Vedi R. Hadiz

*Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia Perspective.*


Vedi Hadiz’s uncompromising exposé of decentralization and democracy in post-authoritarian Indonesia has already become something of a classic. With its grim litany of ‘predatory interests’, ‘money politics’, ‘political thuggery’, and ‘illiberal democracy’, *Localising Power* has inspired many other accounts of the Reformasi period and provided an important part of their analytical vocabulary. Its central claim is that instead of creating accountability, efficiency, and social capital, the decentralization of political power after 1998 led mostly to decentralized forms of corrupt, predatory politics. Its central aim is to explain this catastrophic betrayal of the promise of Reformasi.

As a documentary record of how local democracy was ‘hijacked’ by ‘entrenched’ elites, *Localising Power* surely succeeds. Hadiz shows how former New Order bureaucrats have continued to dominate local assemblies, alongside an increasing number of entrepreneurs who invest in campaigns for public office in the hope of recouping their outlays by means of lucrative contracts, permits, and monopolies. The shadowy apparatus of gangsters and militias which acted as extensions of the New Order state also persisted in the post-Soeharto era, its components now often linking themselves to parties other than Golkar in order to maximize their rent-seeking opportunities in the new democratic environment. Political parties failed to develop close links with labour or peasant organizations, which continued to suffer repression at the hands of politically connected thugs. Party programmes and ideologies remained peripheral to the practice of local democracy, which was dominated by rent-seeking, vote-buying, and intimidation.

A useful practical aspect of the book is the way it brings together a range of quantitative estimates regarding the impact of various types of local corruption on business activity. Here Hadiz follows Andrew MacIntyre and other recent authors on Indonesia in arguing that the competitive, disorganized corruption of the democratic era is intrinsically more damaging to the economy than was the organized, predictable corruption of the Soeharto period.

When it comes to his etiology or diagnosis of all these afflictions, Hadiz is perhaps less convincing. His attempt to blame them on the tenacious legacy of New Order authoritarianism would be more persuasive if he had compared Indonesian patterns of local corruption and predation with those found in developing countries which have not experienced prolonged authoritarian rule, such as India. He may well be underestimating the role of much older cul-
tural norms. Like Daniel Arghiros, whose work on Thailand he refers to several times, Hadiz belongs to that small group of scholars of Southeast Asia who have looked unflinchingly at seamy realities of democratic practice such as vote-buying. Unlike Arghiros, however, Hadiz is not sensitive to the ethical foundation of vote-buying in a traditional morality of reciprocity and gift exchange. In a secret ballot, after all, vote-buying would be useless if voters did not feel ethically obliged to vote for the candidates whose gifts they had received. Here and elsewhere, Hadiz does not always justify his preference for some particular explanations or interpretations above others.

Reading Localising Power in 2014, with the benefit of a certain amount of hindsight, prompts an obvious critical question. Can Hadiz’s dark portrait of early post-Soeharto local politics be reconciled with the subsequent rise to national power of Joko Widodo, with his clean image and strong good governance agenda, via those same organs of local democracy about which Hadiz is so cynical? If so, then either Jokowi is simply a very lucky exception to the rule, or he is very far from being what he now seems to most Indonesians. Perhaps time will tell.

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