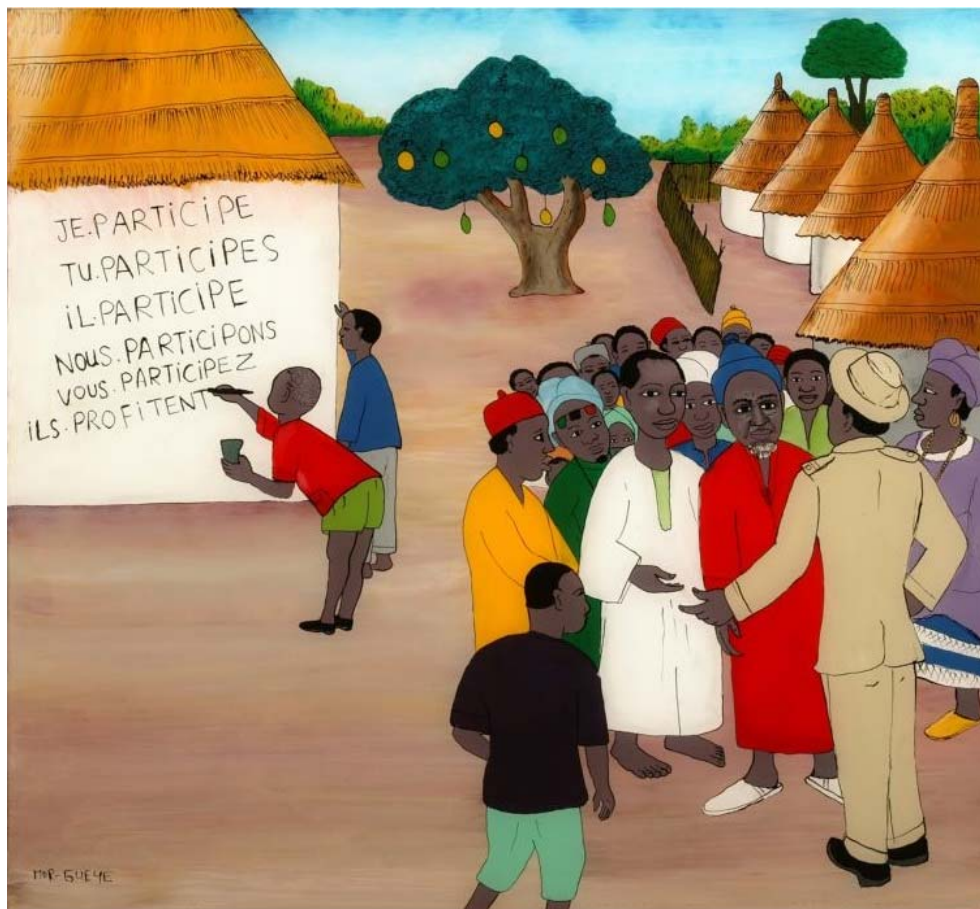


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Working Paper 34

Institutional Choices in the Shadow of History: Decentralization in Indonesia

by

Takeshi Ito

December 2007

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Indonesia**

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Jesse RIBOT



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ABSTRACT

The Indonesian state historically established patrimonial ties with relatively homogenous local elites, using them to make rural life accessible and identifiable for the center. As rural life has been reorganized in functional and territorial terms, patrimonial ties have been preserved as the primary means of extracting communal resources for state formation. The political structure was characterized by a dualism that perpetuated ambiguous boundaries between state actors and social forces at the expense of the population. The same logic of state formation can be observed in the current neoliberal efforts at democratic decentralization in developing countries. For the sake of bureaucratic efficiency and political stability, donors, international aid agencies, and local governments transfer power and resources to local institutions—private bodies, customary authorities, and civil-society organizations. In so doing they reinforce the self-perpetuating structure of dualism put in place in during intensified state formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Drawing on history and ethnography in the Priangan highland of West Java, Indonesia, this article shows how the implementation of democratic decentralization articulates with the preexisting structure of institutions and ideas, undermining rather than promoting government accountability and popular participation.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past a quarter century, democratic decentralization has earned global currency. As an important part of democratization, decentralization has been adopted in the vast majority of developing countries in Africa, Asia, East Europe, and Latin America (Ribot and Larson, 2005). Against this background, neoliberal efforts at democratic decentralization have eroded the power of states while celebrating the resurgence of civil society. There is a growing recognition that civil society plays a central role in promoting democratic and developmental ends, making way for alliance, partnership, or synergy among state institutions, business enterprises, and civic associations at local, national, and global scales (Abers, 2001; Agg, 2006; Edwards and Hulme, 1996a). Donors and international aid agencies promote the potentials of civil society for poverty alleviation, health care, education, etc. and require the inclusion of civil society representatives in the policy process—formulation, decision-making, and implementation. In a review of the literature, Lal (1994: 7) remarks, ‘These voluntary associations were necessary as an intermediating layer between ruling elites and the masses to prevent the abuse of power by the elites, and to allow the ordinary citizen to participate in the political process’. The conception of civil society, however, is ambiguous and often far-stretched. For instance, the World Bank (1997: 114) writes, ‘The growth of these intermediary organizations reflects the larger movement toward democracy in many regions and, in some countries, the need to bridge the “missing middle” between citizens and the state’. It is a tenuous assumption that civil voluntary associations as a proxy of civil society function as the bulwark against tyranny, and scholars have sought to critically evaluate the role of civil society in promoting democracy at global, national and local levels (Chandhoke, 2003; Ferguson, 2006).

