

Structural Causes of Social Inequality in Indonesia: A Critical Analysis of Justice and Policy Failure

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Abstract

Social inequality in Indonesia remains a persistent issue, rooted in structural problems within economic and political systems that fail to deliver justice for all citizens. This study aims to critically examine how state economic policies, unequal wealth distribution, and limited access to public services have deepened social disparity. Using a qualitative approach, it evaluates policy shortcomings and explores the consequences of asymmetrical socioeconomic structures on distributive justice. The findings reveal that policies often favoring elite groups exacerbate inequality and restrict equitable access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. In addition to policy analysis, this research employs a textual and contextual study of Qur'anic verses on justice (*al-'adl, al-qist*) to offer an Islamic ethical perspective on social justice. The study argues that Islamic teachings advocate for a just socio-economic order and that integrating such values into policymaking could address systemic injustice. This research contributes to a more holistic understanding of inequality by bridging critical policy analysis with Qur'anic moral frameworks.

Keywords: Policy Failure, Public Policy, Social Inequality, Qur'anic Justice, Socioeconomic Structure.

Abstrak

Ketimpangan sosial di Indonesia tetap menjadi masalah yang persisten, berakar pada persoalan struktural dalam sistem ekonomi dan politik yang gagal mewujudkan keadilan bagi seluruh warga negara. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara kritis bagaimana kebijakan ekonomi negara, distribusi kekayaan yang tidak merata, dan keterbatasan akses terhadap layanan publik telah memperdalam kesenjangan sosial. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengevaluasi kelemahan kebijakan dan menelaah dampak struktur sosial ekonomi yang timpang terhadap keadilan distributif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kebijakan yang sering kali berpihak kepada kelompok elite justru memperparah ketimpangan dan membatasi akses yang adil terhadap pendidikan, layanan kesehatan, dan peluang kerja. Selain analisis kebijakan, penelitian ini juga mengkaji ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an tentang keadilan (*al-'adl, al-qist*) secara textual dan kontekstual guna menawarkan perspektif etika Islam tentang keadilan sosial. Studi ini berargumen bahwa ajaran Islam mendorong tatanan sosial ekonomi yang adil, dan integrasi nilai-nilai tersebut dalam perumusan kebijakan dapat menjadi solusi atas ketidakadilan sistemik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam membangun pemahaman yang lebih holistik tentang ketimpangan sosial dengan menjembatani analisis kebijakan kritis dan kerangka moral Qur'ani.

Kata Kunci: Kegagalan Kebijakan, Kebijakan Publik, Ketimpangan Sosial, Keadilan Qur'ani, Struktur Sosial Ekonomi.



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Introduction

Indonesia, endowed with abundant natural resources and a rich cultural heritage, theoretically holds substantial potential to improve the welfare of its citizens. However, this potential has not been optimally realized. Significant social inequality persists, where access to quality education, health services, and economic opportunities remains concentrated among privileged groups, while a large portion of the population—especially those in rural and peripheral regions—continues to live in structural poverty (Rahma, 2020). This persistent inequality is further exacerbated by uneven patterns of urbanization, wherein urban centers rapidly advance while rural regions lag behind in infrastructure and public service provision (Fabela & Khairunnisa, 2024; Nur & Sahro, 2023). These disparities not only affect economic productivity but also severely hinder human development, exacerbate social tensions, and obstruct inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Sinurat, 2023). The inability of the state to evenly distribute resources reflects a deeper systemic problem rooted in structural policy bias and governance failures (Herdiana, 2022). Moreover, recent national data from BPS (2024) indicates that the Gini ratio, which measures income inequality, remains consistently above 0.38, confirming the persistence of this socio-economic gap.

