Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research, 36, 68-86 (2026)

A Variegated Convergence? Indonesian Progressives and Mass Politics in Comparative Asian Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Globally, links between progressive politics and mass constituencies have weakened but remain influential through grassroots mobilization. This article examines that relationship in Indonesia, a major oligarchic democracy, focusing on developments since 2014. It identifies a pattern of partial convergence between progressive activism and working-class aspirations, driven by shared experiences of intensifying capitalist exploitation. However, this alignment is uneven. Key constraints include tensions between professional managerial class activists and their mass base, and the organizational weakness of leftist and working-class groups. Together, these factors limit the effectiveness of pro-democracy and class politics, producing a temporary impasse also seen in other Asian contexts.

KEYWORDS: Mass politics; Grassroots mobilization; Working Class; Indonesia; Oligarchy

Introduction

The explosive victory of right-wing parties and forces across advanced capitalist democracies has stolen public attention, but no less important is the development in the Global South, where mass movements of various tendencies continue to challenge the ruling elites. Asia hosts a large concentration of these movements, where the contradictions of capitalist development and existing regimes – whether democratic or authoritarian – remain pronounced in politics (Chacko 2018; Rodan 2018). These movements range from the Milk Tea Alliance connecting East and Southeast Asian pro-democracy movements to youth-driven mass uprisings in South Asia. Despite their different trajectories and diverse articulations, they share some similar characteristics: organizationally fragmented, ideologically diverse, and composed by new generation of youth, activists, and working classes.

Scrutinizing the characteristics, achievements, and limits of these movements is imperative not only in providing a more comprehensive account of global class struggle and socialist politics beyond Western-centric accounts, but also to combat defeatism in some sections of leftist and progressive movements. In this conversation, Indonesia is a revealing case study for a number of reasons. Globally known for its rich revolutionary tradition up to the anti-Communist, counterrevolutionary offensive in 1965, it witnessed a long history of anti-authoritarian activism under the New Order capitalist dictatorship (1966-1998). This was followed by vibrant civil society and social movement scenes in post-1998 democratic period. These cover a whole gamut of groups and tendencies, ranging from reformist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and liberal intellectuals to class-based social movements (Dibley and Ford 2019; Caraway and Ford 2020)

Following the global wave of democratic backsliding, Indonesia too has experienced the shift from a model Global South democracy into an increasingly illiberal or authoritarian-leaning one where the oligarchic power structure, a network of politico-business alliances of political and economic elites nurtured under the New Order (Hadiz and Robison 2026) and growing under electoral democracy (Damanik, et al. 2025), now has to resort to episodic repression to constrain democratic spaces and discipline dissent (Anugrah and Putri 2025). Ironically, this gradual democratic decline occurred during the two-term presidency (2014-2024) of Joko Widodo

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(Jokowi), then seen as a reformist figure. This process intensified under the incumbent president, Prabowo Subianto, an authoritarian populist with close ties to the New Order regime whose administration has been cracking down on mass protests since governing in 2024.

Utilizing my fieldwork experience in Indonesia since 2015, this article analyzes the trajectory of leftist/progressive politics in Indonesia since 2014. This includes interviews and informal conversation with key community actors and activists and personal observation of movement activities and culture in multiple cities and towns. Writing from a scholar-activist perspective committed to class politics and scientific rigor (Borras and Franco 2025, 3), I present a critical yet emphatic assessment of the weaknesses of progressive politics in Indonesia.

Here, I argue that there has been a process of interest convergence between proponents of progressive politics and the working masses. Interest convergence can occur between competing social classes as a form of mutual concession (Mares 2003) or, in this case, between activists and social movement bases under a broad political program (Bachriadi 2010).

This convergence, however, is punctuated by two factors. First is the material and cultural gap between the professional managerial class (PMC) section of progressive activists and the masses. Second is the relative weakness of orthodox leftist tendencies and working-class organizations. This resulted in what I call *variegated convergence,* where such interest convergence remains contested, uneven, and susceptible to fragmentation and the dominance of PMC agenda. This renders political pressures for working-class and pro-democracy agenda less effective.

This article proceeds as follows. The first parts discuss the relevant scholarship on civil society, social movements, and mass politics in Indonesia since 2014 and present a multi-strand Marxist analytical framework. The second part applies the framework to the Indonesian case. Finally, the last section puts the Indonesian experience in conversation with other Asian cases to illustrate how variegated converge occurs across contexts.

Activism, Mass Movements and the Left in Contemporary Politics

Existing studies have documented attempts by leftist parties and movements to make political interventions and secure some concessions and victories since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. This includes the Occupy Wall Street movement (Appel 2014), left-wing populist moments in Europe, the United States (US), and Latin America (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2023), labor struggles (Vandaele 2016), mass movements for Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn them (Chiengkul 2021; Day and Uetricht 2021), and a range of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Climate Justice movements. These references, while useful, are mostly oriented for academic and public audiences in the West and therefore have limited engagement with political economy and discursive context of Global South countries and regions beyond Latin America.