The study of democratic decentralization from a vantage point of policymakers has for the most part focused on the variation of institutional forms of government (e.g. centralization vs. decentralization, democracy vs. dictatorship, and totalitarianism vs. pluralism) and its impact on democratic and developmental ends. Hence, it is assumed that successful decentralization hinges primarily on getting institutions right (Litvack, Ahmad and Bird, 1998: 24-25; Shah, 1997: 8). Consequently, the promotion of democracy has become a technocratic rather than political goal. It is further assumed that democracy requires the growth of civil society, and that civil society is more likely to flourish when power is decentralized (Diamond, 1999). Hence, the civil society approach attempts to develop institutional designs which are believed to foster certain attributes of social relations such as communal norms, local knowledge, and interpersonal trust that are presumably the coproduction between state and society (World Bank, 2005a).¹ Students of democratic decentralization in developing countries, however, have been struck by the little relevance of this model in the experience of developing countries. First, democracy has been put in place as a result of a long process of contestation between state actors and social forces, and has never been frictionless transitions by institutional design. Second, civil society is neither autonomous from nor an alternative to the state. The boundaries dividing state and society are not fixed and clear but fiercely contested and often ambiguous.

¹ By contrast, some decentralization theorists emphasize accountability in promoting democracy (Crook and Manor, 1998; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999).

Based on detailed fieldwork in district Bandung in Indonesia and political ethnography in one village, this essay explores the interplay between state actors and social forces operating over such ambiguous boundaries between state and society, public and private, and center and local, focusing on the role of village officials in local democracy. Despite empowering village elites, democratic decentralization in Java is not empowering ordinary or poorer villagers. This article explores the manner in which a compromised democracy follows from implementation of a civil society approach to decentralization. As the simplistic discourse on local democracy is translated into local institutional design, relations between state actors and local social forces embedded in the historical trajectory of state formation bring into question any notion of a simple transition through technocratic institutional design. The central argument is that the technocratic ‘civil-society’ based approach to democracy involving seamless cooperation between the state and an autonomous civil society misses the centrality of power relations regulating social, political, and economic relations within civil society. By failing to take into account the dynamics of state-society engagement, policy prescriptions for democratic decentralization have often facilitated undemocratic elements within civil society to reinforce their dominant position by renewing their patrimonial ties with the state.

In the name of democratic decentralization, power and resources are being transferred to local institutions—private bodies, customary authorities, and civil-society organizations (CSOs), resulting in a proliferation of local institutional forms and fragmentation of public powers (Ribot, 2004, 2007). As will be shown, transferring power and resources to local institutions has led to reinforcing the dominant power of the village heads and their subordinate staffs who are situated in an ambiguous position between state and society, and prevented local people from using their rights guaranteed by democratic institutions to participate in decision-making. By calling this arrangement ‘pluralism without representation’, Ribot (2007: 44) raises important questions: what is the logical basis by which donors, international aid agencies and local governments choose their local interlocutors? And what are the local democracy effects of institutional choices by such institutions on the three dimensions of grassroots democracy—accountability, participation, and representation? In exploring the questions through analysis of democratic decentralization in Indonesia, this article shows that the institutional choices made by the district government of Bandung are shaped by the history of colonial and post-colonial state formation. Rather than a simple characterization of collaboration between state and civil society, the choice of civil society organizations reflect the historical imbrication of village elites with the patrimonial state, and have not enabled the participation of a majority in democracy or development.

UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL CHOICES: THE SHADOW OF HISTORY

Donors and international aid agencies are promoting decentralization to deepen democracy in developing countries. The rationale for decentralization, advocated by donors and international aid agencies, is that by bringing government closer to people, decentralization allows people to participate more effectively in the decision-making process (USAID, 2000). It is expected that greater participation of people in the political process promotes efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. A World Bank staff

member recommends decentralization for developing countries which lack well functioning government institutions because ‘information requirements and transaction costs are minimized by moving the decision-making closer to people who are affected by those decisions’ (Shah, 1997: 24).

Nevertheless, some scholars have called into question the presumed benefits of democratic decentralization—financial accountability, law enforcement, popular participation, poverty reduction, rural development, and natural resource management (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006; Hutchcroft, 2001; Schonwalder, 1997). These scholars have recognized two widespread pitfalls of democratic decentralization. The first is the problem of co-optation or local elite capture. Local ruling elites use institutionalized links to and decentralized power of the state to enhance their political and economic interests rather than to promote democratic and development ends (Hadiz, 2004). The second is ruling elites’ fear of declining power bases as a result of democratic decentralization (Eaton, 2001). These problems prevent full implementation and offset the presumed benefits by reinforcing existing uneven socio-economic patterns (Crook and Manor, 1998: 302).

Institutional choices are influenced by political motivations and incentives of officeholders—bureaucrats and politicians. The choice of collaborating with CSOs seems on the surface to be either informed by the discourse on democratization or imposed from above. But, based on the author’s fifteen-month fieldwork in Namiwari (pseudonym) village in Bandung district, West Java, this article shows how these institutional choices reflect the self-interest of the ruling elites in perpetuating their dominant position in Indonesian society. Further, this article demonstrates the historical process through which village institutions have been constituted as an important element of state control of resources in the countryside. The history of state formation, whereby village officials have been incorporated into a patrimonial relationship with higher authorities, is reproduced in the institutional choices made by district governments in Indonesia, preventing the presumed benefits of democratic decentralization from reaching the poor.

The following section provides a brief overview of democratic decentralization and local governance reforms in Indonesia. Section III examines the process of state formation since the nineteenth century, describing the process by which the colonial and post-colonial state has shaped society through patrimonial ties to village elites. Section IV explores and analyzes the local governance reforms in district Bandung and the choice of the local government to work with particular CSOs. We also investigate how such choices affect the three dimensions of local democracy—accountability, participation, and representation. Section V concludes.

