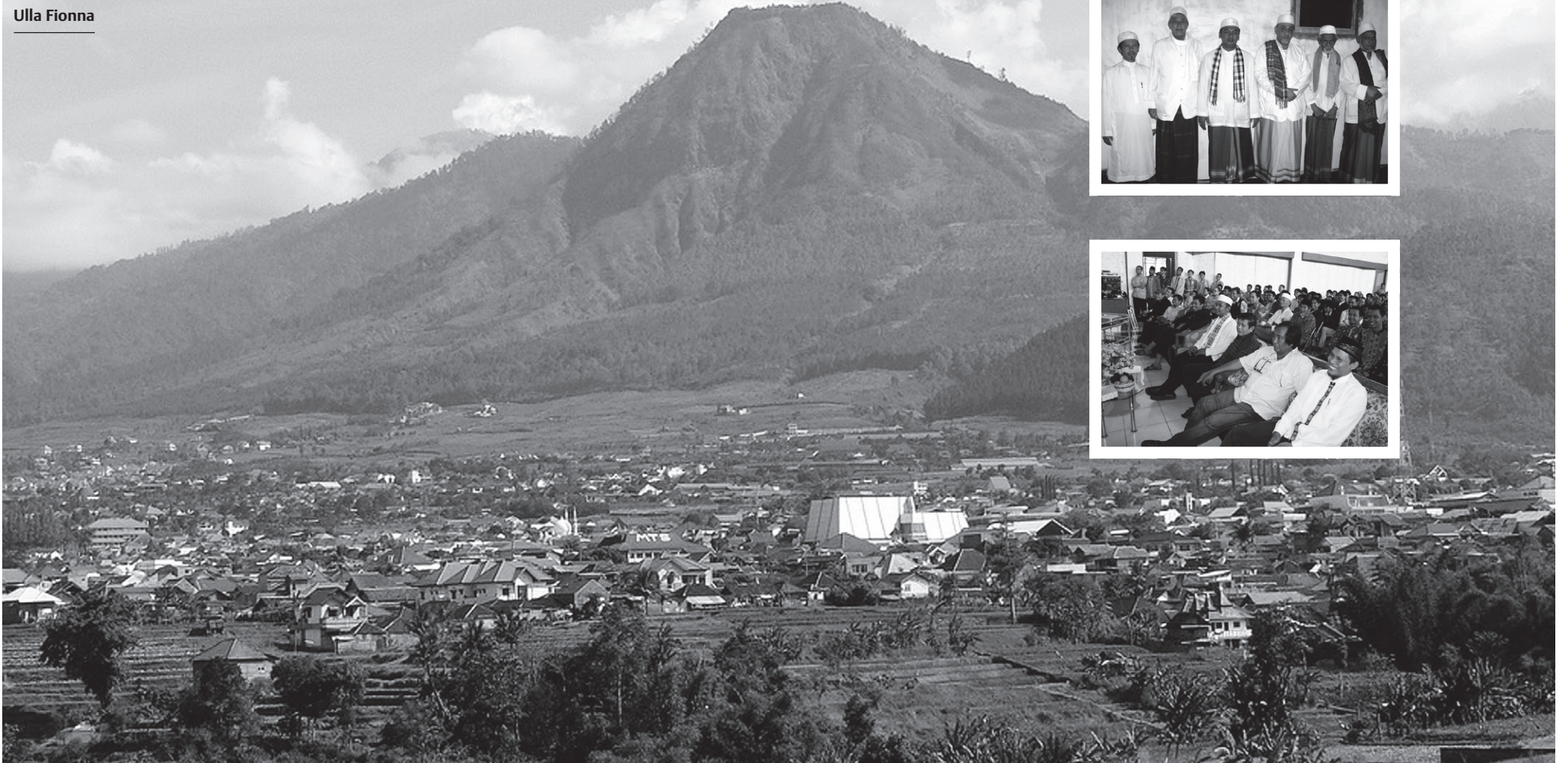


Local party procedures

Field notes from Malang

Having decided to focus her PhD on Indonesian political parties at the grassroots, Ulla Fionna knew that fieldwork would be challenging. Her perceptions, based on parties from the New Order era, were that local branches usually disappeared after the party rallies and elections had taken place. Fionna had concerns about gaining contact and cooperation from party members, but decided to adopt an optimistic approach. Her notes offer useful insights to anyone about to embark on fieldwork and are sure to evoke memories of similar experiences in many others.

