

Deepening and decentralising the study of politics in Indonesia

Politics, off the agendas of both public life and research in Indonesia for thirty years, has returned with a vengeance in Indonesia since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. Within Indonesia there is lively debate of politics in the media every day and this has been mirrored internationally by a growing stream of academic studies.¹ Do we need more? Is there anything new or interesting to say? These two recent publications address themes already well-established, but also reflect substantive changes in Indonesia as well as the benefits of a longer-term view of complex processes unfolding over time.

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Above and far right: Protesters caught on camera in Jakarta. Images courtesy of Prazz on flickr.

Maribeth Erb & Priyambudi Sulistiyanto (eds). 2009. *Deepening Democracy in Indonesia: direct elections for local leaders (Pilkada)*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies. 392 pages, ISBN: 9789812308405 (paperback)

Coen J.G. Holtzappel & Martin Ramstedt (eds). 2010. *Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia: implementation and challenges*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Leiden: Institute for Asian Studies. 433 pages, ISBN: 9789812308207 (hardback)

ONE OF THE CENTRAL POLITICAL PROJECTS of the Indonesian state, since even before independence, has been the containment and management of its staggering cultural, linguistic and religious diversity into a coherent and unified national form. The first president, Sukarno, was ultimately undone by other factors, but the inherent contradictions of his own way of managing diversity contributed to this. A major factor in the success of his successor Suharto, was his ability to create an illusion of national unity, preferably by ideological means, but if necessary by military ones. Both regimes achieved their aims of national integration at the price of democratic representation, civil liberties and recognition of diversity of local social, cultural and political traditions.

Since Suharto's spectacular slide from grace and then fall from power in 1998, this preoccupation has remained, but with a radical change of direction – essentially a huge experiment in finding a way out of half-a-century of increasingly centralised and authoritarian rule. The foci, and indeed the titles of works already published, reflect these themes in various combinations. Very broadly, the trend of these works has been a gradual movement from national-level perceptions of disorder and “disintegration” and the persistence of

established “oligarchies” of power, to more locally grounded studies that increasingly reflect the diversity of emergent “democratic” forms and processes.

The two major planks of this reversal have been decentralisation (*desentralisasi*) of budgets and government, and democratisation (*demokratisasi*) of political representation, via free elections. The two books reviewed here, both published a decade into the process, represent the state of the art of study of *reformasi*. They begin, as do most of their predecessors, from the fundamental dilemma of the state and its twin projects, but each focuses on one of the two aspects of the process. *Deepening Democracy* focuses closely on the mechanics and dynamics of one of the key mechanisms of both *demokratisasi* and *desentralisasi*: the elections of the heads of local levels of government (*Pilkada*). *Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy* builds on an earlier book by one of its editors in retaining a focus on reform and regionalisation of governance structures.

Both begin with general/theoretical chapters, but at their cores are series of case-studies and these span the length and breadth of the archipelago. There are sixteen chapters in *Deepening Democracy* and fifteen in *Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy*. Together their authors reflect a wide range of viewpoints: Indonesian and foreign, academics and others, from World Bank officials to development advisors to think-tank researchers. Rather than listing and summarising this multitude of chapters, I think it is more useful here to discuss the main themes that run throughout and the directions of thought that emerge from them.

Deepening Democracy

A number of observers have followed, analysed and written about *Pilkada*, mostly in the form of journal articles.² These studies have tended to be at the level of individual elections, or local series of them. Key issues and themes emerging from these discussions include the pervasiveness of “money politics”, the roles of political parties, the personal profiles and reputations of candidates, the influence of the media, the “return” or “re-emergence” of traditional aristocracies and the use of signs, symbols and practices derived from “tradition” into the formal political arena, the survival and regrouping of elites entrenched during the New Order period, and the related practices of “collusion” and the consequent formation of “cartels” and “oligarchies”. The bottom line of most of these studies is the practical concern as to whether the reforms have made a difference at the levels of public participation and representation – whether democracy is, as the title of this book asks, really “deepening” or not.

While there is little explicit consensus in these studies, there is at the same time at least an implicit impression of a national pattern: that the democracy developing is at best shallow and is little more than a front for the continuation of elite oligarchy supported by various combinations of money politics, inter-party collusion and more or less direct control over the media.³

Deepening Democracy provides (to my knowledge) the first detailed account of the history, legislation and technologies of the reformed election system in Indonesia as well as a set of comparative studies of actual elections from all over the archipelago. This combination of overview and comparison, along with the benefit of some hindsight, has enabled the authors and editors to address the issues listed above in a more comprehensive, balanced and systematic way than has occurred previously. The result is a more nuanced picture in which any national-level generalisations are balanced by a growing awareness of the diversity of local variations and the complex interactions of factors that influence these.

