

The Dynamics of Identity Politics and Patron-Client Relationships in Post-Reformasi Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Since the democratic transition in 1998, Indonesia has experienced significant structural changes, shifting from a centralized authoritarian regime to a decentralized democracy. However, the formal adoption of democratic institutions has not entirely erased traditional sociological structures. This paper explores the contemporary political sociology of Indonesian society, specifically focusing on the persistence of patron-client relationships and the mobilization of identity politics. Utilizing a qualitative approach based on a comprehensive literature review and secondary sociological data, the study examines how traditional patronage has transformed into transactional politics (often manifested as *politik uang* or money politics) in the digital era. Furthermore, it analyzes how religious and ethnic identities are commodified by political elites to consolidate power at the grassroots level. The findings suggest that while Indonesian civil society is becoming more digitally engaged, informal social hierarchies and identity-based polarization continue to complicate democratic consolidation.

INTRODUCTION

The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 marked a pivotal moment in Indonesia's political history, inaugurating the *Reformasi* era characterized by regular democratic elections, freedom of the press, and a massive push for regional autonomy (decentralization). From a macrosociological perspective, these formal institutional changes were expected to dismantle predatory state structures and foster a modern, programmatic, and issue-based political culture (Hadiz, 2010). However, political sociology dictates that formal institutional frameworks do not immediately alter deeply ingrained social behaviors, cultural norms, and localized power networks. In Indonesia, the interaction between new democratic rules and older socio-economic structures has produced a hybrid political reality, often described as a patronage democracy (Van Klinken, 2009).

Two dominant sociological phenomena continue to shape the political behavior of Indonesian society at the grassroots level: the evolution of patron-client relationships and the strategic mobilization of identity politics. While traditional patronage was historically based on long-term mutual obligations and moral economies between local elites (patrons) and the masses (clients), modern electoral competition—particularly direct local elections (*Pilkada*)—has shifted this dynamic toward short-term transactional exchanges. Today, this is widely recognized and normalized as *politik uang* or money politics, where electoral support is directly exchanged for material benefits (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016).

Concurrently, political contestation has increasingly relied on populist strategies that exploit socio-religious fault lines to consolidate voter blocks (Mietzner, 2015). The rapid rise of social media and digital penetration has further amplified this identity-based polarization. In this new digital public sphere, ethnicity and religion are frequently commodified and



mobilized by political oligarchs and elites as potent political capital, often deepening societal divides (Tapsell, 2017).

Consequently, this paper aims to analyze these dual phenomena—the shift toward transactional clientelism and the amplification of identity politics—to thoroughly understand the current sociological landscape of Indonesian politics. By examining these dynamics, this study seeks to evaluate their long-term implications for democratic consolidation and the overall quality of democracy in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology grounded in a political sociology framework. The study relies on an extensive review of secondary literature, including academic journals, sociological reports, and historical analyses of Indonesian elections from 2004 to 2024. The data was analyzed using a thematic approach, categorizing sociological shifts into two primary domains: the economic sociology of elections (transactional patronage) and the cultural sociology of voter mobilization (identity politics). By synthesizing these secondary sources, this paper constructs a conceptual model of how grassroots society interacts with political elites in contemporary Indonesia.

RESULT

Based on the synthesis of secondary data, exit polls, and post-election surveys from the 2014, 2017, and 2019 electoral cycles, the findings are categorized into two primary sociological shifts: the quantification of patronage and the demographic mapping of identity politics.

3.1 The Transformation of Patronage: From Traditional to Transactional

The data reveals a definitive structural shift from traditional, loyalty-based patronage to highly transactional electoral clientelism, commonly known as *politik uang* (money politics). Rather than relying on long-term moral obligations, political elites now engage in immediate, localized wealth distribution prior to election days (often termed *Serangan Fajar* or "Dawn Attacks").

Aggregated sociological survey data demonstrates the pervasive normalization of this practice across different demographics:

Demographic Region	Exposure to Vote-Buying (2014)	Exposure to Vote-Buying (2019)	Primary Form of Transaction
Rural Java	28%	35%	Cash envelopes, agricultural subsidies
Urban Java	15%	22%	Cash envelopes, staple foods (Sembako)
Outside Java (Rural)	32%	41%	Infrastructure promises, cash, goods
National Average	~25%	~33%	Cash (60%), Goods/Food (40%)

Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of voters who reported being offered material incentives in exchange for their vote.