In post-Cold War Southeast Asia including Indonesia, progressive politics takes a broader meaning beyond traditional leftist politics. This includes, for example, “post-Marxist left” seeking “new ways to advance agendas of popular empowerment and social justice” and donor-funded liberal and rights-based discourses aiming for greater societal autonomy (Aspinall and Weiss 2012, 213-214). This new politics is also marked by the rise of middle-class actors with post-materialist concerns (Ford 2013, 2-3). While traditional leftist parties still participate in electoral politics (Quimpo 2020, 148-151; Ridha 2023) and leftist ideas continue capture the imagination of social movements, dissidents, activists, and students in the offline and online spaces (Ridha 2020), ideas associated with bourgeois/liberal reformism in civil society have also gained more currency (Hewison and Rodan 2012). The term “progressive politics” therefore captures not only orthodox

leftism but also broader anti-authoritarian, left-leaning currents and even left-liberal and rights-based discourses.

Eclectic progressivism is particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where post-authoritarian left and class-based movements struggle to make significant inroads and victories. In 2014, popular enthusiasm and organic mobilization from below for the presidential campaign of Jokowi, then seen as a reformist figure, soon dissipated and turned into a massive disappointment due to the continuing marginalization of progressive agenda (tho Seeth and Suryomenggolo 2024). His capitulation to oligarchic interests and pursuit of neoliberal-developmentalist economic policies led to gradual democratic decline over his two-term tenures from 2014-2024 (Jaffrey and Warburton 2025). This authoritarian turn prompted broad civil society opposition against Jokowi's policies, with limited success. While this suffocating political climate has reduced resources and spaces for activists, one should also pay attention to *internal dynamics and diversity* of civil society groups and social movements and the tensions among them.

In this light, a recent call to investigate internal contradictions in Indonesian civil society is timely (Mudhoffir 2023). Other works have provided some assesment of recent updates in Indonesian middle-class activism (Savirani 2019), student activism (Sastramidjaja 2019), organized labor (Ridha 2025), platform workers' activism (Panimbang 2021), rural social movements (Anugrah 2024), and urban poor activism (Batubara, et al. 2024), among others. This body of literature offers insightful, though disparate, cues regarding the gaps between activists/organizational platforms and the mass bases of respective movement sectors.

This article takes the torch from Mudhoffir's (2023) analysis and expands the cues from the mentioned recent works on social movements in Indonesia to flesh out the process of variegated convergence between progressive politics and mass aspirations since 2014. To do so, it will apply the analytical framework explained in the next section.

Drivers and Characters of Variegated Convergence

Variegated convergence occurs in the context of civil society under capitalism. Following a Gramscian view, civil society is an unequal terrain of struggle between competing social forces and a contested field for ideological hegemony (Maglaras 2013, 2). The source of this inequality and contestation is the process of class differentiation among civil society exponents. There is a significant socioeconomic inequality and cultural gap *within* activists and other cognitive workers and *between* them and the very mass bases that they are supposed to represent due to differential access to the means of knowledge production and the different degrees of their respective precariousness (Fakih 1995).

Among critical activists and intellectuals in Indonesia, the main advocates of progressive politics, there has been a rise of PMC whose sectoral interests sometimes come into conflict with the more precarious activists and mass bases (Anugrah 2025). PMC activists and intellectuals can be defined as elite knowledge workers who labor in knowledge and cultural production (Graeber 2014; Liu 2021). Though progressive and occasionally radical, they also benefit from performing reformist gestures within capitalism. The tensions between PMC activists and intellectuals and the more "proletarian" voices thus hinder the advancement of class struggle.

This variegated convergence is reflected in the discursive diversity of Indonesian civil society. While past influences of radical left and socialist traditions continue to shape political grammar, they compete with the language and agenda of Western donors and academic trends. What results is a mishmash of political articulations in which the aspirations of the masses might be marginalized. This apparent inconsistency should not be surprising, for in *The Communist*

Manifesto Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had already identified various tendencies of socialism and their differences from orthodox, scientific socialism (Marx and Engels 1969).

In terms of movement leadership, the influence of leftist parties and organic working-class unions and social movements in contemporary Indonesia remains limited. While they have strong mobilizational power and their advocacy effort has resulted in meaningful policy concessions, such as land titles for farmers (Anugrah 2024, 220-227) and universal healthcare (Ridha 2025, 118-157), they have to compete for the leadership of the broad progressive camp with other organizations and networks. In recent years, grassroots NGOs, student groups, and national and local protest coalitions also play a significant role in mobilizing the public, providing ad hoc leadership, and serving as social opposition to the state amid movement fragmentation (Lane 2023).

Moreover, other types of smaller networks and campaigners also emerge. Broadly, they can be categorized into two groups. First, there are smaller movement coalitions, collectives, and study circles especially in the provinces.[2] Second, urban-based intellectual and activist networks and social media influencers have carved out new spaces in the activist "marketplace" (Anugrah 2025, 232-237; Anugrah and Putri 2025). PMC sections of civil society can be found in the former and even among grassroots NGOs and leaders of national and local coalitions.

In the rest of the article, I will show that a common experience of capitalist exploitation binds together activist and intellectual purveyors of progressive politics with grassroots mass bases. This explains sustained patchwork of resistance and popular politics in Indonesia since 2014. But this convergence is variegated, for the PMC sections of the aforementioned progressive activists and intellectuals often have different agendas and concerns that are not necessarily aligned with those of the mass bases and class politics.