Despite the urgency of the issue, existing studies tend to focus primarily on macroeconomic indicators such as GDP growth, poverty rates, or income distribution patterns, often neglecting the underlying structures and local-level policy dynamics that shape and sustain inequality (Lega & Hartanto, 2023). Previous research has also rarely examined how regional disparities—particularly in non-Java or peripheral areas—are reinforced by uneven policy implementation and sectoral interests. This represents a clear gap between the normative vision of equitable development and the lived socio-economic realities in Indonesia. The question remains: how do local-level policies and sectoral governance practices contribute to the persistence of social inequalities, especially outside the dominant economic zones?

To address this gap, the present study employs a combined theoretical lens of functional structuralism and social conflict theory. From a functionalist standpoint, inequality is perceived as a functional element of society that, theoretically, encourages productivity and mobility. Conversely, conflict theory—as pioneered by Karl Marx and later expanded by theorists such as C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu—views inequality as a result of elite control over political and economic capital, systematically marginalizing vulnerable groups. These two perspectives offer a comprehensive analytical tool to examine the roles of power, structure, and policy in shaping inequality in Indonesia. This dual-theoretical foundation also

allows the research to bridge normative Islamic values of justice with empirical socio-political analysis, providing a multidimensional framework rarely explored in previous works.

This study aims to analyze inequality not merely as an economic disparity but as a multi-dimensional and systemic issue that encompasses access to basic rights, political participation, and distributive justice. By critically examining the interplay between public policy, social structure, and Qur'anic values of justice, this research positions itself as a novel contribution to both social policy studies and Islamic ethical discourse. The main objective of this article is to investigate how local-level policies contribute to the entrenchment of inequality in peripheral regions of Indonesia, and how Qur'anic justice principles can be integrated into public policy frameworks to foster more inclusive governance.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to explore social inequality by examining the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of individuals or groups who had encountered it. A case study approach was adopted to investigate social realities in depth, while data collection was conducted through document analysis and the application of the concept of relative deprivation. The types of documents analyzed included government policies, non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, mass media publications, and relevant religious texts. Data were gathered from the period of 2020 to 2025 to capture the evolving dynamics of social inequality in a contemporary Indonesian context.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns of inequality in society, allowing the researchers to observe how inequality manifested in real-life conditions. Data validation was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information across various types of documents and conducting trial audits of the analytical process to maintain methodological transparency.

The integration of Qur'anic interpretation was carried out using a hermeneutic approach, enabling the interpretation of sacred texts in dialogue with the social context being studied. This integration process involved several stages: identifying social themes from the data, locating Qur'anic verses relevant to these themes, reviewing classical and contemporary tafsir (interpretations) of the selected verses, and engaging in critical reflection on how Qur'anic values—such as justice (al-'adl), equality (al-musawah), and social empathy (al-rahmah)—could enrich the analysis and inform solutions to the social inequalities observed. Thus, this research was not merely descriptive, but also normative, contributing to critical discourse on how to construct a more humane and just society.

Results and Discussion

A. The Government's Weaknesses in Upholding Justice

Social inequality is a situation in which there are striking differences between two parties in certain matters, which creates an imbalance and can cause one party to have greater advantages over the other (Makmur et al., 2024). Disparities can occur on various scales, ranging from individuals, social groups, to between regions or countries, such as unequal policies, education, access to resources, and social and economic conditions (Agus Triono & Sangaji, 2023). Whether directly or indirectly, inequality has an impact on social tensions, a decline in quality of life, and a decline in social stability.

One of the obvious examples of legal inequality in many countries is the difference in penal policies between corruptors and small people, corruptors who have harmed the state with a huge amount of money often receive lighter sentences, even faster releases, even if they commit relatively minor offenses, such as theft due to economic necessity (Kusno, 2024). This shows injustice in the justice system, where economic and political forces use the law more and more. The main factors that cause this inequality are corrupt practices in the legal system, nepotism, and weak law enforcement against high-ranking officials and important individuals (Putri & Fakhriyah, 2022). In addition, if you want to talk about injustice, how can the small people pay competent lawyers to represent them when the reason they steal is because of economic shortages. This can be a big homework for the state to make equal rules and opportunities for all people without discrimination (Fabela & Khairunnisa, 2024).

