understanding leadership in Indonesia requires the reading of populism, and vice versa. The eminence of populism in Indonesian politics does not mean that it is a generic concept that can be used to label every leadership pattern. Instead, this condition is possible due to the elite networks in Indonesia, which are also connected to the masses (the people) who support

them. These masses were formed through the exploitation of various issues sensitive to and highly relevant to the public.

Populism was used by Sukarno in the Old Order⁶ era as a political strategy by exploiting the identity of the peasant class, resulting in the issuance of policies that benefited the agrarian sector (White et al., 2023). This approach to populism changed when used by Soeharto, who had a totalitarian and authoritarian populism character (Hadiz & Robison, 2017). Soeharto's populist

character had implications for manipulative elections and the state's dominance and control over the mass media (Crewe & Sanders, 2020). Soeharto used populism to create centralized power through a repressive depoliticization process for development policies⁷ detrimental to the agrarian sector (Morelock, 2018).

The transformation of the populism approach from the one used by Sukarno (agrarian populism) to Soeharto (political populism) shows how different types of populism empirically determine political dynamics. Then, the collapse of the New Order was expected to open up more democratic political

6 Several significant policies were issued for the agrarian sector in the Old Order Era. One of the most fundamental laws for agriculture was Law No. 5 of 1960 concerning Basic Regulations on Agrarian Principles. Apart from that, there were other agrarian policies, namely 1) Law of the Republic of Indonesia no. 1 of 1958 concerning the Elimination of Particular Lands; 2) Law of the Republic of Indonesia no. 2 of 1960 concerning Production Sharing Agreements; 3) Law no. 56 Prp of 1960 concerning Determination of Agricultural Land Area; 4) Republic of Indonesia Government Regulation No. 224 of 1961 concerning Implementation of Land Distribution and Provision of Compensation.

7 In the name of economic development, the New Order issued several legal instruments, such as the Law on Basic Forestry Provisions Law No. 5/1967, the Law on Basic Mining Regulations (UU No. 11/1967), and the Foreign Investment Law (UU No. 2/1967). These policies provided legitimacy to foreign companies to accumulate capital and exploit various agrarian resources in Indonesia (Sutaryono et al., 2014).



space, including space for the agrarian populism approach. At the beginning of the Reformation era, President B.J. Habibie committed to agrarian improvement by issuing Presidential Decree Number 48 of 1999 (Salim & Utami, 2020; Sutadi, 2018), and President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) campaigned for land reform for agrarian justice (Rachman, 2012). Apart from that, Gus Dur also proposed abolishing the TAP MPRS of 1966, a policy that had an impact on the prohibition of leftist ideology during the New Order and the demise of the agrarian movement in Indonesia (Habibi, 2022; Suparyo, 2020). However, the wind of change did not last long.

The opportunity to develop agrarian populism was discontinued as the short leadership period of the two presidents ended, which was even before the policies were

well implemented (Hairani, 2014; Salim & Utami, 2020). The lack of development of agrarian populism is also due to B.J. Habibie and Gus Dur's use of populist democracy, which is another type of political populism. B.J. Habibie's leadership focused on implementing democratic values, especially in interpreting a government system led by the people⁸. Meanwhile, Gus Dur focused on eliminating the centrality of the government and the oppressive hierarchy during the Soeharto era by providing space for parties previously excluded from power. The impact of utilizing political populism is that the government was insensitive to socio-economic

8 B.J. Habibie issued several policies related to this, such as granting political rights to East Timor through a referendum, upholding human rights, releasing political prisoners during the Soeharto regime, preparing for democratic elections in 1999, granting press freedom, minimizing military involvement in politics, and political decentralization to the regions (Kurniawan, 2021).

aspects in the villages, which can be seen empirically from the limited budget allocation pattern for agricultural development (Arifin, 2001).

Following Gus Dur's administration, the prevailing elite structures in the previous era helped President Megawati use political populism (Purwaatmoko, 2022). Megawati's populist character has been built since she led the resistance movement against the intervention of the New Order regime, which tried to derail her political career (Marijan, 2019). After the New Order collapsed, Megawati continued to shape her image as a representative of the people and a politician who fought for the interests of the people (Ziv, 2001).

