

Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani, eds. *Governing Urban Indonesia*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024.

Reviewed by Freek Colombijn*

One of the consistent changes in Indonesia since the country's independence has been urbanization. If in 1945 only 12.5 percent of the people lived in cities and towns, in 2011 the urban population of Indonesia reached the landmark of making up more than half of the total population. The collective volume *Governing Urban Indonesia*, the outcome of the fortieth annual Indonesia Update conference held at the Australian National University in September 2023, covers contemporary processes of urban governance. Combined, the overviews and case studies offer a broad panorama of political, social, and administrative changes taking place in Indonesia.


In the opening chapter the editors, Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani, argue that it is no longer appropriate to imagine Indonesia as a predominantly rural society. Not only do the majority of people live in urban settlements, but the national culture is increasingly a middle-class, urban culture with important religious movements and lifestyle trends emanating from cities.

Cities in Indonesia, and the megacity of Jakarta in particular, face serious governance challenges: air pollution, traffic congestion, lack of piped water, shortage of affordable housing, periodic flooding, and so forth. The main point made by the editors is that

Indonesia's urban problems are fundamentally political problems because resolving them requires city governments to develop the independence, and to muster the political will, to challenge the powerful vested interests that undermine urban planning and effective implementation of regulations designed to enhance city life. (p. 9)

A new type of managerial political leader has emerged, and some of these leaders have become

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famous at a supra-local level: Joko Widodo (or Jokowi, as mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta), Ridwan Kamil (mayor of Bandung), Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or Ahok, governor of Jakarta), and Tri Rismaharini (or Bu Risma, mayor of Surabaya). However, these politicians could not have become successful without the backing of an active local civil society.

In the first chapter after the introduction, Abidin Kusno sketches changes and continuities in urban governance since colonial times. In colonial times the authorities planned built-up areas but left people living in *kampung* (unplanned neighborhoods with often a lower-income population) to house themselves (“me-rumah-kan sendiri,” in the words of the Indonesian architect and urban planner Johan Silas, cited p. 33). During the New Order regime of President Suharto, the development of the national capital, Jakarta, was in the hands of the national government, the city government, and business partners of the presidential family. Whether today urban governments have become less corrupt and more efficient should be studied empirically, Kusno argues. A new development is the increasing number of “self-evictions” (p. 41) of *kampung* dwellers selling off their land.

Meirina Ayumi Malamassam and Luh Kitty Katherina present detailed figures for urbanization trends since 2000. They warn that urbanization does not come about only from rural-urban migration but more from natural population increases and the reclassification of rural areas as urban areas. They find the binary urban-rural divide too simplistic and propose a more refined classification. An important point, left implicit in the rest of the volume, is that only in Java-Bali has the urbanization process passed the 50 percent tipping point.

Different from the demographic approach of Malamassam and Katherina, Sonia Roitman states that “three structural conditions have significantly affected the growth of Indonesian cities, namely, poverty, informality and the growth of the middle class” (p. 75). According to Roitman, urban planning mechanisms developed in the Global North are inadequate to address Southern urbanism. During the time of Suharto, planning regulations, still based on Northern practices, were frequently circumvented by a handful of powerful real estate developers. Nowadays, participatory planning involving ordinary people is crucial to make Indonesian urban planning an example of successful Southern planning.

Erman Rahman, Ihsan Haerudin, and Ronaldo Octaviano point out that fiscal policies and the allocation of local budgets in Indonesia do not distinguish between urban (*kotamadya*) and non-urban (*kabupaten*) districts. In reality, however, per capita fiscal revenues and spending—hence also service delivery—can vary considerably. The contributors argue that a rural-urban dichotomy, or in their study the difference between *kotamadya* and *kabupaten*, is too simplistic and for their own analysis classify regional areas into seven categories with different degrees of urbanization.

A puzzling question throughout this book is why some local governments have demonstrated an ability to tackle urban issues while others have not. Two approaches to this question

can be discerned. One analytical lens focuses on the destructive role of corrupt elites, who withdraw resources (development funds, building land, etc.) from local development. The second focuses on the role played by competent leaders. Mochamad Mustafa brings these two perspectives together by highlighting the critical role played by civil society (NGOs, media, academics, and social organizations). Such civil society actors pressure inert political leaders to act, or become allies of effectual leaders to support them against obstructive claims of predatory elites. On the basis of three case studies (Surabaya, Bogor, and South Tangerang), Mustafa argues that “the presence or absence of a robust local civil society constitutes a critical determinant of whether local politics drives effective reform or ineffective and corrupt governance” (p. 130).

