

Indonesia: Urban poor see gap with middle class

Friday 9 December 2016, by [BUDIARI Indra](#) (Date first published: 14 September 2015).

'Illegal residents like them should be evicted without any compensation,' or 'If they want to live on the riverbanks, let them drown during the rainy season,' and similar sentiments have become commonplace in social media in response to the forced evictions of riverbank dwellers in Jakarta.

Forced evictions of street vendors or low-income families are not new in Jakarta, but the strong support for the actions was unprecedented, a discussion among activists and scholars in Tarumanagara University concluded recently.

Sri Palupi from the Institute for Ecosoc Rights said that unlike a few years ago when the middle class supported the poor in their struggle, nowadays the privileged classes have started to turn against the poor.

For example, Sri said, middle class people tended to see the recent labor rally about the regional minimum wage as merely a cause of traffic jams.

"They blame the underprivileged residents for traffic jams, floods and untidiness, but they don't understand that the poor do not live their current life by choice," she said.

Abidin Kusno, an urban culture expert from the University of British Columbia in Canada, said people's resistance was the only hope to counter or balance the domination of political and capital power in the city.

If resistance did not sufficiently challenge political and capital power, he continued, there would be no balance in city politics. 'The city administration should listen more to their people before making any important decision like evicting people, that is how city politics can survive,' he said.

The forced eviction of Kampung Pulo residents in East Jakarta was one of several evictions conducted by the city administration this year. While some people support the idea, a number of activists and scholars have repeatedly criticized Jakarta Governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama for being 'anti-poor'.

Ahok has been slammed by human rights activists for defending his eviction policy by stating, 'When 2,000 people threaten the lives of 10 million people, I will not hesitate to kill the 2,000.'

Ahok was referring to the thousands of people on the riverbanks whom he said caused flooding.

Erry Wahyu Prasetyo, 28-year-old civil servant, said he supported the city administration's current eviction policy, saying that in the bigger picture the city would benefit more from decreased flooding caused by illegal settlements in riverbanks.

In the discussion, Aryo Danusiri, a PhD candidate in anthropology at Harvard University said that what was happening in Jakarta was not only 'normalization' of rivers but also a 'normalization' of public opinion by the media that views violent evictions of poor people as normal.

In recent years, the Indonesian middle class has grown rapidly as the national economy is expected to benefit from their increased consumption.

Sociologist Musni Umar said a lot of middle-class people were comfortable in their life and failed to see the world beyond the high walls of their apartments and houses.

He said that by working hard to reach their current position, the privileged class learn to live in a more individualistic way and tend to believe that others have similar opportunities but have failed to make the most of it.

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* The Jakarta Post Mon, September 14, 2015 | 03:30 pm:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/09/14/urban-poor-see-gap-with-middle-class.html>