

How Neoliberalism and Islamism Shape the Precarity of Gig Workers

Diatyka Widya Permata Yasih and Vedi Hadiz

Neoliberal economic restructuring has created fertile ground for precarious labour markets,¹ while promoting the marketisation of basic social services throughout the developed and developing worlds.² In Muslim majority countries, including Indonesia, the resultant rampant inequalities have provided the setting for mobilisations of the precarious urban poor under Islamic banners against perceived oppression or marginalisation of the *ummah* (community of believers). However, such narratives based on a religious lexicon have not always produced a collective will to resist the neoliberal agenda effectively.³

We argue instead that there has been a coupling of Islamism and neoliberalism in Indonesia in a way that conditions consent to, and compliance with neoliberal precepts. Clues are provided, for instance, in the way private enterprises,⁴ and faith-based organisations,⁵ have referred to Islamic values to promote productivity among middle-class Muslim workers.

Little, however, has been said about the precariat and neoliberalism in Muslim-majority societies. This article, therefore, delves into the influence of Islamist appeals on responses to growing precarity in Indonesia. The study on which it derives was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic (from April 2021 to October 2022), employing semi-structured interviews with twenty-five precarious gig workers who make a living as app-based motorcycle taxi (*online ojek*) drivers in Jabodetabek (Jakarta-Bogor-Depok-Tangerang-Bekasi).⁶

Our focus is on the way the urban precariat forges a kind of common sense to cope with socio-economic marginalisation based on available cultural resources.⁷ Building on Italian philosopher Gramsci, we address common sense as a set of ideas that have arisen from the material conditions of precarious labour and life,

but also shaped by distinct social and historical trajectories. As is well known, in Indonesia, this has involved past conflicts that make lexicons associated with state-dominated or linked nationalist and Islamist traditions more easily to the public than those having to do with liberalism, social democracy, or communism.

Micro-entrepreneurialism and collective organisation

Perceiving themselves as 'micro-entrepreneurs,' *online ojek* drivers accept that their well-being is primarily their own responsibility, thereby absolving the state and employers of significant liability. The self-perception is sustained by the classification of workers as "partners" rather than employees of gig economy firms, while the digitally-mediated work process in the gig economy also sustains the illusion that they have freedom over their labour. The idea that drivers can only rely on themselves – compatible with neoliberal individualism – is also reinforced by life experiences of moving in and out of precarious work in a context where secure long-term employment and welfarism have never been the norm.

For Gramsci, the reproduction of common sense takes place through everyday practices that lead to intuitive thinking.⁸ Among the *online ojek* drivers we interviewed, this results in a kind of practical knowledge that is reproduced in self-help organisations typically referred to by their members as "communities."

It is through such communities that *online ojek* drivers practice a kind of collective solidarity by way of mutual assistance in the event of accidents and provision of information to help individuals navigate the street, as well as digitally-mediated labour controls. However, the communities indirectly tend to reinforce neoliberal individualism

by reiterating the notion that members are primarily responsible for their own well-being and can expect little from the state or firms.

Significantly, religious activities are also typically organised by these communities. Through *pengajian* (religious meetings involving Quranic recitation and sermons), solidarity between drivers as members of a common *ummah* ("community") is strengthened, while simultaneously reinforcing the importance of personal morality in navigating work and life. Resilience is a major theme discussed in religious gatherings, enabling the interface between hard work and religious demands for individuals to persevere through all tests placed on believers by the Almighty. In this way, *online ojek* drivers' organisations provide a setting for the blending of Islamic moral precepts and neoliberal individualism.

It is true that some communities have sometimes enabled the collective organisation of *online ojek* drivers to demand improved working conditions. They have clearly enhanced *online ojek* drivers' awareness of shared grievances relating to labour practices, such as unfair dismissals. Nevertheless, they have achieved little in instilling the idea among drivers that they are workers, whose labour rights should be protected, with most members persistent in perceiving themselves as micro-entrepreneurs.

Morality and political sensibilities

Neoliberal-derived notions of entrepreneurialism have affected how *online ojek* drivers navigate their way through life and work, leading to the normalisation of their own precarity. Although a minority of drivers, especially those associated with Indonesia's union movement, insist that they should be legally considered as employees with formal labour rights, they are a clear minority.

Moreover, some that are linked to unions are hesitant to confront the state and employers. They tend to appeal to combinations of statist-nationalist or Islamist-derived paternalism, which expect governments, and those economically strong, to take care of the weak.

As a result, while drivers' communities can be helpful to individuals, they do little to forge

robust strategies of resistance. They also embody the persistence of features of New Order ideology in democratised Indonesia – namely, hostility towards political liberalism as well as communism – as both enjoy some form of conflictual system of labour relations.¹⁰

At the same time, a kind of morality-based solidarity, mainly developed through socio-religious and mutual assistance activities, permeates through everyday life. Though drivers see such activities as apolitical, they open the door to *ummah*-based political mobilisations by competing elites. We have seen this in recent Indonesian history when such mobilisations have been required (usually during election time).

Some of these communities could potentially provide avenues for precarious urban workers to establish connections with Islamic party and organisational activists. This would explain the presence of many of the urban precariat in such events as the infamous Islamist mobilisations against the then-governor of Jakarta, known as Ahok, in 2016-2017.¹¹

Workers in Indonesia often suffer from precarious working and living conditions. Because labour movements have been largely ineffective, workers have lacked social and political representation, even in the present democratic era.¹² Against such a background, urban precarious workers often resort to religious narratives to articulate their grievances, make sense of their social positions, and to navigate through life and work more generally. While this takes place at the level of everyday life, there are possible links with certain newer dynamics in contemporary Indonesian politics, especially the tendency for identity-based political mobilisations.

Diatyka Widya Permata Yasih

is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the Asia Research Centre, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia.
Email: diatyka.widya09@ui.ac.id

Vedi Hadiz is a Professor of Asian Studies, Director of the Asia Institute, and Assistant Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Melbourne.
Email: vedi.hadiz@unimelb.edu.au

Notes

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- 2 Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- 3 Zamar, Tahir. 'Political Islam in Neoliberal Times', *openDemocracy* (17 November 2014). Available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/political-islam-in-neoliberal-times>.
- 4 Rudnyckij, Daromir. 2010. *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 5 Atia, Mona. 2012. 'A Way to Paradise': Pious Neoliberalism, Islam, and Faith-Based Development'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(4): 808-827
- 6 Yasih, Diatyka Widya Permata & Hadiz Vedi R. (2022): 'Precarity and Islamism in Indonesia: The Contradictions of Neoliberalism', *Critical Asian Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2022.2145980
- 7 Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- 8 Crehan, Kate. 2016. *Gramsci's Common Sense*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 Hadiz, Vedi R. 1997. *Workers and the State in New Order Indonesia*. London: Routledge
- 11 Hadiz, Vedi, and Inaya Rakhmani. 2017. 'Marketing Morality in Indonesia's Democracy'. *Asian Currents*, 21 December: Asian Studies Association of Australia. <https://asaa.asn.au/marketing-morality-indonesias-democracy>.
- 12 Yasih, Diatyka Widya Permata. 2022. 'Normalizing and Resisting the New Precarity: A Case Study of the Indonesian Gig Economy'. *Critical Sociology*. doi:10.1177/08969205221087130.



Fig. 1: An ojek online driver. (Courtesy Afif Ramdhasuma on Unsplash)