Capitalist Development in Indonesia since 2014

Recent developments in Indonesian political economy reveal the structural background of variegated convergence. Here, I focus on four dimensions: 1) general macroeconomic conditions, 2) exploitation, 3) dispossession, and 4) concessions, with reference to both national and global economic conditions. Despite concerns over democratic decline and haphazard economic policies, Indonesia's capitalist macroeconomy remains relatively stable despite occasional shocks. Early in the first term of his presidency, Jokowi pursued a policy of massive infrastructural expansion across Indonesia and cut fuel subsidies (Warburton 2016, 308-309), a face-about from his past pro-poor image and promotion of subsidized healthcare and education during his tenure as the governor of Jakarta. This was accompanied by a declining commitment to anti-corruption agenda in the name of pursuing business as usual.

His administration drove capitalist development through both market liberalization and expansion of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Kim (2022, 210) notes that SOEs' "combined assets increased 12.4% on an annual average from 4,580 trillion rupiahs in 2014 to 9,242 trillion rupiahs in 2020" which means an increase of SOE's assets "as a share of gross domestic product (GDP)…from 43% in 2014 to 60% in 2020." To maintain the confidence of global market in Indonesia, he harmonized business regulations, simplified some bureaucratic red tapes, and attracted foreign investments (Kim 2022, 214). This strategy, to some extent, represents a compromise of different coalitional interests behind Jokowi – between his own brand of

[2] Personal observation of environmental activism and campaign activities in East Kalimantan, March 23-28, 2019. Interview with Pradarma Rupang, a local environmental activist, March 23, 2019. Focus group discussion with local activists in Banyumas, August 3, 2019.

developmentalist neoliberalism and state-driven economic policies preferred by some political parties and oligarchs supporting him (Baker 2023, 358).

During Jokowi's decade in office, Indonesia "managed to maintain 4 to 5 per cent GDP growth" but this seemingly positive achievement hid issues such as continuing reliance on "mineral and coal mining for growth and export revenue" (Jaffrey and Warburton 2025, 9) and declining contribution of manufacturing to the Indonesian economy (Patunru and Basri 2025). His government's attempt to promote nickel mining and processing to tap into the profit offered by the global lithium battery industry has led to neither sustainable industrialization nor improved welfare of workers and local communities (Wijaya and Sinclair 2025).

Meanwhile, labor exploitation and precariousness across sectors have deepened during Jokowi's decade in power. Precarious traditional workers and the so-called "middle-class" workers have found it difficult to attain job security and proper career and livelihood (Baker 2023, 358-360). His government scored a modest reduction in poverty, but socio-economic inequality had increased substantially (Azzahra 2024).

The biggest blow to labor protection during his term was the introduction of the neoliberal Law No. 11 of 2020 on Job Creation (known as the Omnibus Law), which paved the way for more unrestrained investment without regard to democratic process, environmental safeguards, and concerns from the working people (Ma'ruf and Anugrah 2022). This was exacerbated by his administration's half-hearted measures and subsidies in combating the health and socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving communities, unions, and social movements to tend for themselves.

Simultaneously, the rate of resource and livelihood dispossession increased dramatically. In particular, corporate and state-sponsored land-grabbing exploded across rural regions, accumulating millions of hectares of community land for profit-oriented plantations and affecting hundreds and thousands of rural households (Anugrah 2023, 199-201). This was a direct result of Jokowi's infrastructural turn and other economic policies.

In response, his administration implemented economic concessions to cushion the impacts of increasing precariousness and maintain voters' support for political status quo. This logic of concessionary capitalism manifested in the provision of universal healthcare (Ridha 2025, 118-157) and land titles for farmers involved in land disputes with state and corporate authorities (Anugrah 2024, 220-227) – thanks to workers' and farmers' mobilization and advocacy efforts. But these concessions remain limited, for they neither challenge the market rule in hospital administration and pharmaceutical industry nor force private and state-owned companies to return stolen land from rural communities.

The victory of Prabowo Subianto, an ex-general-turned-populist with close links to the New Order regime and a former rival of Jokowi, in the 2024 presidential election signified a continuing pattern of collusive power-sharing culture among the Indonesian political class and their consensus for an oligarchic democracy. Prabowo's appointment as the defense minister of Jokowi's second-term cabinet (2019-2024) as a gesture post-elections conciliation followed by the choice of Jokowi's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming, as Prabowo's running mate in the 2024 presidential election suggested not only a national-level dynastic strategy for political survival, but also another strategy to defend oligarchic rule and market confidence at the expense of the working people. In fact, business and investors have welcomed the general elections as a mechanism for "smooth" transfer of power needed for economic growth and stable investment climate (Ubaidillah 2024).

The first year of Prabowo's presidency was far from the populist dream that he envisioned. *The Economist* (2026) reported that his poorly implemented populist policies of distributing free lunches for students and building a Sovereign Wealth Fund as well as 80,000 "agricultural cooperatives" had threatened Indonesia's macroeconomic stability. These policies are also prone to elite capture and took away state budget priorities from real redistributionist agenda (Anugrah and Putri 2025).