Corry Elyda discusses the political impact of the growth of gated communities in South Tangerang. South Tangerang is characterized by an infrastructural gap between the many housing estates and the remaining *kampung* in the municipality. The infrastructural gap corresponds with a social and political gap. Whereas political scientists generally see the middle class as potential drivers of political change, this is not the case in South Tangerang. There, middle-class residents have withdrawn into their bubbles with good facilities, and many told Elyda that “they do not even consider themselves to be citizens of South Tangerang” (p. 165). As a consequence, a powerful political dynasty has had free reign to rule the area for its own benefit, without solving social and infrastructural problems.

Clara Siagian analyzes how people are doing when they are evicted from demolished *kampung* and moved into rental social housing (*rusunawa*, *rumah susun sederhana sewa*). Stripped of their social network and livelihood base in the *kampung*, residents are trapped in a downward spiral of debt. Civil servants blame the residents for arrears in payments: “They are all lazy” (p. 185). Rental social housing thus serves more “to ameliorate unease among middle-class people about the harshness of *kampung* evictions” (p. 176) than to help residents with their transition to a new livelihood.

Yogi Setya Permana raises the question of why cities operating in the same national context perform quite differently when it comes to flood control. The answer is found in the willingness of local governments to enforce their own regulations that can ameliorate or even prevent floods. A necessary condition for such active government is an active civil society that “co-produces” the enforcement of state regulations. “In such settings,” Permana argues, “members of the government apparatus cannot easily collude with companies that violate drainage regulations” (p. 199).

Nur Azizah discusses the management of household waste in Surabaya, a city that is more advanced in waste collection and landfill management than most others. The city has Indonesia’s first waste-to-electricity plant at its landfill and is further characterized by important community participation, for instance in the form of volunteers—mostly women—who disseminate infor-

mation about waste separation at home and composting organic waste in neighborhoods. Strong political leadership and broad participation from the community, NGOs, and private companies have been keys to its success.

Muhammad Halley Yudhistira and Andhika Putra Pratama offer a rather technical analysis of Jakarta's notorious traffic congestion. They consider the development of the railway network as the most promising solution and advocate the establishment of a Jakarta Metropolitan Authority that can coordinate policies at the supra-municipal level.

Rita Padawangi distinguishes between three types of public space. The first is public places managed by the local government, such as squares and parks, while the second is public space provided by private capital, for example in shopping malls and housing estates. Padawangi urges readers to look critically at the way "managerial city leadership" and companies have created "neat" public places by excluding "unruly" citizens, who may harm the tidy image of the public spaces. The third type of public space is the small but vibrant public spaces in *kampung*, which come closest to the old ideal of public spaces as places where strangers meet. Citizens often take collective decisions on how to use such spaces—for instance, for a funeral or wedding or to ban the driving of motorcycles.

Ian Wilson describes the perplexing variety of security services offered in Jakarta by state forces, private companies, social organizations, vigilantes, and neighborhood patrols, which often cooperate and overlap. Constructed "notions of security and risk are also central to how cities are planned, built, governed" (p. 287). In the extremely competitive security market, private companies emphasize their alleged professionalism and reliance on high-tech surveillance to persuade clients to hire them.

The final chapter is a fascinating reflection by Bima Arya Sugiarto. His background as political analyst, activist, and scholar beautifully intersects with his inside experience as former mayor of Bogor. As he notes, "Leading a city takes more than ideas, courage, and even formal political power. It takes, above all, a clear understanding of the complex local political map, a strategic sense and an ability to pick priorities" (p. 309). However, freedom of maneuver can already become compromised during election campaigns, when candidates get intimately entangled with financiers.

This excellent book demonstrates an admirable coherence for a collective volume. Its central tenet is that a robust civil society is an essential condition for political leaders to become effective. The many cross-references between the chapters help to strengthen the unity of the volume. Many of the chapters are based on detailed research and extensively referenced; the very recent findings—the last interview was conducted on September 14, 2024 (p. 141)—bring readers fully up to date with urban developments and governance issues in Indonesia.

The coherence of the core message and the rosy images of civil society and professional managerial politicians stems partly from the affiliation of many authors with either the state or

civil society organizations. The role and ideals of, among others, religious organizations or the private sector (unless in mostly negative ways) seem therefore downplayed. For instance, in the otherwise excellent chapter by Azizah on waste management in Surabaya, waste pickers are mentioned as an afterthought and their role in reducing the volume of deposited household waste is overlooked. It is excellent that explanations of the differences in performance between cities are sought. It is a pity, in this respect, that there are practically no case studies from outside Java, which makes the word “Indonesia” in the book title almost inappropriate. Finally, I would have loved to read more about ways in which actors (politicians, civil society, and entrepreneurs) in different cities learn from one another, including the enigmatic study visits of civil servants to other places. These minor points of criticism should not obscure the fact that the volume’s relevance goes beyond cities: “Discussing how urban Indonesia is governed, and will be governed in the future, means discussing the future of Indonesia itself” (p. 4).