THE TERRAIN OF DECENTRALIZATION

The Republic of Indonesia is a unitary state and home to some 230 million people. At the early phase of colonial rule (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the Dutch East India Company was mainly interested in trading spices and coffee rather than controlling vast territories. The Dutch upheld the principle of indirect rule, relying on the traditional

authority of the indigenous aristocracy for the supervision of indigenous people. Colonial rule gave rise to the dual structure of administration—one for Europeans and the other for natives. After Japanese occupation (1942-45), the nationalist leaders Sukarno and Hatta led the national liberation struggle and constituted an independent Indonesia. Indonesia's fledgling democratic state faced a turbulent period from centrifugal forces generated domestically through political conflict as well as the geo-political developments in the region. In 1965, Suharto forcefully put an end to the political and economic turmoil, and embarked on the Western model of capitalist development under the highly centralized authoritarian regime, backed by the disciplined civil and military corps.

In the wake of the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the centralized political system of the authoritarian developmental state under the Suharto regime broke down and precipitated multidimensional transformations in the course of the democratic transition. Following constitutional procedures, then Vice President B. J. Habibie took over and laid down the course of democratization by introducing a number of measures of political liberalization. The Habibie government replaced the notorious electoral system which had laid the foundation for the single-party dominant system under the state-sponsored party Golkar. A free and fair general election was held in June 1999 under the new electoral system. After a series of constitutional and legal reforms, the relationship between the executive and the legislative underwent significant changes in favor of the latter. The number of appointed members in the legislative including reserved seats for the military was gradually reduced to zero in 2004. Term limits were imposed on the President. A radical shift occurred again in 2004-05; the President, Governors, and Mayors have been elected by popular vote. The political and social changes in the post-Suharto era featured new institutions of democratic decentralization that profoundly altered the political landscape of Indonesia's 33 provinces, some 440 districts, and 70,000 villages. Decentralization as an important part of democratization was officially implemented in January 2001.² Some key changes relevant to the study of decentralization were the transfer of powers from the central government to district governments and a series of district-level governance reforms as a result of democratic decentralization.

TRANSFER OF POWERS TO THE DISTRICTS AND VILLAGES

Decentralization drastically altered the national-subnational relations by transferring powers, taxes, funds, and personnel to regional governments.³ Except for foreign policy, defense and security, monetary policy, the legal system, and religion, the central government's responsibilities to deal with such important areas as education, health, the

² The central government further revised the 1999 regional autonomy laws into Law No. 32/2004 on regional government and Law No. 33/2004 on fiscal balance in October 2004. The new institutions of democratic decentralization in this article are mostly the product of the 1999 legislations, unless otherwise noted.

³ In Indonesia, provinces (*propinsi*) are the first-level regional government while districts/municipalities (*kabupaten/kotamadia*) the second-level regional government. Hereafter, I use 'district' to indicate the second-level regional government. Below the district level are subdistricts (*kecamatan*) and villages (*desa*). A village is composed of hamlets (RW), which are further divided into neighborhoods (RT).

environment, rural development, public works, and natural resource management were transferred to the second-level regional government—the district—with the rationale being that shifting authority to the subprovincial level promotes democratization and decentralization but discourage separatism. The central government can no longer intervene in the election/dismissal of district heads (*bupatis*). Starting in 2005, people are able to directly elect *bupatis*, instead of by district parliaments as before. District governments can design regional budgets. District councils, composed of representatives from multiple political parties, now have the authority to approve or reject the regional budget proposal and the accountability report by *bupatis*.

Similarly, the villages gained greater autonomy on paper. According to Law No. 22/1999 on Regional Government, the village is a legal community rather than territorial entity as defined by the previous law, and directly administered by the district rather than the subdistrict. The Law followed the tradition of the elective village head while it reduced the term from eight to five years. The Law established the village council, which checks the authority of the village head who had been the sole source of authority at the village level. The village council is directly elected by villagers, consisting of five to thirteen members. The separation of powers within the village seems to have created a mechanism of accountability in the new village government structure. The village head must submit the budget proposal and the annual accountability report to the village council. The village council has the authority to reject them, and if the performance of the village head is unsatisfactory, the village council can file a petition to *bupati* to remove him/her. The village head appoints the village secretary who supervises everyday village administration. Under the village secretary are five to six village government officers (appointed by the village head) in charge of government, development, finance, general affairs, and social welfare. Within each village territory there are three to five (depending on the number of hamlets) hamlet chiefs who are appointed by and accountable to the village head. Together with the village council, these village positions constitute the core structure of the village governance.

Local Governance Reforms in Indonesia

Democratic decentralization led to the emergence of local governance reforms in various parts of the country (Asia Foundation, 2002, 2004; Leisher and Nachuk, 2006). Donors and international aid agencies have been the drivers of these reforms. Accordingly, the lexicon of international development such as ‘accountability’, ‘participation’, and ‘transparency’ has made a quiet transition into the local context where the inclusion of ‘civil society elements’ (*unsur masyarakat*) is automatically translated into ‘good governance’ in the mindset of local officeholders.⁴ Added to this is the massive flow of money from donors and international aid agencies in the promotion of ‘good governance’ (e.g., pro-poor projects, political accountability, financial transparency, popular participation, etc). For instance, 40 per cent of the World Bank’s lending programs in Indonesia for 2004 to 2007 will focus on local governments and support for decentralization (Campos and Hellman, 2005: 251). One such project in which the district government participates is ‘Initiatives for Local Governance Reform’, through which the Bank selectively disburses loans to district governments that meet two-stage requirements for good governance (e.g. participatory planning and budgeting process and transparent district budget implementation process and financial management and reporting process).