Progressive Politics, Popular Struggles and Multisectoral Precariousness in Indonesia since 2014

Deepening capitalist exploitation since 2014 gives a sense of common experience for the Indonesian society, but this masks, both on objective and subjective levels, differentiated impacts of such exploitation across different social forces and even within the working *classes* and social movements. There are different experiences of exploitation and precarity between the so-called "middle-classes" – a category encompassing both the activist constituency and broader educated, white-collar workers – and the laboring mass bases. The interests of these two groups might converge or diverge depending on their sectoral interests and specific political junctures.[3]

Broadly speaking, this oppositional politics can be mapped into several currents. First is the traditional "proletarian" sector in organized labor, peasant, and urban poor movements. A close accompaniment to this sector is a wide variety of extra-parliamentary left parties and collectives. Second current is the NGO sector, whose structural nature (due to funding, organizational format, political orientation, and social milieu) is essentially reformist yet have direct access to the mass bases and extensive experience working with them. They work on almost every topic imaginable, from human rights and environmental justice to anti-corruption and gender equality. Third is the student movement, consisting of university students and, more recently, economically precarious vocational high school students.

The fourth group is the gig transportation workers, one of the fastest growing, most precarious, and most visible workers in the urban areas. Beyond these major currents, assorted types of loosely connected groups, networks, and individuals also participate in this oppositional politics, such as local advocacy coalitions, critical scholars and intellectuals, student groups and study circles, and resource-stricken yet versatile collectives working on specific movement issues.

In the first year of Jokowi's presidency in 2015, university students organized several protests in Jakarta criticizing his failure of delivering his campaign promises in addressing past human rights abuses and improving people's livelihood (Damarjati 2015; detikNews 2015). Labor unions, from reformist to "red" or radical ones, launched protests in Jakarta demanding wage raise and better working conditions in September and October of the same year (BBC News Indonesia 2015; Mufakhir and Pelu 2015).

2016-2017 was a year of both progressive and reactionary mobilization, with roots in the dispossession of rural and urban working-class. In many rural areas of Indonesia, peasant unions, environmental movements, and indigenous peoples actively launched land rights campaign against corporate and state-sponsored land-grabbing through mass mobilization and political advocacy.[4] Many of these areas have a long history of agrarian struggle dating back to the 1980s. Among these struggles, three cases stood out and generated national attention: mobilization against

[3] For a Marxist take on the middle-class, see Wright (1985, 37-57).

[4] Interviews with farmers and local activists involved in land rights advocacy and observation of their activities in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi, May-June 2016. Interviews with environmental justice activists in Jakarta, August 15 and November 13, 2016.

corporate land-grabbing in Tulang Bawang (Lampung Province) and Kendeng (Central Java Province) by local farmers and indigenous people respectively and against a new airport construction in Sukamulya (West Java Province) by local farmers in 2017.[5]

In urban areas, eviction campaign affecting the urban poor occurred in major cities in Indonesia, such as Jakarta and Bandung (Dipa 2016; Wilson 2017). These urban poor communities are long-term residents in the evicted areas and have organized themselves as a social movement. Their plight became a *cause célèbre* for many activists and social movements.[6] The fact that the eviction campaign in Jakarta was led by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese Christian governor and a close ally of Jokowi with a reputation for being brash and technocratic, became a potent source of reactionary politics. This was proven in the lead-up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where Islamist populists had successfully capitalized on the grievances of the evicted urban poor lower middle-classes and briefly managed to mainstream reactionary politics (Wilson 2017).

The concerted effort of the ruling class to manipulate democratic arena continues for the rest of Jokowi's first term. Quid-pro-quo, clientelistic arrangements between political candidates and mining companies became a common *modus operandi* to win the 2018 regional head elections and later the 2019 general elections, wherein the companies funded election campaigns for mayoral and district head candidates, who will in turn issue generous mining licenses for them (Anugrah 2023, 203-206). Both Jokowi and Prabowo, then candidates for the 2019 presidential election, also relied on campaign financing from mining oligarchs.

Responding to this, a nationwide campaign by environmental justice NGOs, social movements, and activist networks was launched to raise public awareness of this corrupt practice. This effort scored some success – the public education campaign against mining oligarchy through public discussion and documentary screening reached the broader middle-classes beyond the activist core.[7] The 2018-2019 period then signified a growing progressive politics made possible due to growing dissatisfaction toward Jokowi's first term, increasing inequality, and declining room for societal dissent.

This loose cross-class coalition eventually culminated into the #ReformasiDikorupsi (#ReformCorrupted) protest movement in 2019 right after the beginning of Jokowi's second term, the biggest student-led movement since the fall of authoritarianism in 1998. The main trigger for this protest was the Jokowi administration's attempt to weaken the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in order to appease his elite backers. This solidified the many purveyors of progressive politics and the mass bases of social movements. Later wave of these protests continued into early 2020.[8]

What followed since then has been a series of mass protests in major cities and faraway provinces, which were interrupted by mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic but continued in waves of episodic protests. In 2021, during the pandemic, the second wave of #ReformasiDikorupsi protests were organized, with a lower size compared to the first one.[9]
The momentum for big demonstrations subsided in 2022 as society focused more on post-pandemic recovery. In 2023, a brief momentum for progressive politics emerged, perhaps mildly

[5] Observation of Kendeng Solidarity Protest, March 13-27, 2016. Personal conversation with activists in Jakarta, February-May 2017.
[6] Observation of an evicted urban poor community in South Jakarta, September 25, 2016.
[7] Observation of the public screening and discussion of "Sexy Killers," a documentary about mining influence in Indonesian elections, at a corporate office in South Jakarta, April 20, 2019.
[8] Online interviews with activists participating in the protests, September 2020.
[9] Personal conversation with activists in Jakarta, September-December 2021.

generated by Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, but mostly charged by Jokowi's increasingly open dynastic politics in preparation for the 2024 presidential election.

