

Identifying Patterns in the Accumulation and Exercise of Power in post-New Order Indonesia

REVIEW ESSAY

THE ROAD FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO DEMOCRATIZATION IN INDONESIA. By *Paul J. Carnegie*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xx, 171 pp. (Maps.) US\$85.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-230-10242-2.

DECENTRALIZATION AND REGIONAL AUTONOMY IN INDONESIA: Implementation and Challenges. Edited by *Coen Holtzappel and Martin Ramstedt*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009. xxviii, 432 pp. (Maps, illus.) US\$79.90, cloth. ISBN 978-981-230-820-7.

DECENTRALIZATION AND ADAT REVIVALISM IN INDONESIA: The Politics of Becoming Indigenous. *Rethinking Southeast Asia.* By *Adam D. Tyson*. London; New York: Routledge, 2010. xiv, 210 pp. (Illus.) US\$130.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-78011-7.

ABSTRACT

The implosion of the New Order in 1998 led to a more democratic political system in Indonesia with elections at all levels of government. A year later, Indonesia also embarked on an ambitious decentralization program that initiated a fundamental restructuring of the country's political institutions on a scale unprecedented since the 1960s. Yet, scholars are still trying to identify clear patterns in the accumulation and exercise of power in this new political environment.

KEYWORDS: Democratization, decentralization, Indonesia, state-society relations

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One of the main challenges for students of Indonesian politics over the past decade has been to identify broad patterns in the accumulation and exercise of power in this new political

landscape.¹ Since the state was the main political force during the Suharto dictatorship, analysts of Indonesian politics have been debating for the past decade whether the state continues to dominate politics or whether power has become more dispersed, with social forces starting to play a more prominent role. The concentration and dispersion of state power is also the overarching theme of the three books under review here.

Towards democratic consolidation?

Paul J. Carnegie explores the forces that have shaped Indonesian politics over the past decade in *The Road from Authoritarianism to Democratization in Indonesia*. The first chapter provides a brief overview of theories on transition and consolidation and the role they assign to human agency and socio-economic structures in shaping democratization. The aim of the book, outlined in chapter 2, is to bridge these differing views by examining how “political actors, old and new, transform structural circumstances into resources for change by selectively drawing upon symbolic narratives to form a grammar of political action” (43). Subsequent chapters examine how political elites shaped Indonesia’s transition by making use of cultural, historical and primordial narratives and symbols, many of which are rooted in deeper structures of Indonesian society. Comparing the 1955 and 1999 elections, Carnegie argues in chapter 3 that parties referred to the same societal cleavages (aliran) in order to win votes in the 1999 elections as in the 1950s. The rise of Islamic parties also shows that new forces entered the political arena. The argument brought forward in Chapter 4 is that the re-emergence of political Islam has injected much-needed electoral competition into the political system. The rise of Islamic parties is the result of a growing middle class, Carnegie argues in chapter 5. If established parties want to remain competitive they have to find a political language that appeals to this “new composition of Indonesian society” (103). Yet, as the author shows in chapter 6, many parties are not only struggling to make themselves meaningful because they do not speak the language of the electorate but also because they are at risk of becoming the personal vehicles of entrenched strongmen who revert to populism to gain political terrain. Still, the influence of “old elites” in post-New Order Indonesia is somewhat exaggerated. The new institutional environment has forced political elites to adjust their political strategies and not all of them have been successful in doing so, as shown in chapter 7. In short, Indonesia’s democracy is far from perfect but the new political system is

¹ The most ambitious contribution in this respect is Edward Aspinall’s “A Nation in Fragments: Toward Identifying a Deep Architecture of Indonesian Politics,” paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Conference in Hawaii in 2011.

qualitatively different from the New Order era. Political actors have had to adjust the manner in which they remember and imagine their roles in order to appeal to a mass audience.

New dynamics or politics as usual?

The broad findings of Carnegie's work are taken up and developed further in an edited volume by Holtzappel and Ramstedt. In *Decentralization and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia: Implementation and Challenges*, the editors assembled almost 20 authors to look at the impact of decentralization on various aspects of governance between 1999 and 2004. In the introduction, Coen J.G. Holtzappel presents an overview of the variegated changes in the regional governance framework between 1999 and 2004. The following nine chapters then look at various aspects of Indonesia's decentralization. Adi Abidin presents several studies on how districts and municipalities manage their new responsibilities and finds that the influence of the central state continues to loom large in local politics. Widjajanti Suharyo shows how the public has become more involved in a decentralized political system but continues to face serious obstacles. Bert Hofman, Kai Kaiser and Gunther G. Schulze examine the relationship between decentralization and corruption and show under what conditions political devolution may increase transparency and accountability. J. Endi Rukmo looks at shortcomings in the decentralization laws that may obstruct the work of newly empowered local parliamentarians. Mohammad Sadli and David Ray show how the regulatory burden for businesses has increased between 1999 and 2004. Henry Sandee also examines local business climates but does so from the perspective of local governments. He shows how decentralization has created new opportunities for the local state to attract business. Bambang Brodjonegoro shows in his contribution that fiscal decentralization is not a panacea for improving the financial situation of localities. Finally, Peter J. M. Nas's account of the origin and development of the Indonesian municipality since colonial times concludes the first part of the book. The second part of the book offers a bottom-up perspective on decentralization through several case studies. Dibyo Prabowo explores how decentralization has shifted the balance in favour of ordinary people in struggles over land rights in Central Sulawesi. Edwin de Jong dissects power dynamics in Tanah Toraja, and explains why rifts between traditional leaders and political elites have become more visible in South Sulawesi since 1999. Franz von Benda-Beckmann and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann show in their study of village politics in West Sumatra that the new institutional framework has not only decentralized power down from the national level but also taken away powers from the villages. Martin Ramstedt looks at Bali, one of the most developed provinces