In Bandung district, international aid has played a catalytic role in local governance reforms. The key local governance reforms include participatory planning in local development, devolution of administrative and fiscal authority to villages, and delegation of *bupati*’s responsibilities to subdistrict heads. Because of these reform initiatives, Bandung was chosen as one of the fifteen districts in the World Bank’s local governance reform project (World Bank, 2005b). Among many other local regulations required under the Bank’s lending program, the district government created a local regulation on Transparency, Accountability, and Participation, requiring the district government to be accountable for the management of government, to encourage popular participation in local governance, and to be transparent for the usage of the public funds.⁵

The district government’s efforts at the local governance reforms were facilitated by the cooperation of several institutions within and outside the district government. Within the district government, the leading institutions are the Regional Planning Board and the Department of Regional Autonomy Development respectively. Main CSOs which worked with the district government are Indonesia Partnership for Governance Initiatives (IPGI), Indonesian Village Head Association, Village Council Association, and Village Development Board Association. In short, the case of Bandung suggests that local governance reforms emerge at the interface of domestic and international forces.

The first approach is a mechanism of participatory planning called the Consultation on Planning of Annual Development Activities as a result of collaborative work between the

⁴ ‘Good governance’ has become the new buzzword in democratic local governance in post-Suharto Indonesia, but there is no common ground as to what it means.

⁵ Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten Bandung No. 6/2004 tentang Transparansi, Akuntabilitas, dan Partisipasi. The process leading to the local regulation involved a series of discussions among district politicians, bureaucrats, CSOs, and World Bank’s local facilitators.

Regional Planning Board and IPGI. In principle, participatory planning aims to accommodate villagers' voices in creating the development scheme with the rationale being that villagers are aware of what their most pressing needs are, what kinds of assistance are most useful, and how they make assistance sustainable. In other words, using locally generated information, the district government can match development projects to their needs. The process of participatory planning begins with villagers' participation in the village development meeting which is held once a year to create collectively a list of development projects based on local needs. Villagers not only list up projects but also prioritize them through discussions among villagers. In determining the development projects, the district government is supposed to weigh the lists created by villagers.

The second approach is capacity building of village government, which has been jointly organized by the Department of Regional Autonomy Development and various civil society organizations. This approach is predicated on the belief that the villages possess a certain level of pro-social norms and networks which enables villagers to act collectively in solving community problems and needs. Moreover, the district government believes that with the clear definition of village authority supported by adequate amounts of fiscal transfer, the villages can manage local matters such as the maintenance of village offices, streets, irrigations, prayer houses, and administrative costs including village officials' salary.⁶ Based on a new formula, the district government makes different fiscal transfers to individual villages.⁷ The village office (i.e. the village head) receives the transfer through a local bank. After the change, the minimum fiscal transfer to a village jumped from Rp 20 million (US \$2,222) in 2000 to Rp 104 million (US \$ 11,555) in 2006.

On the face of it, the decentralization process is going just as envisioned by its champions. Powers are now vested with district governments, and they are collaborating with civil society organizations to incorporate local preferences into village and district plans. Further, greater amount of funds are now trickling down to the village level, and with the necessary institutional infrastructure in place, it is expected that the process of development should largely be in the interests of poor and marginal sections of rural society. In spite of appearances, however, the patronage-based system of distribution of favors and largesse continues to dominate the administration of development in much of Indonesia in general and Bandung district in particular, to the detriment of the intended beneficiaries of decentralization (Bebbington et al., 2006). The role of civil society organizations involved in the process is crucial to understanding this 'changing continuity' in Indonesia (Schulte Nordholt, 2004), and it is their historical origins that we turn to in the next section. The process of state formation through patrimonial relationships between the state and rural elites, started in the colonial period and consolidated during the Suharto regime, is central to an understanding of the complicity of civil society in the failure of democratic decentralization to benefit the poor in

⁶ Interview with Assistant I to *bupati*, 2 March 2004.

⁷ During the Suharto regime, the villages in Bandung received the same amount of fiscal transfer for the upkeep of village household matters. The formula for determining the amount of fiscal transfer is based on variables such as the number of the population, land areas, types of industries, length of roads, etc.

Indonesia.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF VILLAGE OFFICIALS

‘Discovery’ of the Villages

Most countries in Southeast Asia underwent intensive state formation under the rule of colonizing powers of the West. Before the advent of European colonial states, political power of native states tended to be dispersed, fragmented, and localized; thus they lacked the concept of territorial integrity (Reid, 1998; Steinberg, 1987). Demography prevented the centralization of political power; with a low man-land ratio, the first principle of statecraft in Southeast Asia was control over population rather than land (Adas, 1981: 223; Scott, 1998: 185-186). In Southeast Asia, the advent of colonial states based on territorial rule gave concrete shape to amorphous communities, fixing populations down in settlements in order to facilitate surplus extraction (Li, 1999; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995). State formation through territorialization was to make legible resources located within territorial spaces (Scott, 1998). While native chiefs were incorporated into the state apparatus, the villages were instituted as the lowest rung of territorial administration. Colonial states maintained the autonomy of the villages by transferring power to their interlocutors while domesticating local populations under the principle of non-interference in native affairs. In so doing, colonial states imagined the villages as closed organic communities where social relations revolved around by the logic of reciprocity, unity, and harmony.