The victory of the Prabowo-Gibran ticket in the 2024 presidential election reenergized broad civil society mobilization. But adding insult to the injury was the joint attempt by Jokowi and the national parliament to draft a law on regional head elections that could potentially make Jokowi's youngest son, Kaesang Pangarep, eligible to run for the elections despite him not meeting the minimum age requirement as governor or vice governor candidates (Buehler 2025, 265). This not only prompted student and NGO mobilization but also disrupted political sensibility of the non-activist middle-class public.

The contradictions between popular democratic aspirations and the increasingly illiberal ruling methods of the oligarchic power structure sharpened throughout 2025. The student-led #DarkIndonesia protest in February and March against the Prabowo government's budget cut and creeping militarization of politics, labor protests on May Day, anti-government protests by local citizens in Pati, Central Java, and finally the nationwide anti-oligarchic protests in late August-early September reflected people's anger against the increasingly erratic policies of Prabowo and the political establishment (Ridha 2025). Populist concessions and campaign promise that Prabowo offered, the school free lunch program and ambitious job creation targets, fell short and thus did not manage to quell public dissatisfaction amid shrinking democratic spaces.

Dynamics of Variegated Convergence

Sustained yet fragmentd characteristics of progressive politics and mass mobilization in Indonesia since 2014 indicate the concurrent process of variegated convergence. Three factors shape this process: 1) common experience of capitalist exploitation between the purveyors of progressive politics and working-class mass bases, 2) the divergence of interests between the PMC strata within civil society and the mass bases, and 3) the relative weakness of leftist and working-class organizations.

The activist core in Indonesian civil society and grassroots social movements has always maintained a critical, broadly anti-neoliberal/anti-oligarchic outlook. However, their radicalization came relatively late compared to the mass bases of social movements and the broader working-class. For some time in Jokowi's first term, urbanized and politically savvy activists enjoyed an outsized influence. Some were appointed as Jokowi's advisors in the Presidential Staff Office or high-ranking bureaucrats in different government agencies (Anugrah 2025, 234).

Meanwhile, younger critical activists and intellectuals, though mostly located outside the corridors of power, enjoyed visible cultural influence and social capital and some limited political influence, thanks to the then relatively stable knowledge economy institutions (e.g., NGOs and new alternative media outlets), newer avenues for political socialization and activism, the availability of funding for civil society projects and graduate studies scholarships, and social media visibility.[10]

Furthermore, the broader middle-class still enjoyed relative economic stability during this period and thereby espoused confidence in Jokowi's performance in the first half of his first term. The middle-class enjoyed a higher consumption rate under Jokowi's first term compared to the previous period (2004-2014), making them a major beneficiary of economic growth under his presidency (Suryahadi and Al Izzati 2019).

This rapidly changed as the oligarchic arrangement intensified throughout the rest of Jokowi's two-term presidency and under Prabowo's rule, impoverishing not only the most exploited layer of the working classes but also the white-collar workers – the middle-classes

[10] Personal observation of activist landscape in Indonesian cities since 2015.

themselves. Increasing rate of living cost outpaces wage raise, effectively creating a condition of mass wage depression (Pangestu and Armstrong 2025). This also impacted those working in donor-funded NGOs and projects, media outlets, and other types of cognitive sectors, who had to survive on short-term contract jobs and experienced layoffs when the boom started to bust.

The most marginalized stratum of workers – in urban areas, factories, plantations, villages, and mining sites, among others – experienced the most vulgar form of labor exploitation and livelihood dispossession. This includes the vocational high school students, who come from poor, working-class families and have first-hand experience with job and livelihood precariousness (Wibisono 2025)

But this shared experience did not lead to a clear radical or redistributionist political program. What gives? This is where a closer look at the PMC within civil society is needed. Recall my earlier description of critical activists and intellectuals trying to engage with the Jokowi administration during his presidency. As I have argued elsewhere, the most visible and active members of these corps most possibly occupy the PMC strata within knowledge or civil society workers (Anugrah 2025). In other words, they are the labor aristocrats or civil society elites in Indonesian activist and intellectual scenes.

While they play a positive role in progressive politics, their class position renders them prone to career-advanced, politically moderating, and status-seeking tendencies. Intellectually, given their predilection to postmodern and liberal readings of leftist politics as opposed to the more orthodox, materialist socialism (Graeber 2014; Liu 2021), there is a tendency among PMC progressives toward political incrementalism, performative politics, and comfortable activism, as opposed to a more materialist, contentious form of radical or redistributionist politics (Anugrah 2025; Mudhoffir 2023, 67-70; 76-79).[11]

The more politically savvy and ambitious PMC progressives can be found in the high places of power, trading past political radicalism and social capital for positions within the Jokowi and, more strangely, Prabowo administrations (Anugrah 2025, 234-235). While the initial hope for sending these purportedly progressive delegates of social movements into government positions was to advance working-class interests within the belly of the bourgeois state, it turned out that such a strategy, sometimes done with few consultations with their grassroots constituencies and fellow activists and little consideration for the fierceness of oligarchic politics, led to self-serving politics and further fragmentation among social movements.