in the archipelago, to argue that even if local state capacity is well developed, decentralization does not automatically succeed. Politicians on the island have come to support narrow understandings of belonging instead of expanding notions of citizenship. Syafrinaldi's account of local dynamics in Riau province shows how decentralization has facilitated the exploration of intellectual resources of the local population. Finally, Cynthia Chou looks at how newly empowered local governments in Riau have started to re-arrange and standardize resource exploitation, and what the impacts were on the livelihoods of sea nomads living in the province's waters.

State-society relations in local politics

The impact of democratization and decentralization on ordinary Indonesians' lives also features prominently in Adam Tyson's monograph *Decentralization and Adat Revivalism in Indonesia: The Politics of Becoming Indigenous*. The author examines adat revivalism in Indonesia in relation to concepts such as administration, indigeneity and power through case studies from South and West Sulawesi. In chapter 2, he examines the various ways in which adat has been interpreted and applied from the pre-colonial period to the present and shows that customary law usually served ulterior motives. Studying how adat is constructed therefore reveals local power relations. Interestingly, in all the cases Tyson examined, the revival of adat occurred in a top-down manner. Both district heads and local parliamentarians implemented adat laws without consulting the broader population. In fact, claims for recognition were "officialized" through issuing local regulations on adat and promoting folkloristic "cultural events." Local political elites successfully managed to neutralize resource claims this way by channeling political dissent into "the patterned regularity of the state" (60).

Against this backdrop, Tyson asks the question in chapter 4 of whether the international development industry and its affiliated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are more receptive to popular participation. He critically evaluates two programs that the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) implemented together with local NGOs in North Luwu district. The conceptualization of adat in these projects was more receptive for input from the broader population, Tyson thinks, but the version of adat purported by these international organizations had very little in common with the actual content of local traditional law or systems of customary governance. Chapter 5 contains a detailed account of the debate in Tanah Toraja district surrounding primordial political and social orders. Youth groups (pemuda adat) situated at the fringes of the political system have come to use the "politics of tradition" to challenge

the dominant order by pushing for the reintroduction of traditional, pre-colonial political units (*lembang*). Once again, however, the local government in Tanah Toraja managed to steer the discourse about indigeneity in directions that “do not challenge existing relations of power and economic interests in the district” (96).

The final two substantive chapters explore the politicization of customary governance in the context of competition over resource control. Chapter 6 contains an account of the struggle between PT Inco, a foreign mining company, and local populations in East Luwu district. For decades, PT Inco has been confronted with accusations of unlawful land appropriation, but such challenges flared up after 1998. PT Inco’s official reaction, Tyson shows, was the activation of an armada of “sophisticated corporate public relations and mediation teams [that...] work to undermine the unity of local actors and confound them by questioning the legitimacy and viability of adat as a system of governance” (102). In addition to promoting an apolitical view of adat, the mining company has—in ways that smack of corruption—encouraged local bureaucrats to establish administrative hurdles for groups struggling for recognition under customary law. Local groups were similarly unsuccessful in a land dispute between London Sumatra Limited rubber plantation estates and indigenous groups that started in Bulukumba district in the early 1980s. In a landmark ruling in the mid-1990s, local farmer communities received—a rarity then and now—recognition at the highest level when the Indonesian Supreme Court ruled that London Sumatra Limited had illegally appropriated land. However, the implementation of the court ruling that was upholding and endorsing customary land tenure was delayed for more than a decade due to a combination of bureaucratic inefficiency, incompetence and a lack of political will. Ethnic “entrepreneurs” exploited the insecurity among local farmer communities that resulted from this government inertia and quickly found a way to turn the local adat discourse to their own financial advantage by making false claims over contested land only to sell it to local farmers later on. The book’s main conclusion is that new players have reinvigorated the adat discourse but failed to fundamentally transform local power constellations.

The concentration and dispersion of state power

The books under review offer several valuable insights on the accumulation and exercise of power in post-New Order Indonesia. For instance, all authors provide ample evidence for the continuing dominance of the state in politics. The important role official ordinances and statutes play in the “politics of recognition” and adat discourses is emblematic of the continuing integration of power within the bureaucracy. Furthermore,

the main nodes of power continue to be under the control of political elites that rose to power during the dictatorship. Decentralization has failed to fundamentally empower citizens.