As will be shown, however, the image of the closed organic community cannot be taken at the face value. Just as the ‘self-regulating’ market economy was enforced by the state (Polanyi, 1944), the maintenance of the organic structure of the village required more than autonomy. Ironically, the principle of non-interference had to be accompanied by the whole gamut of regulations. Nowhere is this more evident than the process of state formation at the grassroots in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. During the interregnum period (1808-16), the French and British undermined the authority of native chiefs (*bupatis*) whom they believed were pro-Dutch, and abandoned the principle of non-interference in favor of reaching directly the population. British Lieutenant-Governor Raffles (1811-16) introduced a new revenue system called the land-rent system, whereby the colonial state made claims to all land, and demanded that rent be paid in cash. Raffles placed village heads in charge of collecting dues directly from the population. The land-rent system required the creation of the village head as both rural representative and state agent to make the system work.⁸

To this end, Raffles ‘discovered’ the institution of elective village heads, which he regarded inherent in Javanese society and, more importantly, compatible with his new revenue system. As he puts it, ‘the right of election on the part of the people, gives to them so much real liberty, and is an institution apparently so peculiar to this Island, and so congenial to the genius and principles of British Government’ (Raffles, 1814: 113,

⁸ Before the introduction of land rent, the institution of the village head as representative of the local community was unknown (Breman, 1982: 197).

cited in Furnivall, 1939: 79). The discovery of elective village heads was a happy discovery because elective village heads served as the representative of villagers and simultaneously, the agent of the state (Furnivall, 1939: 70).⁹ The historical anthropologist Breman (1982: 201) concludes, ‘the village as a collective unity did not antedate the colonial state but is rather the product of it; as a result of a process of localization and horizontalization that manifested itself during the course of the nineteenth century’.

Upon returning to Java, the Dutch realized that social order was disrupted by the weakening of native chiefs’ authority. With the outbreak of the Java War (1825-30) and introduction of the cultivation system (1830-70), Dutch Governor-General Van den Bosch (1830-1833) saw the restoration of traditional influence and prestige of *bupatis* as the key to social order. It was done by reviving ‘customary’ practices such as hereditary office, appanage, and communal land (Furnivall 1939: 126)¹⁰. The incorporation of *bupatis* into the colonial bureaucracy created the native territorial administrative corps, shifted the basis of their power from their followers to the colonial state, encouraging upward accountability to the colonial state rather than downward accountability to local communities. Furnivall (1939: 139-40) concludes, ‘his [Van den Bosch] policy was to strengthen the regents and leave the villages, “the little republics”, under their own heads with as little interferences as possible’.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the principle of non-interference became increasingly at odds with the spirit of the age—liberalism. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, administrative departments were established in order to make the headway for the European corporate capital and to provide legal services and economic and social infrastructures mainly for the European community (Furnivall, 1939: 189, 265-66). While the customary claims of *bupatis* were denied in favor of the European capital, the villages assumed importance as the lever by which the state raised supplies of land and labor (Furnivall, 1939: 217).

REORGANIZING HEGEMONIC POWER IN INDEPENDENT INDONESIA

With the gradual expansion of the modern state and economy, the fate of native chiefs became dependent upon the state. Deprived of political power and incorporated into the state apparatus, native chiefs and village elites were rendered state agents whose interests were more congruent with those of the Dutch than the population. Thus, the centralization of state power was the main cause of avoidance protests staged by the native population in Java (Adas, 1981). In Banten, West Java, for instance, the Communist party in alliance with discontent local influentials—Islamic leaders and local thugs—led the uprising of 1926 to counter the hegemonic power of the Dutch and their indigenous partners (Williams, 1985). Despite the initial outbreak of violence against them, the indigenous aristocracy survived, and repositioned themselves, be it under the Dutch or a new republic of Indonesia (Magenda, 1989).

⁹ Later, as a part of the standardization of village government, the Dutch instituted the system of elective village heads throughout Java.

¹⁰ Even the Dutch admitted that the principle of heredity was an innovation that found no support in the Javanese customary law (Schrieke, 1955: 188).

State formation in independent Indonesia was shaped by the wholehearted efforts of *pamong praja* to preserve the core structure of colonial rule that served their interests (Sutherland, 1979). Just as the Dutch constructed ‘tradition’ to maintain social order, *pamong praja*—members of the native administrative corps—used the concept of ‘organicism’, which rests on the claim that it reflects the indigenous patterns of social organization (Bourchier, 1996). Nowhere is this more evident than in the creation of the 1945 Constitution. Supomo, the principal author of the 1945 Constitution and the eldest son of a Javanese aristocratic family, saw the emergence of leaders of the nationalist movement and political Islam as a threat to the social structure preserved under colonial rule, and suggested basing the political system of the future state on the indigenous system of ‘integralist’ state—harmony, consensus and a unity between rulers and ruled. Bourchier (1996: 80) concludes, ‘what Supomo wanted more than anything was to preserve the aristocracy-linked administrative apparatus of the colonial era intact’.

After successfully defending their socio-political status in the Constitution, *pamong praja* emerged organizationally intact, and organized the Department of Internal Affairs into a leading national institution in which they occupied key positions by the end of the independence struggle against the returning Dutch (Magenda, 1989: 15). *Pamong praja* also flourished by assuming leadership in the state-sponsored party Golkar in the Suharto regime, establishing an alliance with the army, and continuing to supervise the local bureaucracy (Magenda, 1989: 61). Under the Suharto regime, *pamong praja* further consolidated their political power. After his victory at the general election in 1971, Suharto established the hierarchical structure of local administration—province, district, subdistrict, and village—whose heads were appointed by and accountable to the President. By establishing an effective administrative system, the regime mobilized popular support while undermining the role of other political parties. The anti-politics mobilization at the grassroots thus relied on village leadership. In the Broad Outlines of State Policy of 1978, the Suharto regime recognized the important role of the villages: ‘Strengthen *desa* [village] administration so that [we will be] more competent to mobilize society in its participation in development and to run *desa* administration increasingly more extensively and efficiently’ (cited from Kato, 1989: 92).