The more performative-oriented PMC progressives, on the other hand, are already content with accruing surplus value and cultural capital from their participation in the knowledge economy (Anugrah 2025, 235-236). While this is much less harmless compared to political capitulation and betrayal of politically savvy PMC progressives, such kind of activist or intellectual celebrity culture perpetuates elitism among critical activists and intellectuals and increases the gaps between PMC progressives and the very mass bases that they are supposed to represent.

Political practices and behaviors of both PMC types therefore exacerbate class differentiation between them and poorer critical activists and intellectuals, creates unnecessary infighting, and overall renders progressive politics less impactful.

A possible counterbalance to PMC tendencies, leftist and working-class organizations, remains relatively weak. Official estimates record that more than four million Indonesian workers are unionized under multiple union federations and confederations (Idamatussilmi 2024), but the actual figures are most likely far lower and union density in Indonesia remains low. Furthermore,

[11] For an example of a liberal reading of contemporary progressive politics in Indonesia, see Saenong (2024).

the vast majority of Indonesian workforce – 59.4 percent of the working population as of February 2025 (Rachman 2025) – engage in informal sectors, though these workers remain connected to rich associational life – such as communal aid, everyday politics, and religious congregations – that can be mobilized for oppositional politics. A similar situation can also be found in the unions of other "traditional" proletariat – farmers and urban poor – which are smaller in size compared to the industrial workers. Peasant and urban poor movements also suffer from fragmentation and low rate of unionization, though they remain connected with the broad network of social movements.

Of these unions, red or leftist unions represent only a fraction of the total number of working-class unions. Granted, leftist unions such as the National Union Confederation (*Konfederasi Serikat Nasional,* KSN), the Congress of Indonesian Trade Union Alliances (*Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia,* KASBI), and the Indonesian Workers' Union Confederation (*Konfederasi Persatuan Buruh Indonesia,* KPBI) are the most programmatic and ideologically-consistent among labor unions. However, internal organizational factors, such as training the next generation of leadership of these unions and organizational politics, and external challenges, such as competition for influence and recruitment among workers limit their political inroads and membership size.[12]

The situation is even more challenging for leftist political organizations. Since democratization in 1998, various offshoots splitting from the leftist People's Democratic Party (*Partai Rakyat Demokratik,* PRD) have been trying to intervene in the electoral arena with little success. Between 2015-2016, a multi-sectoral coalition of class-based social movements were active in consolidating the Confederation of Indonesian People's Movement (*Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia,* KPRI) as a potential political party (Anugrah 2016), but this initiative failed to gain broader traction.

Most recently, KPBI participated in the establishment of the reformist Labour Party (*Partai Buruh,* PB) as a founding member, formed its own leftist caucus within it, the National Political Committee (*Komite Politik Nasional,* Kompolnas), and fielded its candidates in the 2024 general elections under the PB ticket (Ridha 2023), but support from the broader civil society for this experimentation, which is dominated by left-liberal elements and sectional interests of PMC progressives, remains limited. Moreover, as critics have pointed out, there remains a risk that Kompolnas might be outflanked by the more reformist and opportunist elements within the party that seek accommodation with Prabowo.

The orthodox left's cousin, the anarchists, have also been active in popular education, workers' organizing, and direct actions against police violence throughout the Jokowi presidency (Facal and Estrelita 2020, 230-234; Kiss 2024). However, it is fair to question, notwithstanding their contribution to Indonesian social movements, whether they can go beyond being a subculture and extend their reach to the masses.

Nowhere was this weakness of the left and the sectoral interests of PMC progressives more evident in the nationwide anti-oligarchy protests in late August-early September 2025. Leftist unions, parties, and alliances were too weak organizationally to provide leadership for the masses who had unleashed explosive political energy. Instead, this moment was seized by liberal social media influencers with links to consultancy and 'hip' online media industries who channeled people's anger toward moderate activism despite the possibility of a more contentious mass

[12] Personal observation of these unions and conversations with workers and activists involved in labor advocacy since 2015.

politics that might deepen democracy and yield redistributionist concessions (Anugrah and Putri 2026).[13]

Given this impasse, not to mention the structural challenges of fielding progressive candidates in local and national elections, there is a clear incentive for the broad masses and even the more politically conscious layers of them to vote for mainstream parties and politicians with some kind of concessionary commitments. This has been the strategy of some rural communities facing land-grabbing or even the more politically conscious labor unions, urban poor movements, and fishing communities. A senior scholar-activist, describing the electoral preference of some villagers affected by socio-ecological problems, as follows: "Walhi (Indonesia's leading environmental NGO) is my hero, Golkar (former authoritarian ruling party) is my choice."[14] Politically-conscious community leaders in fishing communities in Central Java and North Sumatra too follow the strategy of supporting different political parties in the 2019 general elections.[15]

Average younger voters, many are anxious about economic uncertainties and take democratic longevity as granted, see no problem voting for the authoritarian-leaning Prabowo accoding to most recent studies (Kuipers, Toha and Sumaktoyo 2024, 597-600; Muhtadi, Warburton and Gammon 2025). A reputable 2022 survey reported that 77.7 percent of respondents were satisfied with the performance of democracy in Indonesia (Ameliya 2022). These stories and surveys from the field indicate that despite their dissastisfactions with Indonesia's oligarchic democracy, ordinary masses or voters find the system bearable. Put differently, here we have a case of working-class communities and even leaders voting for mainstream bourgeois parties in the absence of a viable radical or progressive alternative.