Yet, the books also show that change is happening in Indonesia even if only incrementally. Carnegie, for instance, shows how politicians had to acquire new ways of communication to sustain power in a mass democracy. Several contributors to the Holtzappel and Ramstedt book even claim that genuinely new political elites emerged and started to become more vocal. Arguably, such new forces are broadening the political arena even if they fail to fundamentally change the ways in which power is distributed within it.

Against the backdrop of the dynamics described in the three books under review here, it seems that the main research question students of post-New Order politics have to answer is why state-society relations are changing in a top-down manner across the archipelago despite the absence of fundamental elite turnover or the rearrangement of class structures? My tentative answer would be that relations within governing elites are the main driver of political change in contemporary Indonesia and not classes, individuals or societal groups. Change in state-society relations has unfolded (and arguably continues to do so) along the following lines: Recruitment, promotion and retirement mechanisms in the New Order state were upward oriented and therefore ultimately regulated by President Suharto. This system created and maintained a certain unity within state elites. The New Order, in other words, was exerting authoritarian pressure along horizontal lines as effectively as it was suppressing non-governing elites and ordinary citizens along vertical lines.

In order to politically survive the chaotic months following the implosion of the dictatorship in 1998, governing elites had to adopt various institutional changes, including the introduction of elections and the decentralization of political authority. These measures created a more competitive political environment within governing elites and deregulated the capacity to extract resources.

The conflicts that ensued from this modicum of competition disrupted ties within governing elites. As competition re-ordered the once relatively stable political structure, governing elites were facing new challenges to reproduce their social positions. With horizontal tensions mounting, the formation of new alliances became both possible and necessary. To find allies and support for their battles with one another, governing elites started to 'reach-out' and 'reach-down' in the political arena. Consequently, new alliances have emerged within governing elites as well as between governing elites and non-governing elites/ordinary citizens.

The creation of such alliances may have allowed governing elites to defend their social position overall, but concessions made during these struggles with one another have come to limit governing elites in new and

significant ways, some of which are described in the three books under review here. Overall, by competing against each other, 'old' New Order elites have been changing state-society relations in spite of themselves.

Despite aforementioned important contributions, the books leave several questions unanswered. For instance, how do power dynamics within the state look like? For all their emphasis on the continuing importance of the state, most contributions actually focus primarily on societal groups. A discussion of the state in less isomorphic tones would have provided readers with a clearer picture of whether the state indeed continues to dominate or if, in fact, societal forces have come to rule through the state in certain parts of the archipelago. In this respect, it would also have been interesting to learn more about the impact of symbols on the relationship between state elites and societal groups. When and under what circumstances, for example, does "the state" manage to use symbols that reinforce its power and when does it fail to co-opt societal groups? Have "policy programs" of recent years, such as the implementation of syariah regulations in districts and provinces that are a manifestation of this "new political grammar," helped to co-opt extra-statal groups or have they strengthened local social organizations at the state's expense?² Finally, do current patterns of power accumulation really indicate a lack of change in Indonesian politics or are they actually a first-step towards more meaningful democratization? The shortcomings of the Holtzappel and Ramstedt book in addressing these questions are most immediately obvious. Almost all contributors hail from the development industry and therefore equate "change" with "successful service delivery." A broader understanding of change would have provided more insights, however. Both Carnegie's and Tyson's book show nicely how change or the expansion and contraction of political space in Indonesia is ongoing and occurs in a non-linear fashion.

Political scientists working within the mainstream discipline will find the lack of theoretical contributions in these books to questions about why, where and under what circumstances political space in post-authoritarian political systems is expanding or shrinking, disappointing. At the same time, regional specialists may criticize the lack of new empirical material in Carnegie's contribution as well as in the Holtzappel and Ramstedt volume. Carnegie's book, for instance, is overtly descriptive and merely chronicles events since 1998. Other scholars have also published some of Carnegie's observations before in a more theoretically grounded and more comprehensive manner. For instance, the continuing importance of aliran in voting behaviour has been documented already in 2003.³

² Michael Buehler, 'Whodunit? Politicians affiliated with secular parties implement most sharia regulations', *Tempo: Special Edition 10 Years of Sharia*, September 6, 2011, 58-9.

³ Dwight King, *Half-Hearted Reform: Electoral Institutions and the Struggle for Democracy in Indonesia* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

Likewise, various scholars have shown in recent years that the political competition ensuing from the rise of Islamic parties has already subsided.⁴ Islamist parties have become entangled in corruption scandals and patronage networks which has greatly undermined their legitimacy.⁵ The Holtzappel and Ramstedt volume looks equally “dated” since most of the chapters are, in fact, donor reports written for the development industry in the early 2000s that were simply ‘repackaged’ for publication in this volume. Hence, many of the trends and developments examined in the book are no longer relevant due to legal and institutional changes in recent years.

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⁴ Shihab Najwa and Yanuar Nugroho, “The Ties That Bind: Law, Islamisation and Indonesia’s Prosperous Justice Party (PKS),” *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, 10 (2008): 233-67.

⁵ Michael Buehler, Revisiting the Inclusion-Moderation Thesis in the Context of Decentralized Institutions: The Behaviour of Indonesia’s Prosperous Justice Party, *Party Politics*, forthcoming 2012.