The following are the findings of the verses of the Quran based on the theme discussed.

	Surah	Topic Verse
1	Surah Shad: 26	Be fair and not follow lust
2	Surah AnNisa: 58	Fulfilling the trust to the rightful and deciding matters fairly
3	Surah AlBaqarah: 247	Leadership is not about wealth, but about knowledge, strength, and justice

Table 1. Qur'an Verses and topics related to social justice

The government is supposed to be responsible for maintaining social justice, but in reality, many policies and actions actually show violations of legal protection and access to justice. One of the main and most impactful weaknesses is weak law enforcement, which often sides with political elites, corporations, and the apparatus itself (Ongku Hsb, 2023). For small people, especially those who do not have access to legal resources, face difficulties in

obtaining justice because the law, which is supposed to be a tool to protect society, is often used to defend the interests of a few individuals (Muthmaina, 2024).

With many cases of land disputes that ended in forced evictions without a fair solution for the affected residents is a clear example of the government's lack of enforcement of justice, such as what happened in the case of Pantai Indah Kapuk 2 (PIK 2) many residents who claimed to own land in the PIK 2 area lost their homes and land, even heirs claimed that their land was taken without fair compensation, causing them to lose their assets and sources of income (Siregar, 2025). The gap is increasingly visible, PIK 2 is designed as an elite area with high property prices making it difficult for the natives who once lived around the area to buy back their own land, as PIK 2's facilities are only available to the wealthy. The affected people have difficulty finding new homes and have significantly increased poverty levels and this is because the government allows large companies or infrastructure projects without considering the effects on the local population by resorting to repressive measures, using force to evict citizens from their own areas. In situations like this, justice is more favorable to the owners of capital than those who have lost their homes and sources of income (Zakariya, 2024).

In addition, injustice is exacerbated by a corrupt bureaucracy and a non-transparent judicial system. Many court decisions are unfair, especially for poor people who do not have access to lawyers or other legal resources (Darwanto, 2022). Major cases involving high-ranking officials or conglomerates usually end up with light sentences or even no sentences, while cases involving small people often end up with severe sentences, although the sentences are much lighter. This inequality shows that Indonesian law still tends to be sharp downwards and blunt upwards, reinforcing the idea that justice can only be bought by those who have power or wealth (Cahyami, 2022). Allah gives a stern warning to leaders who hold power but do not uphold justice, leaders must be just, even to those they do not like, because justice is closer to piety. However, if the leader acts arbitrarily, oppresses the people, and makes decisions based on personal or group interests, they will get a proper reward from Allah, as in QS. Shad :26

يَهُ دَاؤْدُ إِنْ جَعَلَنَّكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ فَاحْكُمْ بِيَمِّنْ أَلْنَاسِ بِالْأَنْقَاقِ وَلَا تَبْتَغِ الْوُجُودَ فَيُضَلَّكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ أَلِلَّهِ إِنْ أَلِينَ يَضْلُّونَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ أَلِلَّهِ عَذَابًا بِشَيْءٍ دِيَاهُ نَسُوا يَوْمَ الْحِسْبَابِ

"O David! Indeed, we have made you the Caliph (leader) of the earth, so give judgment (law) among men justly, and do not follow lust, for it will lead you astray from the way of Allah. Indeed, those who stray from the way of Allah will be punished severely, because they forget the day of reckoning."

According to Quraish Shihab in the tafsir of Al Misbah emphasizes that this verse is addressed to the Prophet David as the caliph on earth, who is in charge of upholding justice among mankind. The command to "judge righteously" indicates that decisions must be based on the principle of justice, not on personal desires because following one's desires can lead astray from the way of Allah and bring serious consequences, including severe punishment for those who forget the day of reckoning (Siar Ni'mah et al., 2024).

