



Governing urban Indonesia

edited by Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2024, xix + 335 pp., £22.90 (pbk), ISBN 9789815203714

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BOOK REVIEW

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Since 2007, the world has witnessed a significant shift, with the urban population surpassing the rural population and growing at a faster pace. This experience has been particularly acute in countries across the Global South, including Indonesia. By 2012, Indonesia had become predominantly urban (Mardiansjah, Rahayu, and Rukmana 2021). The profound transformation in the country's spatial, economic and social landscape has presented both opportunities and challenges for urban governance.

Governing Urban Indonesia offers diverse analyses of Indonesia's social transition, tackling the pressing question of how urbanization is remaking the nation's politics and governance. By bringing together fourteen chapters from nineteen scholars and practitioners, this book is a significant contribution for academics and observers of urbanization in the largest country of South East Asia. It illuminates how Indonesian cities have become key arenas shaping democratic practices, public policy and socio-economic change. The chapters in this book were presented at a conference at the Australian National University in September 2023, followed by publication in 2024, and I wrote this review in April 2025. This timeline allows me to contextualize this book against the backdrop of the recent presidential transition in Indonesia, from Joko Widodo to Prabowo Subianto.

The main purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive and politically grounded analysis of how Indonesia's rapid urbanization is reshaping governance, highlighting both the persistent structural challenges and the emergent possibilities for reform across diverse urban landscapes of Indonesia. The editors provide a clear thematic roadmap in their introduction, grouping the discussion around four major governance challenges and responses. These themes progress logically: from the classic problems of urban service delivery and infrastructure to political obstacles that exacerbate those problems, to the emergence of reformist leadership and, finally, to the persistent and growing urban inequality that complicates democratic governance.

Abidin Kusno, one of the most prominent scholars on urban Indonesia, provides a historical overview of urban development in Indonesia (Chapter 2) and an insightful analysis of how the interests of political elites and property developers have long influenced spatial planning, often at the expense of equitable urban development and the needs of ordinary residents. In Chapter 3, Meirina Ayumi Malamassam and Luh Kitty Katherina discuss an important aspect of urbanization, namely how the reclassification of rural areas as urban has outpaced governance capacity, leading to fragmented planning and service delivery. Chapter 4 by Sonia Roitman investigates poverty, informality and planning challenges in Indonesian cities. Next, Erman Rahman, Ihsan Haerudin and Ronaldo Octaviano explore the fiscal and institutional limitations faced by local governments, arguing that many urban districts lack the resources and administrative readiness to manage complex urban growth effectively (Chapter 5).

Mochammad Mustafa (Chapter 6) offers a comprehensive analysis of role of civil society in shaping urban governance in three Indonesian cities: Surabaya, Bogor and South Tangerang. His chapter underscores the vibrancy and organization of civil society as critical determinants of effective urban governance. In the following two chapters, Corry Elyda examines the rise of

gated communities and discusses infrastructure, political and social gaps in Jakarta's periphery (Chapter 7), and Clara Siagian discusses the precarious life in Jakarta's rental social housing (Chapter 8). I found their analytical perspectives very convincing, adding nuance to our understanding of urban life by highlighting how middle-class lifestyle enclaves and protracted housing crises are reshaping social relations in the city.

This book also provides compelling examinations of three acute urban problems in Indonesian cities: flood (Chapter 9, by Yogi Setya Perman), solid waste (Chapter 10, by Nur Azizah) and traffic congestion (Chapter 11, by Muhammad Halley Yudhistira and Andhika Putra Pratama). These chapters show how urban governance challenges are deeply shaped by political and institutional dynamics. Flood governance in Jakarta is hindered by fragmented authority, which obstructs long-term planning and coordination. In contrast, Surabaya's success in solid waste management is attributed to strong local leadership and active community participation. Meanwhile, persistent traffic congestion in major cities like Jakarta is shown to stem from weak policy enforcement and a continued bias toward car-centric planning. I found many critical discussions in these chapters that highlight the urgent need for more accountable, coordinated and citizen-responsive urban governance in Indonesia.

Rita Padawangi (Chapter 12) explores the contestation over public space in Indonesian cities, emphasizing how urban transformation often marginalizes vulnerable communities. She discusses how spaces that once served communal or inclusive purposes are increasingly commercialized or securitized, limiting access for the urban poor and informal groups. Her argument, that public space is not only physical but also politically shaped by power relations, state policies and citizen resistance, is commendable. Indonesian cities need to reclaim public space as a site of democratic engagement and social justice.

Chapter 13 by Ian Wilson examines urban security governance in Jakarta, focusing on how order is maintained through a combination of formal policing, informal networks and vigilante groups. I found many important and insightful discussions in his chapter. He argues that security practices often reinforce social hierarchies and exclude marginalized populations, especially the urban poor. Political elites, local strongmen and security actors collaborate in managing urban space, resulting in uneven enforcement and the criminalization of informality.

The last chapter of this book, by Bima Arya Sugiarto, offers an intriguing analysis of his experience as the mayor of Bogor City from 2014 to 2024. The chapter discusses his challenges of navigating political dynamics, bureaucratic resistance and public expectations while implementing reforms in areas such as transparency, infrastructure and citizen engagement. He advocates for a governance approach that builds trust and fosters collaboration between government and civil society.

In sum, the book's arguments and cases advance knowledge by linking Indonesia's urban phenomena to broader questions of democracy, governance and social change in ways not previously synthesized in one work. The quality of evidence throughout *Governing Urban Indonesia* is high, underpinning the book's claims with robust empirical data and field-based research. Contributors draw on a rich array of sources: official statistics, surveys, historical archives, policy documents and interviews. Aspinall and Savirani's collection is deeply engaged with the existing literature and theoretical debates, situating Indonesian urban governance in a broader scholarly context, especially concerning the Global South. The contributors consistently enter into dialogue with key theories of urbanization, governance and development. Moreover, this book does not treat Indonesia in isolation; it draws parallels to urban phenomena in other parts of the world, especially in the Global South.

Governing Urban Indonesia arrives at a pivotal moment as the country transitions from President Joko Widodo's decade-long administration, marked by major urban infrastructure projects, to that of Prabowo Subianto. This book was written during the final years of Joko Widodo's term in office, a period characterized by growing concerns over the decline of democratization, driven by the rise of dynastic politics and the entrenchment of oligarchic power (Asfar, Wicaksana, and Asfar 2024; Muradi and Silas 2024). As Indonesia transitions to Prabowo Subianto's leadership, this volume offers critical insights into how urban politics operate amid weakening democratic institutions, rising dynastic politics and constrained civic space – trends likely to persist and intensify in the coming years.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Governing Urban Indonesia* is its relevance to policymakers, urban planners and governance reform advocates – in Indonesia and beyond. The discussions have direct applicability to real-world urban governance challenges. The volume vividly illustrates that many urban problems are not merely technical; they are fundamentally political, requiring institutional reforms and accountability. This book provides models that reform-minded officials can study. *Governing Urban Indonesia* serves as a valuable guide for anyone committed to fostering more livable, equitable and well-governed cities in Indonesia and in comparable settings around the world.

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