

BOOK REVIEWS

***Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism and the State in Indonesia.* By Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019). Softcover: 308pp.**

Since the end of President Soeharto's New Order regime, transactional politics has become prevalent in Indonesia. Politicians try to win elections using community brokers and bargain over cash or other material rewards in exchange for electoral votes. These practices occur not only within "formal" institutions, i.e. political parties, but increasingly outside parties through informal, ad hoc or freewheeling deals. While these clientelistic practices have become more common and entrenched, the authors of this book note that this practice, especially its determinants and variations, remains relatively understudied. *Democracy for Sale* tries to fill this literature gap by examining how clientelistic exchanges are organized in practice and how they vary in nature and intensity across Indonesia's large and diverse political landscape.

Placing informal or clientelistic politics at the centre of its analysis, the book looks at how such practices play out in Indonesia in comparison with other large democracies such as India and Argentina. Its main argument is that the informal politics of clientelism and patronage is critical in explaining why democratization in Indonesia has failed to eradicate widespread corruption (p. 250). The authors describe how election campaigns have become very expensive for aspiring and incumbent politicians due to pervasive clientelistic practices. As a consequence, when they are elected as state officials, they tend to act corruptly, thus undermining the institutions of the state (p. 250). Elections, therefore, are deemed as a sale of state power, in which whoever has money and privileged access to state resources stands a greater chance of winning. This is why clientelistic politics (or informal politics) worsen social inequality

(pp. 250–51). It might also be responsible for many developmental challenges in Indonesia, such as environmental degradation, poor spatial planning and inadequate public services (p. 13). As such, uncovering the workings of clientelistic politics is important for the remediation of governance challenges in Indonesia.

The book employs an innovative method of analysis by combining extensive ethnographic research with quantitative methods. The authors draw on a lengthy period of fieldwork during 2013–14 and an expert survey with 509 local observers, including academics, journalists, campaign organizers and non-governmental organization (NGO) activists in thirty-eight districts across Indonesia. The survey aims to assess how clientelistic practices are perceived across regions with different social and economic characteristics. The authors then present an innovative Clientelism Perception Index (CPI). As the book rightly points out, clientelistic practices manifest themselves in many different forms. They might involve either monetary or non-monetary rewards to buy votes, including the distribution of various state resources. In this book, CPI is measured using seven categories of clientelistic practices: public services, welfare programmes, contracts, jobs, licenses, social assistance funds and vote buying (p. 235). However, given the complexity and variations in clientelistic practices, it is difficult to interpret the index when different forms of clientelistic practices are combined into a single index. One might wonder whether the authors are indeed comparing like with like, since they equate granting government jobs with providing social welfare programmes to the community.

The CPI is measured based on “expert assessments”, which means that it reflects the selective view of a small group of people about clientelistic practices in their respective regions. The selection of experts may generate biases. For instance, if the expert making the assessments is an NGO activist, then his/her assessments may be biased. Similarly, an expert’s cultural background and social understanding of corruption may influence their responses. For example, an expert who has a high moral standard might determine that his/her district is rife with clientelistic practices and thus assign a high score to the district. Meanwhile, an expert from another cultural background might rate the same district with a lower score.

Moreover, the authors then ranked the thirty-eight districts based on their respective calculated CPI. The lowest-scoring district, Surabaya, was considered as the least clientelistic district, while Kupang was identified as the most clientelistic. However, this method of ranking may prompt readers to question the fairness of ranking thirty-eight

very disparate districts. There are significant variations between the selected districts, including their sizes. For instance, while some districts like Jakarta, Surabaya and Bandung are megacities, others such as Jayawijaya, Manggarai and Sinjai are small regencies with populations of less than 300,000. As such, it may have been more meaningful if the authors had selected districts of similar sizes in terms of economy and population for the comparison of their clientelistic practices.

There is also an issue with the regression (pp. 242–43). All the variables associated with the cost and constraint perspective are not significant in the multivariate models (p. 243). This indicates a severe multicollinearity problem as some control variables are possibly correlated. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the predictors with the strongest association with the dependent variable, i.e. CPI. Moreover, with a small sample size, the study has low statistical power, thus undermining the reliability of the regression results. As such, extra caution in interpreting the results is warranted.

For sure, clientelistic politics is a complex phenomenon and attempts to compress it into a single index might lead to results that are imprecise or even misleading. Since clientelistic practices take different forms in different regions, they need to be examined on a case-by-case basis. The reason why one might doubt the overall reliability of CPI is the intractability of money-politics in the country. This is the outcome of a combination of factors, including weak institutions (such as the judiciary and property rights), over or under-regulation, an entrenched bureaucracy, and an under-developed civic society and media. These factors are difficult to measure in terms of quantitative analysis.

Nevertheless, this book is still an important contribution to the literature on informal politics in a young democracy like Indonesia. For students or researchers in political science, the book provides links to the data and survey instruments, which can be useful for further analysis. Future research might consider this study as a baseline and look at how clientelistic politics has evolved in selected regions, especially in the wake of the 2016–17 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which has been considered as a turning point in Indonesia's democracy.

SIWAGE DHARMA NEGARA is Senior Fellow, Co-coordinator, Indonesia Studies Programme, and Coordinator, APEC Study Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Postal address: 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore, 119614; email: siwage_dharma_negara@iseas.edu.sg.