However, Megawati's populist approach only showed that political populism was the default, i.e., the exploitation of the identity of 'the people' for

the interests of the elites. This exploitation can be seen from Megawati's leadership approach, which was increasingly distant from the interests of marginal groups, especially peasants or farmers. Megawati even issued Presidential Decree No. 34/2003, which supported the pro-market land system promoted by the World Bank and dampened the enthusiasm of agrarian activists and experts (Rachman, 2012). Megawati also rejected the formation of the National Commission for Resolving Agrarian Conflicts (KNUPKA). This independent institution was set to help resolve Indonesia's chaotic agrarian conflicts (Salim & Utami, 2020).

The dominance of political populism continued under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY)



administration⁹. SBY exploited the populism approach to achieve his pragmatic political interests, such as winning the elections (Mietzner, 2009). SBY's political populism may also reflect his development vision¹⁰, which eliminates agrarian/land from the state's priorities. Based on this policy, the image of Indonesia as an agricultural country was increasingly shifting to an archipelagic country oriented towards maritime

development¹¹. This national development policy has denied that the agricultural sector is the backbone and source of livelihood for most Indonesians (Sutaryono, 2012).

Moreover, SBY's populist political orientation can also be seen in his commitment to inviting foreign capital to invest in strategic infrastructure development projects. This was achieved by implementing the Master Plan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia's Economic Development (MP3EI) 2011-2025, a program that targeted an investment worth 450 billion US dollars (Murtadho,

9 Some political scholars consider that SBY implemented a populist approach called economic populism or thaksinomics (Mietzner, 2009). This populist approach is based on several pro-poor SBY policies, such as providing cash assistance to the poor (especially before the 2009 election period) and the policy of reducing oil prices. This policy is synonymous with political populism because it does not emancipate the peasant class and becomes rhetoric for electoral interests (Hardiyanto, 2021).

10 Based on the development vision in the National Long Term Development Plan 2005-2025 (RPJPN 2005-2025).

11 Indonesia often constructs an image of itself as an agricultural country, referring to the dominance of the agricultural sector in the economic structure. Even though this term is often employed for political rhetoric, the discourse of Indonesia as an agricultural country is actually starting to shift. The strengthening discourse on Indonesia as an archipelagic country, which emphasizes the development of the marine sector, illustrates the shift from agricultural dominance to other economic sectors, such as maritime.

2022). This program allowed the provision of as much foreign investment as possible, giant infrastructure projects, massive industrialization, and integration Indonesia into a free trade zone that accelerated the marginalization of the agrarian sector in Indonesia (Rachman & Yanuary, 2014).

Subsequent to that, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) continued the legacy of political populism, using the jargon 'the people' as a tool of political rhetoric and winning the elections. Jokowi's victory in two presidential elections reflects this phenomenon. His populism allowed him to portray himself as a politician who comes from and fights for the grassroots (Hamid, 2014). In practice, with his close alignment with Western interests, Jokowi often does not build his development policies upon the interest of the people (Mietzner, 2015; Power, 2018).

For example, Jokowi issued controversial policies contrary to public will, such as Act Number 11/2020 on Job Creation. As mentioned in the previous section, this neoliberal policy will further marginalize the agrarian sector due to agricultural liberalization (Setiawan, 2006). Therefore, even though Jokowi's political communication approach is populist, Jokowi's policies show that 'the people' are only a means to strengthen the dominance of the oligarchic elites in Indonesia.

In the Jokowi era, a fiscal decentralization policy called the Village Fund was expected to encourage development and reduce poverty in villages (Sidik & Habibi, 2023). This policy is a continuation of the institutionalist intervention in villages sponsored by the World Bank, which, in practice, emphasizes administrative decentralization or the top-



down approach (Sidik & Habibi, 2023; Widodo, 2017). Apart from strengthening patronage patterns between villages and the state, Village Funds have also given rise to the local elites phenomenon. This policy also increases the practice of clientelism in the village because these funds could benefit village elites who control the village fund allocation (Habibi, 2022; Sidik & Habibi, 2023). Therefore, instead of solving the main problems, the Village Fund policy is more like a political program that widens inequality in the village.

