

*Local Politics in Indonesia: Pathways to Power*, by Nanyung Choi. London and New York: Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, 2011, 143 pp., \$140.00 hardcover.

*Reviewed by Michael Buehler*  
*Northern Illinois University*

One of the many ironies of Indonesia's self-perception as a rising power and an emerging market is that the world does not seem to reciprocate these feelings. It sometimes looks as if the archipelago is only on the map of Western oil and mining executives as well as board room members of ailing Canadian cell phone companies that are desperately trying to make up for lost market shares in rich countries.

Developments in the world's largest Muslim-majority country and third largest democracy, in other words, have largely gone unnoticed outside a small circle of area specialists and donor agency folks. This is also true for Indonesia's decentralization program, one of the world's most ambitious and radical initiatives.

After the New Order dictatorship of President Suharto collapsed in 1998, Indonesia embarked on an ambitious decentralization program that initiated a restructuring of the country's political institutions on a scale unprecedented since the 1960s. Two laws were adopted that spelled out the conditions for the devolution of political authority and outlined a new system of fiscal arrangements between Indonesia's institutional layers. The implementation of these laws shifted a considerable amount of political authority to the district and municipality level of government, leaving the center and (to a lesser extent) the provinces behind with just a few key responsibilities. In 1999, local parliaments were given the powers to elect governors, district heads and mayors. In 2005, a system was introduced that gave ordinary citizens the authority to directly elect their local executive heads.

Nanyung Choi examines in her book the impact of indirect and direct local executive head elections on Indonesia's democratization effort. Concretely, she is interested in evaluating whether decentralization in combination with local executive head elections has improved the representativeness and responsiveness of political institutions. To this end, she analyzes executive head elections in five localities across four provinces.

Choi's account of Yogyakarta's mayoral elections in 2001 shows that centralized New Order patronage networks have simply shifted to the local parliament as a consequence of decentralization. Concretely, candidates for local executive government posts tried to lobby local parliamentarians through bribes and favors. In addition, candidates running in local

executive head elections had no real interest in developing political parties but simply used them as vehicles for their personal and economic aspirations.

Due to this increase of corruption and backroom dealings in local parliaments, direct elections for local executive heads were introduced in Indonesia in 2005. Examining the gubernatorial elections in Riau, Choi shows in Chapter 3 that political corruption once again shifted form. Since candidates still had to be nominated by parties, politicians now started to bribe local party cadre instead of parliamentarians. Once candidates had secured a party nomination, they showed no interest in maintaining links to political parties but relied on private networks and expensive power brokers to mobilize the masses.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Choi provides a detailed account of such campaign strategies through an analysis of three mayoral elections in different parts of the archipelago. She shows how candidates reverted to identity politics and other political symbolism in addition to relying on vote-buying. Choi argues that many of these strategies were exclusionary and pursued particularistic politics. Direct executive elections were therefore detrimental to democratic consolidation in many ways.

Choi concludes in Chapter 6 that the impact of decentralization on Indonesia's democratization efforts as seen through an analysis of local executive head elections is mixed at best. Decentralization, she argues, has allowed elites that rose to power during the New Order dictatorship to extend their power. At the same time, direct elections for local executive heads have weakened Indonesia's already poorly institutionalized political parties. Choi's overall conclusion is that "the widely held assumption that political decentralization enhances the quality of local democracy remains problematic" (p. 102).

The research question of her book whether the introduction of elections for local executive heads has fostered democracy in Indonesia, is important for several reasons:

Due to its sheer size and the fact that there are almost as many Muslims living in Indonesia as in the entire Arab world combined makes this an important case to study the relationship between devolution and democratic consolidation. At the same time, studying local politics in Indonesia allows not only to gain a better understanding of devolution programs overall but also to identify some of the challenges decentralization efforts may face in Islamic countries. Finally, Choi's research topic is important because studies of local *executive* elections remain rare despite the enormous powers that have come to be concentrated in local executive head offices in many countries across the world over past years.

Choi's book provides an accurate description of post-New Order local political dynamics on many levels. Especially her detailed account of various forms of political corruption, both old and new, shows how endemic and systemic vote-buying, rent-seeking and the misappropriation of state budgets have remained despite the decentralization and democratization of power more than a decade ago. Economic pundits are largely ignoring the abysmal governance record of the Indonesian state, especially at the local level, when they pore over their models that aim to predict when exactly Indonesia is reaching the status of an advanced economy. This is unfortunate because it is *political* dynamics at the local level that will determine whether Indonesia's economic growth, currently mainly driven by domestic consumption and resource extraction, will be sustainable. The book under review here serves as an important reminder of this fact.

However, Choi's book also has some shortcomings. Her account of local elites, for example, is incomplete at best. It is not clear who exactly constitutes the pool of candidates running in these elections, something she readily admits in her conclusion (p. 105).

Such data would be important, however, to support the claim that elites rooted in the New Order dictatorship have co-opted Indonesia's decentralization initiative. Furthermore, the book suggests that there is considerable variance among localities in terms of wins in the executive elections. Unfortunately, Choi does not explain why there is elite turnover in some but not in other provinces. Most importantly, her book fails to situate Indonesia's experience in a broader academic debate. Rather, Choi positions her hypothesis and subsequent finding that decentralization does not necessarily enhance the quality of democracy against a debate within development industry organizations such as the Asia Development Bank and the World Bank that still propagate the decentralization of political and fiscal power as part of their good governance agenda. Such organizations may dominate the discourse in Indonesia, however, they do not reflect the academic debate. Hence, Choi's argument that the devolution of power can also be un conducive to democratization efforts has been raised by political scientists and public policy experts more than two decades ago already.

At the same time, this reviewer thinks that Choi has taken a textbook definition for democracy as a yardstick for her assessment only to subsequently show how much the Indonesian case deviates from this ideal, an approach also found in other recent accounts of local politics in the archipelago (see, for instance, Hadiz 2010). If Choi would have engaged more with the rich academic literature on decentralization and local elections, she would have found interesting similarities between her Indonesian case studies and accounts of "power elites" in consolidate democracies. Likewise, a more serious review of the existing theoretical literature on "audience democracies" in the West would have allowed Choi to put her assessment of democracy in Indonesia as a "spectator sports" into perspective.

As much as mainstream social scientists ignore political developments in Indonesia, as much do area experts ignore the developments in broader theoretical debates. A more intense exchange between the two worlds would be to the benefit of the scholarly work produced.

## Reference

Hadiz, Vedi. 2010. *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asian Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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