

Book Review

Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asian Perspective

By Vedi Hadiz

Stanford University Press, 2010, 264 pages, \$60 cloth, \$22.95 paperback.

Reviewer: Michael Buehler, *Northern Illinois University*

The decentralization of state institutions has been a global phenomenon for more than two decades. Vedi Hadiz is looking at the outcomes of this trend in Indonesia, where the collapse of the New Order dictatorship in 1998 shifted powers to the local level.

The book's main contribution is a forceful critique of the "technical" view of decentralization multilateral donor organizations adopted when assessing and supporting Indonesian government initiatives over the past decade. Hadiz argues that the decentralization of political responsibilities can hardly ever be supplied as a matter of policy choices only, because state institutions are always embedded in broader social power relations. Through detailed case studies, for instance, on the composition of local elites or subnational party dynamics, Hadiz exposes the political naïveté of many decentralization programs implemented as a part of broader development initiatives. Somewhat similar to the finding made by Benedict Anderson in an earlier study that a certain degree of societal democratization has to precede elections to make the latter meaningful, Hadiz concludes that decentralization failed to fundamentally transform power relations in Indonesian local politics because political forces of the Suharto period survived the regime collapse in 1998.

The book's main strength—an articulate critique of donor agencies' Weberian conceptualization of "the state" and the apolitical understanding of decentralization *technical* advisors advocate during "institutional capacity building" workshops in Jakarta—is also the book's major weakness. If Hadiz had engaged more with the scholarly literature instead of glossy donor reports, he would have realized that academics by no means consider decentralization to be a one-size-fits-all solution for bad governance. A more comprehensive account of the scholarly debate surrounding decentralization would also have helped readers to gain a better understanding of the main theoretical debates against which to evaluate Indonesia's decentralization efforts. It is unclear whether Hadiz wishes to contribute to the literature on the impact of decentralization on public participation or the literature on the relationship between political devolution and governance. This is important, however, because these distinct literatures define "success" and "failure" of political devolution rather differently.

Finally, Hadiz implicitly subscribes to the "technocratic" understanding of government reform when he claims that institutional change adopted post-1998 has

had *unintended* consequences. Hadiz, it seems, believes that institutional reform programs were indeed crafted with the goal of changing power relations but were later co-opted by political elites during the implementation stage. A close analysis of the debates surrounding the various decentralization laws suggests, however, that many of these regulations were drafted with the intention to insulate and protect state elites from new political challenges. Decentralization efforts in Indonesia, in other words, were arguably never based on a technocratic vision of the state but were part of a political project from the start. One could therefore argue that the consolidation of elite rule through decentralization was very much intended.

In addition to these shortcomings in the theoretical framework, the author has too static a view of the empirical situation on the ground. Hadiz shows convincingly that New Order administrators dominate local politics. Local executive head elections, for example, are mainly an expression of intra-bureaucracy competition. Clearly, the postauthoritarian local state is not an arena where conflicts between societal forces are waged. Still, Hadiz' claim that "the patterns and essential dynamics of the exercise of social, economic and political power have more or less been established, and will remain relatively unaltered in the foreseeable future" (42) leaves important questions unanswered. For example, why do subnational bureaucrats only rarely use their local networks and influence in regional politics to launch national careers? Upward mobility within the political class is common in decentralized postauthoritarian countries with similar political and financial arrangements between the center and the periphery such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico or the Philippines. Hence, it would have been interesting to learn more about why there are different dynamics in Indonesia.

Likewise, the local party dynamics described in the book raise interesting questions. The author shows that "old elites" defend their local dominance using a broad range of newly created parties. However, why do old elites, all of which were members of the New Order's Golkar party at some point, not guard the local state against opposition along party lines? In Mexico, for instance, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) zealously protected the outcome of gubernatorial elections because the loss of subnational offices would have upset the patronage networks within which the party was rooted.

Finally, Hadiz ignores the fact that there are genuine tensions *within* state-elites in contemporary Indonesia. As a Marxist scholar, Hadiz understands the Indonesian state as a mere condensation of existing class relations, and therefore confines his examination of the nature of the Indonesian state to questions about the interests of the "dominant class" as *a whole* vis-à-vis society. Eager to show that the state primarily serves capitalist interests and that government institutions are a means to dominate other classes situated in society, Hadiz' account treats the state as a "black box," thereby glossing over and obscuring the different interests the Indonesian state embodies. The difficulties Hadiz shows in acknowledging and explaining that the main tensions in contemporary Indonesian politics run horizontally, not vertically, originate in his too static a view of the state.

Overall, if the state and the political interests embodied in it are the central explanatory variable for Indonesia's local democratization (or the lack thereof), then the author should have focused more on the kind of state internal dynamics mentioned above.

One may question the state-centric view of the book altogether, however. Rarely can any social force achieve its goals without finding allies. The drastic decline of political violence in Indonesia, a fact the author mentions several times in his book, raises the question how elites, who for decades relied on coercion to remain in power, manage to dominate local arenas today. The relative ease with which old elites managed to entrench themselves in subnational politics suggests that Hadiz underestimates the measure of popular legitimacy the current political class enjoys within the Indonesian electorate. Perhaps, state-society relations in present-day Indonesia should not be understood in as dichotomous a way as suggested by the author who sees a strong state operating against the interests of a weak society. In fact, one can acknowledge that an accommodation between the Indonesian state and societal forces has occurred in Indonesia over the past decade without having to subscribe to the equally rigid dichotomy between strong societies and weak states advocated by Joel Migdal. For instance, the adoption of syariah local regulations by governors and mayors with secular party affiliations in Indonesian regions with strong Islamic movements is ample evidence that state elites react to societal forces.¹

Overall, development practitioners and area specialists will find this book illuminating for its detailed account of Indonesia's experience with decentralization. The broader questions Hadiz' work raises about the impact of political devolution on state-society relations will make this book also an interesting read for scholars working within mainstream political sociology.

¹ Michael Buehler. 2011. "Whodunit? Politicians Affiliated with Secular Parties Implement most Sharia Regulations." *Tempo: Special Edition 10 Years of Sharia*, September 6, 58-9.