In 1979, the regime’s ambitions culminated in the creation of Law on Village Government, which made rural life identifiable and accessible to the center by standardizing the structure and functions of village government. The village office functioned as the forefront of the state, exercising such powers as administering government documents, conducting socio-economic surveys of every household, implementing state projects (agricultural intensification, family planning, etc.), and policing communal problems. Historically, the work of village officials has been remunerated by land grants. Village officials have used this land to enter into share-cropping arrangements within the village, forming the foundation for the patron-client relationship that goes well beyond the economic relations—i.e. mobilizing villagers at the grassroots for their socio-political interests.¹¹ On top of this remuneration,

¹¹ During the Suharto era, village heads were ‘elected’ by villagers. However, candidates were screened by district governments. Candidates had to pass the fit-and-proper test and interview by

their work has also been rewarded by various types of state patronage—commissions from various government activities.

At election time, the villages became the unit of electoral mobilization. While political parties were banned from organizing activities at the village level, the state-sponsored political party Golkar was allowed to mobilize villagers with the village head acting as the agent of the party. A former village head in Namiwari village told, ‘the higher the percentage, the more generous the district government became’.¹² The district government generously rewarded the villages which earned high percentages of Golkar votes. Nonetheless, due to the inequalities of agrarian structure, the bulk of benefits of state-led village development such as agricultural credit (*Bimas*) and infrastructure projects (*Inpres*) went to large farmers including village officials who controlled village office land (Husken and White, 1989: 253).¹³ The village heads were ‘enforcers of local order, dispensers of state resources, vote brokers for Golkar—to enhance their strategies of political entrenchment and private capital accumulation’ (Sidel, 2004: 65).

PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION

When it comes to the efficient provision of public services, working with CSOs is an appealing choice to the district government whose increasing responsibilities were not always accompanied by corresponding budget increases (McCarthy, 2004: 1219). In developing the new mechanism of participatory planning, the Regional Planning Board in Bandung worked closely with the Indonesia Partnership for Governance Initiatives (IPGI). IPGI, with its reputation as a capable CSO which had successfully reconciled government-community conflicts, was established in January 2001 by some former alumni of the City Planning Department of the Bandung Institute of Technology to further local governance reforms at the district level.¹⁴ IPGI sought to create synergy between government and civil society; while IPGI offers conceptual frameworks, the district government implements them.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in 1999, a group of village heads established the League of Village Heads (IKDL) in Bandung to ‘strengthen the relationship between villagers, village heads, and the district government’, and was subsequently reconstituted under the All Indonesian Association of Village Governments (APDESI) in 2002. Members of Village Councils and Village Development Boards followed suit. APDESI has the national secretariat with

district governments. Thus, most elected village heads were pro-government.

¹² Interview with a former village head, 6 August 2006.

¹³ Husken and White argue that this type of patrimonial politics was necessary as a result of the dissipation of the short-lived alliance of the army, Muslims, and urban intellectuals who had combined to oust Sukarno and crush the Communist party. ‘State patronage of this group of larger landholders ... has in turn eased the problem of political control in rural areas, which even a large military and police presence cannot accomplish without civilian allies in a rural population of some seventy million’ (Husken and White, 1989: 253).

¹⁴ IPGI was an internationally funded CSO. It received funds from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

¹⁵ Interview with the Director of the Regional Planning Board, 4 March 2004.

subnational branches at every level of the administrative unit. These interest groups/organizations representing various kinds of village elites as well as present and former village officials are the main civil society organizations that were involved in implementing local governance reforms in Bandung.

World Bank conditionalities associated with democratic decentralization in Bandung have enabled participation of CSOs in the policy process. In practice, however, the district government has chosen to work with interest groups of village elites for the sake of administrative efficiency. This institutional choice has undermined downward accountability of democratic institutions. First, the current electoral system does not allow villagers to censure the village heads. While villagers elect them, only *bupatis* can remove them. As will be shown below, the collaboration with village elites interest groups has been accompanied by a set of public decisions to devolve power and resources to their members—incumbent village officials. Second, since democratic decentralization, village officials have become more economically dependent on the district government. Traditionally, village officials have been remunerated by their privileged access to village official land; they were not on the state payroll. Now they receive a greater proportion of salaries from the government. The financial dependence on the state has only increased village official upward accountability to the state.

Third, there are no measures against which their performance can be evaluated (Fowler, 1996: 174). While Assistant I praises the development of popular participation in the policy process, it is not clear whose interests IPGI and the village government interest groups represent. In the absence of mechanisms for downward accountability of the CSOs, decentralization of power and resources has only served to transform CSOs into a mere ‘tool’ for local and international decision-makers to achieve certain objectives in their agendas (Edwards and Hulme, 1996b).

‘Changing Continuity’ in Patronage Politics

The 1999 disintegration of the Suharto single-party dominant system gave rise to a competitive multiparty system. Suharto’s Golkar party’s national vote share plummeted from 74 per cent in 1997 to 22 per cent in 1999 and 21.5 per cent in 2004. In Bandung, Golkar is the largest party in the local parliament with 15 seats (33 per cent), and the *bupati* is the district chair of Golkar. Nonetheless, the political situation is not certain as the 2005 direct *bupati* election demonstrated, when the *bupati*-vice *bupati* pair won by a margin of 1.69 per cent. With the demise of the centralized system of patronage politics, the key for local elected officials to stay in power is to renew patrimonial ties with critical interlocutors in rural areas. The village heads are no longer required to show loyalty to Golkar, and are being approached by other political parties for their influence.

As we have seen, state formation in rural Indonesia proceeded historically upon patronage politics as the primary basis of regulating social, political, and economic relations within the villages. Under colonial rule, public officeholders maintained patrimonial ties with rural populations as a way to make rural life identifiable and accessible. The case of Bandung shows, this logic is still true of the institutional choices by the district government under democratic decentralization: they are designed to make

the villages work for the state. District politicians need to raise revenue and support from their constituencies, giving rise to the new patterns of ‘decentralized corruption, rule by predatory local officials, the rise of money politics and the consolidation of political gangsterism’ (Hadiz, 2004: 711). Hadiz (2004: 711) concludes that ‘predatory interests nurtured under the Suharto regime’s formerly vast, centralized system of patronage, which extended from the Presidential palace in Jakarta down to the provinces, towns and villages, has largely survived and remain intact’.