Apart from the policies above, the political populism approach is also reflected in Jokowi's policy of selling

the agrarian reform jargon¹². Jokowi began rolling out agrarian reform as a national priority set out in the 2015-2019 National Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMN) and further regulated in Presidential Regulation no. 45/2016 concerning the 2017 Government Work Plan (RKP) and Presidential Decree no. 86/2018 concerning Agrarian Reform. This agrarian policy focuses on the legalization and redistribution of Land Objects of Agrarian Reform (TORA). In actuality, this policy is the opposite of agrarian reform's

12 The agrarian reform policy advocated by Joko Widodo is welcomed by the world community. One of the positive impacts of this government's commitment was the appointment of Indonesia as the host of the eighth Global Land Forum in 2018. This forum was vital because it discussed various strategic issues such as true agrarian reform, land grabbing, food sovereignty, and so on (Era.id, 2018). However, on a practical level, this forum did not have a significant impact because various policies labeled agrarian reform in the Joko Widodo era did not address Indonesia's agrarian problems. In fact, policies that are detrimental to farmers continue to be produced, such as food import policies and land grabbing for investment purposes.

goals. This policy only speeds up and simplifies land buying, selling, and acquisition for significant capitalist purposes. This certification program is a foundation for Jokowi's neoliberal development, aiming to accelerate investment rates with legal certainty over land (Murtadho, 2022).

The use of a political populism approach in Indonesia continues to date¹³, especially in welcoming the presidential election in 2024. The dominance of political populism as a political approach or strategy is not neutral, driven

13 For example, Prabowo is a politician with a military background and an ultra-nationalist ideology. Several studies see Prabowo as a phenomenon of the emergence of oligarchic populism, authoritarian populism, or maverick populism (Aspinall, 2015; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). In short, these labels lead to Prabowo's classification as another phenomenon of strengthening political populism, which only exploits people's identities for personal political interests. Besides, there is also Islamic populism, which leads to reactionary populism. Islamic populism mobilizes the masses to fight against the ruling elites by using religion as a shared political identity (Hadiz, 2016).

more by pragmatic political logic exploiting the people for political interests. This condition has practical implications for Indonesia's political and economic structure, especially in terms of agrarian development. The following section explains these implications in more detail.

The Impact of Political Populism on the Agrarian Sector in the Reformation Era

The entrenched political populism in Indonesia shows how 'the people' have been used as objects to benefit the political elites. This populism is based on individual politicians, not political parties or people's movements. Instead of emerging from 'the people,' it is formed and directed by political leaders or elites who exploit the identity of 'the people' for the elite's pragmatic interests. The dominance of this political approach has implications not



only for the distance between leaders and the people but also for pragmatic leadership patterns. This pragmatism is reflected in development policies that only focus on economic development patterns that pursue growth rates without paying attention to the quality of welfare of most people. Pragmatism, due to the dominance of political populism, also has an impact on development projects that encourage neoliberal enclosure, which has further marginalized agriculture in Indonesia (Fauzi, 2008).

The strengthened neoliberal enclosure cannot be separated from market processes and government intervention in capital accumulation. In this context, the government, dominated by pragmatic leaders, is the central actor in strengthening capitalistic ownership relations, which can reduce the relative power of the

rural poor (Akram-Lodhi, 2007). The neoliberal enclosure also allows for the private ownership of land and natural resources that ultimately contribute to the rural, agrarian, and peasant world expulsion through the practices of deruralization, deagrarianization, and depeasantization. The burden on village communities and farmers here is increasingly heavy due to the pragmatism of political populist leaders who continue to issue structural adjustment policies and market liberalization globally, which can dissolve the farmers' lives (Fauzi, 2008).

Therefore, the supremacy of the political populism approach has significantly impacted the creation of an ultra-pragmatic leadership character, which is absent from noticing the centrality of agriculture in Indonesia's development. In fact, government policies often



inhibit agricultural economic growth. For example, under Jokowi's administration, the Indonesian government has continued increasing rice imports despite a surplus in production¹⁴. Continuing a similar policy to be implemented is burdensome for farmers because imported rice is cheaper than local rice. This tendency means that agriculture cannot develop and continues to decline in Indonesia's GDP, from 15.6% in 2000 to 12.72% in 2019. Degradation in the agricultural sector has implications for the high level of job transfer from agriculture to non-agriculture. During the Reformation Era,

the share of agricultural labor in Indonesia decreased from 45.3% in 2000 to 28.5% in 2019 (Bank, 2019).