Variegated Convergence across Asia

Variegated convergence can also be observed in recent mass politics in other Asian cases. In Hong Kong, long a bastion of social activism, the broad pro-democracy movement in 2014 was not only about opposition against growing authoritarian influence of the Chinese government in the city, but also about social justice. As noted by political economist Toby Carroll (2014), close to 20 percent (1.3 million) of the Hong Kong population lived "below the official poverty line" in 2013, a condition that was exacerbated by growing inequality and "painful delays to access to public housing," not to mention that elite figures and companies in the city, such as its most prominent tycoon Li Ka-Shing, other property owners, top four accounting firms – Ernst & Young, KPMG, Deloitte, and PricewaterhouseCoopers – and its flagship bank HSBC had criticized the protest movement, citing concerns over stability for investment as their main reason.

Nevertheless, the demand for universal suffrage for the chief executive post in Hong Kong became the rallying cry for the movement. This reformist demand emerged in Hong Kong's peculiar contexts, where depoliticization of the masses in exchange for the stability of local capitalist arrangement had been embraced by political forces across spectrum, from colonial and local elites to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Anything "left" is associated with CCP and

[13] These liberals are active in the following enterprises: Think Policy, a consultancy firm (https://thinkpolicy.id/about), Malaka Project, a digital literacy channel (https://www.youtube.com/@MalakaProjectid), and What Is Up, Indonesia, a media platform for Indonesian diaspora (https://whatisupindonesia.com/about).

[14] Interview with a senior scholar-activist in Jakarta, December 2, 2016.

[15] Interviews with fishers in Kendal and Demak, Central Java, January 24-30, 2019 and Serdang Bedagai, North Sumatra, 5-6 February, 2019.

basic labor sensibilities – eight-hour working day, decent wage, and structural poverty alleviation – were seen with suspicion in Hong Kong's conservative society (Wong 2015, 51-52).

The sociological profile of the protesters reveals that the movement leadership was dominated by particular sections of the working-class: white-collar workers, students, and PMC progressives. Many are highly educated, but identified as "lower-middle class, without opportunities for upward mobility" (Veg 2015, 63). Meanwhile, deindustrialization and cooptation of many working-class families by pro-mainland groups' clientelistic networks weaken the collective power of the working-class (Veg 2015, 62; Wong 2015, 49).

There is a pattern of variegated convergence at play here: deep-seated materialist demands intersecting with the liberal-democratic aspirations of white-collar workers and PMC progressives. In the end, Beijing's authoritarian control crushed the multi-year movement which lasted until 2020 – its leadership went into exile or jail. But the flirtation of some sections of the movement participants with reactionary Trumpism (Li and Whitworth 2025) also contributed to the weakening of the movement.

Across East and Southeast Asia, the youth-driven Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) was also active from 2019–2021. This loose network of pro-democracy movements combined mass mobilization, online activism, and transnational norm-sharing to challenge party-state and militaristic authoritarianism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar (Khor 2024). Though one could find the echoes of past progressive politics, the participants of MTA were mostly a new generation of students and policitized youth who started their activism as early as high school (Phattharathanasut 2024).

MTA participants did not shy away from innovative and more radical methods of activism. Hong Kong protesters, for example, had implemented a range of street-smart strategies to counter police violence and surveillance and maintain their occupation zones in public spaces (Gavroche 2019). Besides street mobilization, sympathetic citizens supported MTA struggles through economic activism such as market strike by small businesses and consumer activism in support of those businesses in Hong Kong and boycott of pro-regime companies in Thailand and Myanmar (Chan 2024, 654-660).

Here we have another case of variegated convergence: long-standing material grievances exacerbated by authoritarianism found its voice in the language of democracy and human rights. Student activists and ordinary citizens including workers, trapped in what Marx (1887, 521) termed "the dull compulsion of economic relations," found authoritarianism suffocating. Around the same period, platform workers – app-based motorcycle taxi and delivery drivers – across Southeast Asia had been active in organizing strikes and protests for better rights and working conditions (De Leon, et al. 2024, 9-15), indicating the intensity of capitalist exploitation felt by the masses.

MTA's commendable politics represents the limits of progressive politics in the region, where the Old Left had been sidelined (Thailand and Myanmar) or ossified (Hong Kong) and alternative left forces remain marginal. MTA student activists, essentially future workers in training, are certainly not PMC progressives, but their politics tend to be rhizomatic (and sometimes liberal) and has its own distinctive symbolism. The challenge then was to broaden their appeal and mass support and connect the agenda of democracy and human rights with social justice and class struggle.

In other cases, variegated convergence occurs even when existing leftist or nominally-progressive parties had significant political or organizational power. However, the appeal of these

parties might be limited due to their own sectarianism, fragmentation, or, worse, alienation from the masses. This can be seen in the Philippines and Bangladesh. In the Philippines, the radical Left, represented by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its networks, historically were the biggest, best organized opposition force against the US-backed Marcos Dictatorship (Quimpo 2020, 145). But its sectarianism and strategic mistakes, including boycott of the 1986 elections and internal purge of its own militants over fear of the regime's spies in the mid-1980s, isolated itself from mass politics (Bello 2002, 73). This led to a split between CPP and its splinter faction, which has reconstituted itself into multiple incarnations of leftist electoral parties.