Although patronage politics remains the rule of thumb, however, the transition to multi-party democracy has re-shaped the political strategies of local officeholders. For district officeholders, with the disintegration of the centralized system of state patronage and rise of political competition, establishing patrimonial ties with the villages has become more important than getting institutions right. In the context of the discourse on the positive role of civil society in democracy, the interest groups of village elites provide an ideal avenue to reconcile the need to construct and maintain patrimonial ties with villages with the rhetoric of civil society.

The collaboration between the district government and the village government interest groups has grown stronger. Their collaboration developed into one of the district government’s local governance reform initiatives—the new mechanism for the devolution of power and resources to the villages. The members of the village government interest groups were invited to town meetings, workshops, dialogues, training camps, and study tours to express their views. In such occasions, the district government uses letters to extend invitation to ‘stakeholders’ whom the district government considers important. On other occasions, some key members of the village government interest groups are present every day in several district government offices in charge of village affairs, and exchange information very informally with district government officials. The members were also invited to *bupati*’s private residence for social gathering two months before the first direct *bupati* election of 2005.

The most tangible effect of the institutional choice of collaborating with interest groups of village elites is the remarkable improvements in village officials’ material well being. Their lobbying resulted in increasing the flow of subsidies to the villages. Disbursements for the upkeep of village administration went up from Rp 20 million (US \$ 2,222) in 2000 to Rp 104 million per village (US \$ 11,555) in 2005. In addition, the villages received development projects such as rehabilitation of school buildings, social welfare projects such as emergency funds for pregnant mothers, and since the Asian economic crisis of 1997 distribution of subsidized rice. All of these aid projects are controlled by village officials who decide how to allocate the funds to villagers. Not surprisingly, as in the Suharto regime, the benefits of such increased development aid go disproportionately to village elites. Evidence from Namiwari village reveals that subsidized rice does not reach the intended target; while the poor can buy subsidized rice, the rich also enjoy the same benefits. According to a village official, the necessity of rice is the same for all households regardless of income.

In April 2006, village officials organized protests, demanding a pay raise (*Pikiran Rakyat*,

12 April 2006). Similar movements have been happening in other parts of Indonesia. Organized under the Village Head Association (APDESI) or other organizations, village officials in Semarang, Central Java (Suara Merdeka, 2005), Purworejo, Central Java (KOMPAS, 2004), Bangka Belitung (KOMPAS, 2006) have also demanded the improvements of their welfare (e.g. salary raises, extension of term to ten years, etc). Village officials have also organized themselves at the national level, demanding the right of village officials to join a political party, currently banned by law (KOMPAS, 5 April 2006). Capitalizing on the political situation, village elites have captured the initiative to corner the benefits from decentralization while posing as civil society at the same time.

Decentralization and Participation

In the rainy season of 2004, we had a lot of rain. When it rained, it poured down. Even the paved main street in the village was flooded at least once a week. The unpaved roads became muddy and uncontrollable. In the village, most roads are still unpaved. On a rainy day, villagers hesitate to go to work because they do not want to splash mud all over their clean-ironed pants. One day, the village head was on his beige official motorcycle on an unpaved road running through green rice fields. In the middle of the road, he got a flat tire, and had to stop. Villagers who do not participate in village development meetings thought this would be a great opportunity to say something about their wishes. Villagers who passed by jokingly suggested to him, ‘Mr. Headman, it is time to fix the road’.

Author’s field notes, Namiwari Village

The World Bank has used the term ‘symbiotic’ to describe the presumed link (at least in theory) between decentralization and participation.¹⁶ Contrary to the ‘symbiotic’ relationship presumed by the World Bank, the links between village officials and villagers are better described as predatory. Despite the new mechanisms of participatory planning instituted by democratic decentralization, villagers are unable to participate in village development meetings, relying instead on chance occasions such as the headman’s flat tire to communicate their needs.

The result is not surprising when we recall that participation takes place in relations of power (Gaventa, 1980; Mosse, 1996). Traditionally, village meetings have been organized and attended by village officials and informal leaders. The village office sends formal letters to invite these village elites. One of the obstacles to villagers’ participation is the formal setting in which the village development meeting takes place. Although the village office is required to encourage villagers from all walks of life—landless peasants, factory workers, and women—to participate in the development meeting, many villagers do not feel encouraged to attend the development meeting because it is no different than other village meetings organized by the village office. Villagers feel out of the place if they do not have an invitation letter. Some villagers said, ‘I am not invited’, and ‘I do not have an invitation letter’. Villagers have internalized their secondary role, and calibrate their rights to participate based on their socio-economic status in the village; ‘I am not

¹⁶ See the World Bank’s Decentralization and Regional Economics website. <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/political.htm>

qualified to participate because I did not finish [elementary] school'. Most village elites—especially younger generation—have the minimum educational level of high school or higher. Formal education is a consequence of wellbeing in the village; sons and daughters of village elites are more likely to finish their education. The formal setting implicitly makes villagers conscious of social class to meet several standards to be able to participate in the development meeting.