At the same time, the agricultural sector also faced other challenges in the form of massive agricultural land conversion of up to 600,000 Ha per year (Humas, 2020). Conversion of agricultural land is a major challenge to agricultural development because this dynamic illustrates the transfer of the main assets of agricultural production to other economic sectors, such as manufacturing, mining, or service industries. Unfortunately, this conversion of agricultural land is often maintained by the government with a repressive approach. For example, during Jokowi's administration, in 2020 alone, there were 241 agrarian conflicts in 359 villages involving 135,337 heads of families on land covering an area of 624,272,711

14 Excluding the economic crisis, the largest average annual rice imports occurred during President Joko Widodo's time (Purnomo, 2019). The highest level of imports was carried out in 2018: 2.2 tons. This import was carried out during a rice surplus, resulting in suboptimal rice distribution patterns, inadequate management of rice stocks, and a decline in rice quality (Asikin, 2021). This import policy continued to be implemented in the following years.



hectares. As a result of these agrarian conflicts, 134 cases of criminalization occurred, 19 cases of persecution, and 11 people died in the agrarian conflict area (KPA, 2020). These figures demonstrate that the process of exclusion and discrimination against agrarians has been carried out structurally and is fully supported by state power.

The marginalization of agriculture above is in sharp contrast to Jokowi's populist rhetoric, which portrays himself as a representative of the people who will develop Indonesia from peripheral areas, including villages (Presiden, 2019). This conflict shows that the marginalization of agriculture is not only related to changes in the flow of Indonesia's economic development but also the dominance of a pragmatic political style rooted in political populism in the Indonesian

political constellation. These populist leaders can act hypocritically. They always use populist rhetoric to achieve political legitimacy. However, they are pragmatic in policy making because the attachment of populist leaders to the supporting masses is built only in political pragmatism but not politically substantive ties. The political rhetoric will be enough for populist leaders to gain false legitimacy without a political contract that can be used as a reference for people to demand their political and economic rights.

The dominance of political populism over agrarian insignificance in Indonesia's economic structure is strengthened by the character of populist leaders who are eager to maintain the status quo by avoiding political antagonism. At least two status quos are constantly maintained. The first



is a discourse inherited from the New Order authoritarian regime that has eliminated leftist ideology and movements in the Indonesian political constellation (Habibi, 2022). The lack of opportunities for the left to exist has emptied the antagonistic political space. This condition allows for an ideological monopoly, which in the Indonesian context continually follows global norms campaigned by international donor institutions. Dependence on fiscal assistance and political morals from developed countries has an impact on the reluctance of populist leaders to challenge the dominance of Western-oriented development ideologies.

The domination of discourse that forms a negative image of leftist ideology has also affected the minimal contribution of the agrarian populism movement in Indonesia (Canovan, 1981). The ideologically monopolistic

system has prevented the agrarian populism movement from directly engaging in politics. The consolidation of democracy in the Reformation Era did not improve conditions because, empirically, it perpetuated the hegemony of political discourse created by the New Order. The dominance of this discourse continues to place the peasant movement and the critical left movement in a biased space and negative perception as



enemies of the state¹⁵. Therefore, the pragmatism of populist leaders in maintaining this discourse will just preserve the marginalization of the agrarian sector and agrarian movements from the Indonesian political space. This situation explains

why a real agrarian movement cannot live and grow like the peasant movement in Russia or the agrarian political movement in the United States.

The second is the romanticization of the village as homogeneous, harmonious, and always working together for the common good (Pincus, 1996). Populist leaders often romanticize this village imagination and deny the existence of class differentiation in agriculture and fragmentation in the farmers' movement (Habibi, 2022; Rachman, 2017). Class differentiation in rural farming communities has strengthened since the New Order Era, especially during the Green Revolution. In the Indonesian context, the Green Revolution as a geopolitical project is more profitable for large-scale farmers because of the accessibility to new technology and other infrastructure to accelerate

15 There is an agrarian movement in Indonesia called the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA), which is important in revitalizing the idea of agrarian reform in Indonesia. However, this movement was criticized because many people within the KPA joined the government and participated in several government policies, contrary to the basic ideas of agrarian reform. The KPA's involvement with state policy also shows the powerlessness of agrarian groups in changing the status quo. The continuation of neoliberal policies shows that the fusion of the agrarian movement into the regime's political approach has practically silenced the agrarian movement. The involvement of agrarian groups in government circles also creates horizontal friction between agrarian groups, which leads to the weakening of this movement in supporting substantive agrarian agendas. KPA was also criticized for being involved as a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC), which has a neoliberal perspective because it has close relations with international donor institutions such as the World Bank. This proximity has created a distance between the KPA and the interests of agrarian reform that fight for the peasant class.

agricultural production (Welker, 2012). Inequalities in accessibility and production patterns in villages have affected the formation of class polarization in agrarian society until the Reformation Era (Eng, 1996). This polarization creates societal inequality in controlling the land and agricultural resources, which constructs village communities in non-single socio-economic classes.