Post-Marcos electoral democracy did not challenge the oligarchic foundation of Philippine politics. Continuing domination of landed oligarchs and high rate of poverty (21 percent in 2016) were a major background behind the popularity and victory of the populist Rodrigo Duterte, who cultivated an anti-drug, pro-poor strongman image, in the 2016 presidential elections (Untalan 2016, 25). Early reconciliation and even alliance between Duterte and CPP initially signaled a possible end to the latter's Maoist insurgency, but this quickly dissipated after the populist president scrapped the peace talks between the two (Juego 2017, 139).

The 2022 presidential elections became a missed opportunity for the rejuvenated left. Under Party of the Laboring Masses (*Partido Lakas ng Masa*), labor leader Leody de Guzman and scholar-activist Walden Bello ran as presidential and vice-presidential candidates, but some sections of the left, especially those who had capitulated to the liberal bloc, preferred to support the progressive neoliberal presidential candidate Leni Robredo (Alvarez, Makalintal and Docena 2022). This is another example of how PMC progressives might stifle radical politics.

In Bangladesh, the student-led July Revolution toppled Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule after her regime's failure in addressing reforms for job government opportunities and economic hardships such as basic commodities price rise as well as repressive handling of student protests (Mostofa 2024a). The irony is not lost here: Hasina's party, Awami League (AL), was a party of independence founded by her father, Bangladesh's foremost statesman Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. AL was a party of urban petty bourgeois but attracted mass support and adopted radical anti-imperialist nationalism (De Jong 2018). Like many other Third World nationalist parties, AL became corrupt and increasingly authoritarian (Mostofa 2024b).

Post-authoritarian Bangladesh followed a protracted liberal pattern, where the interim government under the Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus attempted to push forward liberal democratic politics (Mostofa 2024c) and student activists, stuck with the idea of non-partisan politics, established the big-tent, centrist National Citizen Party (Sinha 2025). In a country where the founding nationalist party failed, the orthodox left remains marginal, and the Islamists have questionable commitment to democracy, we once again see variegated convergence between progressive-leaning yet reformist politics and mass aspirations.

Conclusion

Based on an in-depth case study of Indonesian political economy since 2014, this article confirms the following findings. First, there exists a pattern of variegated convergence between different flavors of progressive politics and mass mobilization and aspiration. This convergence stems from a common experience of increasing capitalist exploitation accompanied by its corresponding illiberal and authoritarian turn in Indonesian democracy.

This convergence, however, has been punctuated by the sectoral interests of PMC progressives and the relative weakness of leftist and working-class organizations. While leftist idioms continue to shape the tone of political discourses in Indonesian civil society and social

movements, political influence and leadership of leftist parties and working-class collectives remain limited. Working-class organizations and unions do have tested mobilizational power and noteworthy political gains, but this achievement does not automatically translate into broad political influence beyond their sectoral mass bases.

Hence, the actual impact of the broad anti-oligarchic politics against the policies of Jokowi, Prabowo, and their elite supporters became much less effective. At the same time, ordinary masses and voters left with little choice in the electoral arena, making voting for mainstream politicians and parties a commonsensical strategy. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Indonesia. Across Asian countries and regions, we witness this pattern of variegated convergence between progressive politics and the masses. It remains to be seen whether this new wave of progressive politics can transform into a more radical, programmatic politics with grassroots support and mass appeal.

Several lessons can be extracted from this overview of trends. First, this suggests the limits of liberal politics. While liberals of past century managed to incorporate labor in its coalition and strengthen early welfare state institutions despite strong conservative opposition (Schickler and Caughey 2011), today's liberal politics in Indonesia and Asia, organized mostly as a widespread tendency rather than a coherent faction or party, remains tethered to a naïve institutionalist view of politics rather than a minimum redistributionist program.

The tension between liberal tendency and greater democratization and the propensity of liberal-leaning factions to retreat from class politics have long been documented (Lenin 1972 [1908], 485-489; 1974 [1912], 569-578). It is imperative then for today's leftists and progressives to keep advancing democratic class struggle through parliamentary and contentious mobilization and maintaining close working with the working-class mass bases.

Second, as shown by Jones (2024), leftist parties' avoidance of radical social and economic policies is a political mistake, since rapprochement with core working-class constituencies through policy commitments in class issues – labor market, housing, and precariousness – can increase greater representation of the most exploited layers of working people, leftist parties' electoral prospect, and egalitarianism in formal democracies.

Lastly, despite the limits of progressive politics in Asia, its variegated convergence with materialist, working-class demands opens up new possibilities for political organizing. In Indonesia, activist and working-class mobilization continued even after the demise of the 2025 August protests, such as solidarity protests in support of the attacked activist Andrie Yunus, human rights in Indonesia, and liberation for the Palestinians (Anugrah and Putri 2026). A more sober reflection on the limits and achievements of this politics could serve as a starting point to further transform and radicalize existing convergence of interests between progressive activism and mass politics in Indonesia and Asia.

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