Moreover, the introduction of the village council has proved unable not only to check the power of the village head but also to bridge the gap between village officials and villagers. While the village head and the village council are popularly elected, their authority derives from their patrimonial ties to the state apparatus as in the economic dependence of the village. And village officials used them to accumulate petit capital which in turn enables them to maintain their privileged status within the village. Therefore, despite the new mechanism of participatory planning, village officials are indifferent to the idea of participation.¹⁷ Village officials, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to exclude villagers from the decision-making process. Village meetings are held on weekdays—discouraging attendance. In the case of a large village, attending a village meeting from geographically peripheries is burdensome because villagers have to spend money for transportation. In Namiwari village, the village office has never held the village development meeting as prescribed. In 2003, the village headman invited secretary, village council members, and informal leaders to discuss the expenditure of the village budget, and created a list of development projects. In 2004, the village headman did not even hold the village development meeting, and submitted the last year's list of village development projects to the subdistrict government. Interestingly, village development projects endorsed by village elites are different from villagers' wishes. Village elites tend to suggest large infrastructure projects such as the rehabilitation of schools, irrigation, and village office, and the construction of roads from which they can seek a bulk of rents. For villagers, however, such large infrastructure projects are not necessarily high priorities. For instance, agricultural laborers are less concerned with improving irrigations than landlords. Similarly, villagers who do not own motorbikes or cars are less interested in maintaining roads. Rather, they express needs related to their everyday lives such as funds to pave back allies, to run Islamic mini-schools (*madrassa*), and to build houses for elderly widows. 'Participatory' planning has failed to incorporate the preferences of the poor.

The practice of democracy in Indonesia appears to be moving forward. A democratic regime has been established, power and resources have been devolved, village councils have been empowered. Despite all these developments, power relations within the village seem to be unaffected.¹⁸ As noted earlier, the gap between village officials and villagers

¹⁷ It was not because the village office was not familiar with the new mechanism. The village office is aware of the new mechanism of participatory planning introduced by the district government. The main village administrators such as the village head, village secretary, and the village council were able to show me how it works at the village, subdistrict, and district levels.

¹⁸ In Namiwari village, a few elite families continue to dominate key village office positions, which allow them to maintain political power as negotiators with the state and to accumulate capital which is even connected to the global economy.

has been historically shaped by the structure of dualism which served to create cultural barriers (see Wolf, 1957). Similarly, in the making of a marginal culture, as Tsing (1993) shows, local leaders of hill people in Kalimantan based their power on the state-sanctioned dualism by playing the intermediary role between the center and periphery. More importantly for the purpose of the present study, this dualism constructed for the functional and territorial purposes is being legitimated by the dominant discourse about democratic decentralization. Most district officeholders in Bandung think that communicating with village officials is far easier than with villagers; village officials are viewed as 'progressive', 'rational', and 'knowledgeable' while villagers as 'backward', 'naïve', and 'ignorant' (see Wertheim, 1964: 259-277). In the eyes of government officials, villagers are not the partner but target of rural development. The changes have only served to increase the salience of village elites in local politics, even as a minimalist definition of democratic decentralization promoted by donors and international aid agencies has been put in place.

CONCLUSION

This article questions the discourse about democratic decentralization in which power and resources are uncritically devolved to local institutions with civil society as an equal partner. Donors, international aid agencies, and recipient governments think alike; the villages are 'organic' communities where traditional ways of organizing themselves are still practiced. 'Discovering' such traditional practices and empowering them is regarded as congenial to building civil society, which has occupied the center stage of international aid policy.

But, the Indonesian case shows that throughout the state formation process, the villages have been the spheres where the state has constructed its hegemony in alliance with village elites. In order to make rural life accessible and identifiable for the center, the colonial state relied on rural elites who functioned to link the state and villagers. The maintenance of the 'organic' structure of the villages was accompanied by the whole gamut of regulations which served to construct the images of 'traditional', 'customary', and 'hereditary' power. After the dissolution of the Suharto regime, the state ability to control the villages diminished dramatically. The vacuum was soon filled by transferring power and resources to village officials incubated in the dense webs of state patronage under the Suharto regime.

Against this backdrop, devolving power and resources to village officials simply renews the existing patrimonial ties because the conservative course of state formation has kept patronage politics as the primary model of regulating social, political, and economic relations within the villages. Neither organizational forms nor institutional designs alone (for instance decentralized form of government) are synonymous with 'good governance'. Institutional choices and outcomes do not simply get constructed by the stated objectives but are shaped by the complexity of power relations between state actors and social forces. Gramsci (1971) reminds us of the importance of patrimonial ties that have bound state and society for the maintenance of the status quo.

The experience of Indonesia illustrates the complexity of the relationship between decentralization and the empowerment of villagers. Physical proximity does not explain why accountability does not work. As the case of Namiwari village has shown, bringing governments closer to villagers failed to encourage the participation of villagers in village meetings. Instead, for the sake of administrative efficiency and political calculation, power and resources have been devolved to village officials who are organized under the village government interest groups. The institutional choice by the district government can never be fully understood without taking history into account; village officials have been reliable partners while villagers are the targets of state formation. One consequence is that it undermined village officials' downward accountability, and prevented villagers from using their guaranteed rights to participate in decision making and ultimately to hold village officials accountable.

By failing to take power and history into account, the current use of the concept of civil society in the global discourse of democratic decentralization serves to help legitimate a profoundly antidemocratic politics.

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- To expand participation in environmental decisions, we collaborate with partners worldwide to increase people's access to information and influence over decisions about natural resources;
- To avert dangerous climate change, we promote public and private action to ensure a safe climate and sound world economy; and
- To increase prosperity while improving the environment, we challenge the private sector to grow by improving environmental and community well-being.

Institutions and Governance Program

WRI's Institutions and Governance Program addresses the social and political dimensions of environmental challenges, and explores the equity implications of alternative environmental management regimes. IGP aspires to inform environmental policy arenas with analyses of why apparently sound technical and economic solutions to environmental problems often fail to be implemented, and to generate and promote ideas for how constraints to such solutions can be lifted. The program's principal, although not exclusive, focus is on developing and transition countries, and the representation of the interests of those countries in global environmental policy areas. For more information, please visit <http://www.wri.org/governance>.



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