The birth of Law No. 6 of 2014 concerning villages can be an example of a policy that continues to romanticize villages as homogeneous entities. This policy shows the state's perspective, which often fails to see the class differentiation of village communities. Village romanticization, by burying the class differentiation, can pose a barrier in articulating the interests of the peasant class under a single umbrella of interests. The unrecognized

farmer class differentiation can blur the latent conflicts, which is counterproductive to agrarian development. The maintained differentiation of the farmer class will also inhibit the consolidation of the farmer movement. Even though there are movements that strive for farmers' rights and agrarian reform in Indonesia, such as the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA) and the Indonesian Farmers' Union (SPI), these movements are vulnerable to being trapped in the romanticization of farming communities and missing the main problems of fragmented farming communities (Habibi, 2022). This movement also cannot fully offer the growth of an agrarian populism movement that can compete discursively and practically in the political space.

Therefore, the populist leaders' romanticization of the village has blurred farmer



class differentiation as a latent problem growing in the village. The romanticization of villages will also create a gap between the image and actual conditions in the village¹⁶. Ultimately, the village is only at a crossroads, not sensitive to specific class struggles. This condition explains why the agrarian movement could not be born in one strong and autonomous movement, both culturally and structurally. The pragmatism of populist leaders in pushing for neoliberal agendas exacerbates this condition, evidenced by the capital inflows and the criminalization of farmers, which results in the despair of farming communities fighting for their economic and political rights.

Ultimately, farming communities continue to be trapped in a monopolistic system that limits their space for articulating their interests. The peasant class continues to be positioned as the political object of the populist elites in the electoral process and other political rituals.

The impact of political populism on agriculture in Indonesia explains that historical linearity (from the New Order-Reformation Eras) plays an essential role in controlling the structure and discourse that marginalized agrarians in Indonesia. The historical traces of the New Order and the political populism approach prevail, giving rise to pragmatic leaders who romanticize the village and demonize the leftist ideology. The dominance of the political populism approach continues to strengthen the dominance of the development of the non-agricultural economic sector,

16 An example is the Indonesian Farmers' Harmony Association (HKTI), which acts on behalf of farmers but is dominated by the interests of the political elites who control HKTI. The movement's interests are not based on the interests of farmers but rather the pragmatic interests of the political elite who lead HKTI (Setiyono, 2011).



which is supported by the state under the umbrella of the neoliberal project. In addition, this domination creates the political space to become monopolistic, eliminating the struggle for multi-ideological-based discourses in interpreting development. This condition persists with the absence of the agrarian populism movement that benefits the people, i.e., peasants or farmers.

Conclusion

This study starts from the question of why the agrarian sector continues to be marginalized in Indonesia's political economy structure, to what extent political populism factors influence this marginalization, and why the agrarian populism movement has a limited presence in response to this phenomenon. Unlike studies that use a developmental perspective, this study offers a political

perspective on this phenomenon. By utilizing Margaret Canovan's theory of populism, this study argues, firstly, that political populism influences the process of marginalization of the agrarian sector in Indonesia's Reformation Era. Political populism works in the form of pragmatic populist leaders who exploit 'the people' as a tool of political rhetoric to gain power and a model of mass mobilization of supporters.

Second, the cause of this political populism is the neoliberal economic development and ideology. Third, there is a restriction of political space for the people to articulate their imagination and meaning of development. Economic development is ultimately dominated by an approach oriented towards profit and growth without being based on the interests of the peasant/farmer class.



Fourth, the dominance of political populism in the agrarian sector creates pragmatic leaders who perpetuate the two status quos inherited from the New Order Era: 1) political structure that continues to exclude leftist ideologies and movements; 2) political structure that romanticizes villages as homogeneous units. By maintaining the status quo, populist leaders maintain a monopolistic system that closes down the dimensions of antagonism that are constitutive of the peasant class-based agrarian populism movement. The peasant class continues to be positioned as the political object of the populist elites in the electoral process and other political rituals without being able to influence political discourse. This fact explains why the agrarian populism movement—as a populist movement emerging from the farming community

and fighting for the interests of the farming community—has limited power in the Indonesian political constellation.





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