The overwhelming message repeated in various ways and from various locations throughout the book is (not surprisingly) that these are local elections, conducted in distinctly local styles and in which the results tend to reflect local factors and influences. These observations are often accompanied by warnings against the analytic dangers of top-down national level generalisations (e.g. by Sulistiyanto on p.191, Lindsey on p.213). However, they also consistently recognise a series of recurrent patterns that intersect in various ways with the national-level themes identified in previous studies.

One such pattern is the role of political parties, which despite significant local variations, is quite different to what we are accustomed to in western democracies. Parties, besides those defined in religious terms, generally do not represent any particular, let alone consistent constituency, point of view or policies. They are instead pragmatic political machines with distinct histories and usually focused around powerful individuals. As such they are, unlike their predecessors in the 1950s, virtually free of consistent policy, let alone philosophy. Pratikno (ch.3) does attempt to map patterns of ideological



and cultural similarity of parties, but even he admits that they mean little in practice, especially when it comes to the pragmatic business of making coalitions or alliances.

As a consequence, parties command little loyalty on the part of members and candidates. Candidates shop around for parties to nominate them, often paying for the privilege, but also hop from party to party in response to internal conflicts and according to what they see as their best interests. Choi (ch.4) argues that this “weakening” of the role of parties in fact results in them being little more than gatekeepers to candidacy, resulting in advantage to existing elites (of which more later). Parties do, however, have distinctive, if changing, local styles that usually reflect existing local formations of power and traditional allegiances. Ironically voters, unlike candidates, do seem to have a degree of allegiance to parties, with some areas being seen as PDI-P or Golkar “strongholds”.

A reflex of this weak and, from a western point of view, inverted role of parties, is that electoral campaigns tend to focus overwhelmingly on the personalities of candidates, sometimes almost to the exclusion of their parties (Choi ch.4, Lindsey ch.10). Perceptions of “personality” are themselves, however, closely linked to a range of factors including the media (Hill ch.11, Choi ch.4), “money politics” (Hidayat ch.6), ethnic, religious and other social divisions (Mietzner ch.12, Subianto ch.15) and the previous public profiles and track records of candidates (Priyambudi ch.9). This last factor brings us back to the dominant theme in the existing literature of the continued political dominance of elites established during the New Order period.

While many of the studies in *Deepening Democracy* provide further evidence of this pattern (Choi ch.4, Mietzner ch.12, Smith ch.14, Subianto ch.15), others equally document counter- or even coexisting movements toward broader participation (Mietzner ch.12), surprising electoral results, new sources of political capital (Buehler ch.5) and, as the title suggests, a generalisable “deepening of democracy”. As mentioned above, much of the value of this book lies in the way it takes us beyond such simplistic arguments for or against “elite oligarchies” to remind us, again and again, that the size, complexity and diversity of Indonesia is reflected in its electoral politics, and that while national-level generalisations have their uses, they are only as useful as the quality of the local-level studies they should be built on.

Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy

This book focuses on the other main aspect of the reform process – the decentralisation of regional governance structures and budgets. It begins with a long introductory chapter in which one of the editors (Holtzappel) reviews, in considerable detail, the reform process which has been rolled out by means of a complex series of laws and regulations since 1999. The remainder of the book is divided into two parts: first a series of national overviews of different aspects of the process followed by a series of local case-studies.

The overview chapters consist of summaries of monitoring reports prepared by various agencies for the Indonesian

government during the early years of reform, as well as other similar reports prepared specially for this volume. They vary considerably in length and depth and the topics covered range from surveys of experiences at different levels (province, district, village), regional parliaments (DPRD), effects on business, small enterprises and economic development, as well as a somewhat misplaced but interesting historical chapter on the development of urban municipalities.

The longest chapter (by Endi Rukmo et al) is a comparative study of the early functioning of new DPRDs (regional parliaments) in five pairs of provinces and districts from across the country. It reveals considerable variation but frequently significant difficulties in getting to grips with the technical and managerial realities involved in the new system. That this is particularly so in the (mainly eastern) regions, more remote from Java, reflects the extent of their marginalisation under, and lack of participation in, the previous regime. Anecdotal evidence that I have heard since suggests that these problems remain in 2011.

Another very important chapter is one on corruption, based on a World Bank report in 2003. Dealing with corruption remains a major challenge for the present Yudhoyono administration and this report, despite being based on evidence several years old, sadly confirms the widespread popular perception that corruption has neither increased nor decreased, but has simply been “democratised” and “decentralised” along with the reform process.