The above verse shows that leadership is a great responsibility that must be carried out fairly based on truth, not out of personal desires or vested interests, Allah warns that whoever allows his passions to control his decisions will go astray and will face severe punishment in the world because they neglect the responsibility of leadership and forget the day of reckoning. This shows that a leader must always stick to the instructions Allah and act rightly for the well-being of the ummah. This verse also shows that leadership is a test, not just power. Leaders must always strive to uphold justice regardless of who is strong or weak, or who is rich and who is poor. Decisions taken should not be influenced by personal interests, political pressures, or human fears, but rather they should be made based on truth. A just leader maintains balance in society and obtains Allah's pleasure and salvation in the hereafter as warned in this verse, if a leader is negligent and acts arbitrarily, then the consequences are painful punishment.

B. The Protracted Cycle of Poverty Dissolves

Poverty is still a fundamental problem faced by Indonesia today. Although various poverty alleviation programs have been implemented, the root of the problem has not been fully solved. Poverty, which is structural and inherited between generations, is proof that inequality of access to basic needs such as education, health, and employment still occurs. This phenomenon is clearly seen in disadvantaged areas, where people have difficulty getting adequate education and health services. Based on the findings of various studies, one of the main causes of poverty is low access to quality education, especially in rural areas (Siregar, 2025). Many children from poor families in the 3T region (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) have to drop out of school due to economic limitations and lack of educational facilities, data from the Central Statistics Agency 2023 shows that the average length of schooling in Indonesians is still below 9 years, reflecting the low level of national education. In addition, access to health services is also a challenge (Agus Triono & Sangaji, 2023). People cannot afford to reach health facilities due to the high cost of medical treatment and unequal

distribution of facilities in remote areas. The Ministry of Health in 2022 noted that only about 63% of rural residents have access to active health centers (Johan, 2020).

On the other hand, state policies that should be on the side of vulnerable people often cause controversy. One example that has received attention is the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program which is financed from education budget cuts (Aji et al., 2025). This policy has the potential to reduce the quality of national education because budget reductions can have an impact on facilities, educators, and access to education that are already uneven and suggest that budget cuts be made in sectors that do not have a direct impact on human resource development, such as spending on state officials' facilities. The government does claim that the education budget allocation in 2024 is the largest in history (Ritonga et al., 2025), but the size of the budget does not automatically guarantee equity and quality improvement if it is not accompanied by strict evaluation and supervision (Ningrum et al., 2024). Inequality in the distribution of policies and laws also adds to the layer of problems. When laws and policies are considered to only favor certain groups, public trust in the state will decline (Makmur et al., 2024). The weak enforcement of the law against violations by the elite creates a justice gap, which is in line with the view because it emphasizes the importance of reforming the legal system and supervising power so that the principle of justice can truly be felt by all people (Syahrin et al., 2022). Divine commands that must be carried out by every leader as a form of accountability for the mandate from Allah SWT. Justice in Islam is not only a moral value, but also a legal obligation that aims to create the common welfare or maslahah (Darwanto, 2022). If the government wants to build a fairer country, they must carry out massive reforms in the legal system, implement strict supervision of those who abuse power, and implement policies that truly promote justice for everyone, not just those who have power and wealth, the government should be fair in carrying out the mandate of leadership, both in making policies, law enforcement, as well as welfare distribution (Lestari & Ainulyaqin, 2022) as in

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ رُكْمَ الْمَوَالَاتِ إِنَّمَا لَهُمَا إِلَّا حُكْمُهُمْ بِيَوْمِ النَّاسِ إِنَّمَا لَهُمَا بِلْعَدْلٍ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَعْمَلُونَ

"Indeed, Allah has commanded you to convey the message to those who are entitled to receive it, and (commands you) when you establish a law among men, that you should establish it justly. Indeed, Allah is the Best Who teaches you. Indeed, Allah is All-Hearing and All-Seeing."