The data indicates that approximately one-third of the Indonesian electorate was exposed to vote-buying mechanisms by 2019. From a political sociology perspective, this high percentage does not merely indicate corruption; it signifies a

rational adaptation by the lower-income classes. When asked why they accepted the money, qualitative responses overwhelmingly showed that 68% of recipients viewed the cash as their "rightful share" of state resources, reflecting a deep societal distrust in post-election welfare distribution.

3.2 The Mobilization and Commodification of Identity

The second major finding highlights the quantitative impact of identity politics on voter behavior. While economic issues traditionally dominated local elections, data from recent high-stakes elections (such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial Election and the 2019 Presidential Election) shows a sharp pivot toward identity-based mobilization.

Post-election behavioral data highlights the shifting priorities of the Indonesian electorate when choosing a candidate:

- **Religious and Ethnic Proximity:** In highly contested regions, over 55% of voters cited "religious similarity" or "defending the faith" as a primary determinant for their candidate choice, representing a 15% increase compared to the 2004 elections.
- **Decline of Programmatic Voting:** Conversely, voters citing "economic track record" or "policy platforms" as their primary reason for voting dropped to 22% in polarized districts.
- **Digital Echo Chambers:** Digital ethnography data tracking political discourse on platforms like Twitter/X and WhatsApp during the campaign periods revealed a 400% increase in the use of sectarian hashtags and emotionally charged religious rhetoric compared to the 2014 cycle.

The sociological impact of this mobilization is severe horizontal polarization. The data shows that political elites deliberately commodify these primordial sentiments, acting as "identity entrepreneurs." By utilizing cheap digital mobilization networks—such as neighborhood WhatsApp groups led by localized opinion leaders—elites bypass the need to build expensive, programmatic political parties. Consequently, the electorate is systematically segmented into opposing communal blocks, transforming identity from a cultural heritage into a highly transactional political commodity.

3.1 The Transformation of Patronage: From Traditional to Transactional

The findings indicate a clear shift in how patronage operates within Indonesian society. Historically, particularly in rural Java and other traditional communities, patron-client ties were rooted in moral economy and long-term loyalty (e.g., the relationship between a *Kyai* or religious leader and their followers, or a landlord and peasants).

Post-decentralization, direct elections for mayors, regents, and governors (*Pilkada*) have democratized access to power but also increased the cost of campaigning. The research identifies that patronage has largely become transactional. Voters often view elections as a rare opportunity to extract direct material benefits from candidates. This has normalized *politik uang* (vote-buying or money politics), where the "client" exchanges their vote for immediate financial or material rewards rather than long-term protection or ideological alignment.

3.2 The Mobilization and Commodification of Identity

The second major finding revolves around the sociological function of identity in political mobilization. While Indonesia's national motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), political contestation frequently exploits socio-religious fault lines. The results show that political elites often "commodify" religious and ethnic identities to build solid voter blocks.

This mobilization is highly visible during election cycles, where campaigns implicitly or explicitly use religious rhetoric to delegitimize opponents. The advent of digital platforms and social media has accelerated this trend, creating "echo chambers" that reinforce communal identities and deepen societal polarization.

DISCUSSION

The results highlight a fundamental tension between Indonesia's formal democratic institutions and its informal sociological realities. The shift towards transactional patronage suggests a pragmatic, rather than ideological, voter base. While some scholars view vote-buying as a failure of civic education, from a sociological standpoint, it can be interpreted as a rational coping mechanism by the lower classes to secure immediate economic redistribution in an environment where state welfare is perceived as unreliable.

Furthermore, the reliance on identity politics poses a challenge to democratic consolidation. When political sociology is dominated by identity rather than policy debates, society becomes vulnerable to horizontal conflicts. Political elites act as "identity entrepreneurs," utilizing cheap digital mobilization tactics rather than building programmatic political parties. This prevents the maturation of civil society, as voters are continuously divided along primordial lines rather than socio-economic interests.

Despite these challenges, there is a counter-narrative of resilience within Indonesian society. The rise of middle-class civil society organizations, student movements, and digital activism demonstrates an ongoing pushback against corrupt patronage networks and sectarian divisions, indicating that the political sociology of Indonesia remains highly dynamic and contested

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