The highly specialised and technical nature of many of these chapters means that they will be of interest largely to specialists or people seeking fairly specific information. Consequently, the only one on which I feel well qualified to comment (by virtue of my own specialist knowledge) is the one on Bali, which happens also to be (besides Holtzappel’s introduction) the longest and most detailed, and written by Martin Ramstedt, the other editor. It is a summary of the first seven years or so of the reform period in Bali. There have been other such summaries, but this is one of the most comprehensive, providing details of the governance reform process of which few Bali specialists would be aware. But most interesting of all are the ways in which Ramstedt links these processes with better-known social changes and public culture, and especially the subtleties of developments in Balinese religion, in which he is particularly expert.

Few of the other chapters are as rich and detailed as Ramstedt’s, but to the various extents in which they approach this, they provide valuable documentation of processes that few of us have the opportunity to study in detail. The spread of case-studies is from (central and south) Sulawesi, West Sumatra, Riau, Java, and Bali and foci on topics ranging from local efforts to annul New Order mining licences, to protection of local minorities, to intellectual property rights. An unfortunate weakness, in a book devoted to the “regional”, is the absence of any studies from eastern Indonesia, let alone the important if marginal case of West Papua. Together, however, they provide a reasonable if not entirely comprehensive overview of the variation across the country.

Major themes emerging through the book are the challenges of resolving contradictions between national laws and local traditions, the persistence of corruption, tensions between regional parliaments and heads of government. Another significant theme, which casts light on the persistence of entrenched elites in electoral politics evident in *Deepening Democracy*, and links the two aspects of the *reformasi* process, is the parallel persistence of senior personnel and the administrative culture they reflect at senior levels in local civil service offices. Taken together with the networks of patronage, which link incumbent district leaders with their senior staff, this goes some way to explaining the resilience of these elites in the face of both top-down reform and bottom-up desire for change.

Together

The formats, analytic strategies and even the conclusions to be drawn from these two books are in many respects similar: the enormity, at a national level, of the task of reform and the formidable obstacles to it at every level. However, what they both provide is a strong counter-narrative of the diversity across the country, local examples that repeatedly question the certainty of national-level generalisations and evidence of methodological value of balancing such generalisations with locally-grounded case-studies.

Taken together, *Deepening Democracy* and *Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy* provide the broadest, richest and most up-to-date picture we have of the political and administrative reform process in Indonesia. Both will undoubtedly become standard references for some years to come. This brings me, however, to a point that struck me while reading both books, but also applies across the academic publishing spectrum – the sheer time delay from the research/writing process to final publication. In the case of works addressing fast-changing contemporary issues, this can result in a sense of things being out-of-date by the time they are published – in these cases by five or even more years. This is nothing new: book publishing has always taken time, and the legitimate priorities of much academic work are depth, accuracy and quality rather than speed. However, the growth of virtually instant formats such as blogs, but also e-publishing, which can cut production times by months while retaining core academic values, raises ever more serious questions about the place of the already beleaguered monograph and edited volume formats in academic discourse.

Finally, standards of publishing and production of both books are very high, with relatively few of the typos and other defects that have plagued some of the more prestigious academic presses in recent years. Singapore has for some time been a centre for quality book production, but its emergence as a major global hub in academic publishing may also give the established presses food for thought.

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Notes

- Major contributions include (in chronological order) C.J.G. Holtzappel, M. Sanders & M. Tilas (eds). 2002. *Riding a Tiger: dilemmas of integration and decentralisation in Indonesia*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg; E. Aspinall & G. Fealy (eds). 2003. *Local Power and Politics in Indonesia: decentralisation and democratisation*. Singapore, ISEAS; D. Kingsbury & H. Aveling (eds). 2003. *Autonomy and Disintegration in Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon; R. Robison & V. Hadiz. 2004. *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: the politics of oligarchy in an age of markets*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon; H. Antlov & S. Cederroth (eds). 2004. *Elections in Indonesia: the New Order and Beyond*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon; M. Erb, P. Sulistiyanto & C. Faucher (eds). 2005. *Regionalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon; H. Schulte-Nordholt & G. van Klinken (eds). 2007. *Renegotiating Boundaries: local politics in post-Suharto Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV; Thomas Reuter (ed). 2010. *The Return to Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*. Clayton: Monash University Press
- Examples include: M. Buehler. 2007. ‘Local Elite Reconfiguration in post-New Order Indonesia: the 2005 election of district heads in South Sulawesi’, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 41(1); G. MacRae & N. Darma Putra. 2007. ‘A New Theatre-state in Bali? Aristocracies, the Media and Cultural Revival in the 2005 Local Elections’, *Asian Studies Review* 31:1-18; G. MacRae and N. Darma Putra. 2008. ‘A Peaceful Festival of Democracy: Aristocratic Rivalry and the Media in a local election in Bali’, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 42(2); Vel, Jacqueline. 2008. *Uma Politics: an ethnography of democratisation in West Sumba, Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV.
- This impression is also reflected in national-level studies such as Robison and Hadiz (2004).

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