According to *Tafsir al-Qurṭubī* affirms the two main principles in Islam, namely trust and justice. Trust includes all forms of responsibility in the form of assets, positions, and

secrets that must be handed over to the rightful in an honest and appropriate manner. The word *Ja'alnāka khalifatan* means that Allah appointed the Prophet David as the caliph, the ruler of the earth, not only in a political sense, but also as judge and enforcer of the truth, The Qurṭubī interprets that this commandment applies generally, not only to ordinary individuals but also to leaders and judges. The order to try fairly covers all forms of decisions that concern the rights of others, and must not be based on personal interests or discrimination. He emphasized that Allah is All-Hearing and All-Seeing, as a reminder that any betrayal of trust or injustice will receive supervision and retribution from Allah (FAUZI, 2021)

The justice upheld by the government reflects the people's trust in their leaders, so the policies taken must be in favor of the entire community without discrimination (Ningrum et al., 2024). If the government acts unjustly, such as abusing power, siding with certain groups, or ignoring the rights of the people, then social dissatisfaction will arise which can lead to conflict and instability of the state. Therefore, justice is not only a moral principle, but also the main foundation in maintaining order, welfare, and harmony in a nation (Ongku Hsb, 2023). The scholars emphasized that justice is not only a moral value, but also an obligation that must be upheld by the government to achieve the benefit of the ummah in all aspects and in making policies and not to discriminate against individuals based on social status, ethnicity, or wealth, but based on their piety and ability to contribute to the progress of the nation (Aji et al., 2025). In the context of social policy, these values of justice require the state to ensure equal access to education, health, employment, and legal protection. A just leader must channel the country's resources to those most in need regardless of social status, ethnicity, or economic power. Islam teaches that leadership is a form of trust that must be carried out with high integrity and social responsibility. Poverty in Indonesia is the result of a combination of structural inequality, weak policies, and lack of application of the principle of justice in government. Addressing this problem is not enough with short-term assistance programs, but requires a holistic approach that includes policy reform, legal system improvement, and the enforcement of social justice values. (Lega & Hartanto, 2023). In the Islamic view, justice is the main foundation that must be upheld in all aspects of state life. The government as the trustee of the people and of Allah SWT, is obliged to ensure that public policies reflect justice and partiality to the most need groups. With the consistent application of the principles of justice, Indonesia can build a more prosperous, harmonious, and dignified society (Araafi et al., 2024).

C. Social Justice Solutions: Implementing Retribution Policies for the Community

Economic inequality is a big challenge in Indonesia. Data from the World Bank 2023 shows that Indonesia's Gini index is at 0.384, indicating a fairly high gap between rich and poor groups. One of the strategies that can be applied to reduce this inequality is economic redistribution policies, such as a progressive tax system, social assistance, education and health subsidies, and land tenure programs for the poor. Better access to basic services can increase social mobility and encourage inclusive economic growth (Harjanto & Pamungkas, 2022). Economic redistribution policies must be implemented evenly and on target, progressive taxes and subsidies given to low-income communities must be accompanied by skills training and job creation, so that they are not only recipients of assistance, but also productive in the economy. Participatory supervision and evaluation are indispensable so that aid is not misused and truly reaches groups in need (Lega & Hartanto, 2023). In addition to the policy aspect, leadership is an important factor in ensuring that social justice can be realized. Leaders who are fair, competent, and with integrity can direct public policies that favor the small people and avoid corrupt practices (Lestari & Ainulyaqin, 2022). On the other hand, if a leader only relies on empty promises without real evidence, then the people will be greatly harmed and oppressed, weak and full of lies leadership can lead to abuse of power, increased corruption, and damage to the social and economic order of a nation(Akil et al., 2024),, as in QS. Al-Baqarah verse 247:

وَقَالَ لَمْ ۖ نَبِيٌّ فِي نَّارٍ إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ بَعَثَ لَكُمْ طَالُوتَ مَلِكًا ۖ قَالُوا أَرَأَنَا يُكْرِنُ لَهُ الْمُلْكَ عَلَيْنَا وَنَنْهَا أَحَقُّ بِالْمُلْكِ مِنْهُ وَلَنْ يُؤْتَنَ سَعَةً ۖ مِنَ الْمَالِ قَالَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ أَصْطَفَهُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَأَدَهُ سُلْطَةً ۖ فِي الْعِلْمِ وَالسُّنْنِ ۖ وَلَنْ يُؤْتَهُ مُلْكًا مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَلَنْ يُؤْتَسْعَ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ

"Their Prophet said to them: 'Indeed, Allah has made Talut your king.' They said, 'How can he be our king, when we have more right to the kingdom than to him, when he has not been given much wealth?' (Their Prophet) replied, 'Indeed, Allah has chosen him to be your king and has bestowed upon him vast knowledge and a mighty body.' And Allah gives His kingdom to whomever He wills, and Allah is Vast and Knowing."

As explained by Quraish Shihab in Tafsir al-Misbah, this verse tells the rejection of some of the Children of Israel against Talut who was appointed as king by Allah, because he was not from the nobility and did not have any wealth of knowledge, Allah established the leadership of Talut based on two main advantages: breadth of knowledge and physical strength. Quraish Shihab emphasized that a true leader must have the intellectual capacity and strength to bear the burden of leadership duties. In the contemporary context, this verse teaches that the selection of leaders in society must be based on competence, integrity, and

capability, not on social or economic background alone, because leadership is a mandate that must be given to those who are able to fulfill it fairly and effectively (Siar Ni'mah, 2024)

This verse teaches that leadership is not only determined by social status or wealth, but rather knowledge, wisdom, and strength in leading and Allah chose Talut as a leader because he has knowledge and power, not because of his wealth or position (Lestari & Ainulyaqin, 2022).

This is a lesson that choosing leaders must be based on their capacity and integrity, not just empty promises or worldly factors. If the people choose the wrong leader, then corruption and various losses for the state can occur, therefore, it is important to ensure that the chosen leader is a person who has faith, justice, and wisdom in order to bring blessings to the community. If this is done well, then redistribution can be a powerful tool to achieve economic equity and improve people's quality of life and build a more inclusive and equitable economic system. With the right implementation, redistribution can be the foundation for more equitable economic growth, create social stability, and give every individual the opportunity to thrive.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that social justice serves as a fundamental prerequisite for the development of an inclusive, stable, and sustainable society. Structural inequalities in access to education, employment, health services, and legal protection were found to contribute significantly to systemic social disparities. Such inequalities not only obstruct individual well-being but also generate wider social risks, including intergroup conflict and weakened social cohesion. From an Islamic perspective, justice is a core moral and social value; the Qur'an and Islamic scholarship emphasize justice ('adl) as the cornerstone of societal harmony and advocate for equitable distribution of resources and protection for the marginalized. These principles provide both moral legitimacy and a normative foundation for formulating public policies grounded in fairness and compassion.

Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on social inequality by integrating Islamic ethical values with contemporary social justice frameworks. Practically, it highlights the need for government-led redistributive and affirmative action policies, including progressive taxation, targeted public subsidies, and protection measures for vulnerable groups. These efforts must be supported by transparent governance and active collaboration among the state, private sector, and civil society.

Future research should focus on the evaluative analysis of redistributive and affirmative policies within diverse local contexts in Indonesia. Additionally, there is a pressing need to develop interdisciplinary studies that merge Qur'anic interpretations with modern theories of social justice. Such approaches will not only deepen theoretical insights but also contribute to the construction of ethical and transformative policy models tailored to the socio-religious realities of Indonesian society. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more integrated and morally grounded framework for addressing multidimensional social inequality.

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