Ulla Fionna



EVEN WITH SUCH OPTIMISM, I decided it was important to be as prepared as possible before I flew to Indonesia. A stroke of luck revealed that an old high school friend is now on Megawati's staff (*staff ahli*), and I decided to shamelessly exploit the opportunity and contact him for the first time in 12 years. Luckily he was helpful and supportive and assisted me not only in getting formal permission for my research on the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP), but also by putting me in touch with two other parties which were to be the subject of my study – Partai Golkar and PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*/Prosperous Justice Party). I had to find other avenues to contact PAN (*Partai Amanat Nasional*). At this point, however, I decided that contacts for three parties was a good enough and flew to Indonesia.

It turned out that permission from the PDIP was not only the easiest but also the fastest to obtain – full credit for which should be given to my long lost high school friend. As for the PKS, after calling its provincial office I was advised that because my research was going to be conducted in Malang I should contact these branches directly. The *kodya* (municipal) office asked me to produce a letter from my university, after which permission was received within a few days. When the same thing happened at the PKS *kabupaten* (district) office I felt I was on a roll, however, my luck with the party branches had just run out.

Battling bureaucracy

Although Partai Golkar was easy enough to find, and the *kodya* office was actually located near to my grandmother's Malang house, they were adamant that I had to seek research permission from the central office in Jakarta. With the *kodya* office insisting that this was the proper procedure, but providing little help to put me in touch with the Jakarta office, I ended up making tens of calls to my Partai Golkar contact in the capital. Since nobody seemed to know who had the authority to grant research permission, my request was tossed around from one person to another. Before I knew it, *Ramadhan* (fasting month) and the feast of *Lebaran* (*Idul Fitri*) were upon us and I simply had to stop hassling people about this matter. I eventually

received permission in December, about five months after my initial request to Partai Golkar. Remembering the words of the *kodya* office, I did not bother to contact its *kabupaten* office, thinking that I would find myself repeating the whole procedure again. The irony is that once started work, I discovered that the *kabupaten* office had adopted a different policy. They told me that I could have started my research at *kabupaten* level much sooner, since the office provided the permission locally!

My experience with PAN was even more interesting. After contacting its central office, I was told that I need to get the permission locally. A search for the branch office ensued. Finding a physical office proved to be a challenge. Offices for which addresses were given by the central office were empty and padlocked – although party signage was evident. It was only by asking the PDIP personnel that I got the idea of looking for PAN cadres at the local Malang assembly's office (*kantor DPRD kodya Malang*). When I finally found them, they informed me that they were looking for a new *kontrakan* (place for rent), as the lease on the old one had expired.

The *kabupaten* office was a one-man show. The office secretary (who months later was elected chairman) took care of everything. This included surrendering his house to be used as a party office, handling all enquiries and at the same time looking for a new office for the branch. He was extremely helpful and not only granted permission promptly but promised to contact me to let me know when the cadres would come together for a meeting, so that I wouldn't have to travel all over – a much-appreciated gesture given that many places were more than two hours drive away and some of the villages were flooded at the time.

My interaction with the *kodya* office, however, was much more complicated. My PAN *kodya* contact was really hard to meet, (he was not always at the local assembly's office), and he only occasionally answered his mobile phone. Eventually he did take my call, only to tell me that I had to wait until after *Lebaran* for my request. Understanding how important *Lebaran* is to most

people, I waited patiently until the festivities had finished only to be frustrated again. When I called him, he told me that the paperwork had been lost because they didn't have an office and so I would have to resubmit my request. Adding insult to injury he then informed me that he was no longer in charge of this matter and I had to contact someone else. The one silver lining to all this was that a new office had been found and so at least I no longer had to roam around the halls of the local assembly looking for PAN cadres. I decided to visit the new person in charge at his residence in order to make sure my request was not lost again. After a long drawn out process I was finally granted permission for my research on PAN.

I can conclude that reform-era parties differ from their New Order counterparts. They are more active in general and they don't disappear after elections. However, my interaction with them indicates that, at least for some of parties, local organisation is in dire need of improvement. Their management is erratic and their personnel are at times reluctant to handle party matters. This attitude is perhaps understandable given that for most of them party activities are voluntary and come second to their regular jobs. However, efficiency in handling external requests reflects the state of their organisation, and my experiences suggest that they need to shape up badly.

Dealing with local parties demands an extremely open mind. Most of the parties are still young, and they are still learning about local management and organisation. Even among the incumbent parties such as Partai Golkar, different branches might have different policies. My advice to any researcher wanting to take the same path as I did is to be prepared for surprises along the way but not to be disheartened. After all, the parties are well worth the trouble and they make a fascinating research subject.

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INSET TOP:
Members of Islamic PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) in Malang. Photograph courtesy of author.
INSET MIDDLE:
Religious leaders in Malang. Photograph courtesy of author
INSET BELOW:
Members of PKS at a mayoral rally in Malang. Photograph courtesy of author.

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