



Book Review

Governing Urban Indonesia. *Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani (eds).* ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2024, pp xviii + 335. ISBN 9789815203714 (pbk).

Governing Urban Indonesia responds to the emerging theories and praxis of politics in urban Indonesia, considering how ‘cities have been at the forefront of post-Suharto political and governance reform’ (p. 14). This book is based on the premise that ‘Indonesia is an increasingly urban society’ (p. 1) and urbanisation is fundamentally productive of political contestation. Written and edited by political scientists, the chapters in this book conceive urban problems—including housing, flood and waste crises—as political, requiring ‘city governments to develop independence and to muster political will’ (p. 9). Therefore, against the usual national methodological stance in political science literature, this book invites the readers to think of how urban politics can be rescaled and substantiated from the bottom up. The book is in itself a political project, arguing for a democratic governance to address unequal urbanisation.

In its theoretical contribution, the book engages the notion of informality in almost every chapter, understanding informality not as exclusive to poverty, but as a relational practice and ‘instrument of both accumulation and authority’ (Roy, 2009) sustained by different actors in the city. Through the exploration of urban informality, this book contributes towards a nuanced understanding of Indonesian urbanism, rather than simply imposing urban theories inwards to Indonesian cities. Informality is explained as path-dependent from Suharto’s elite relations, affiliated with corruption, collusion and nepotism, which today exacerbates urban problems and/or hinders efficient management of the city. As an example, Abidin Kusno describes the coalition between Suharto and his business allies speculating on land development around Jakarta. This land development project today, as Corry Elyda discusses, resulted in socio-spatial segregation between real estate and *kampung* communities in South Tangerang, with the wealthier residents being less dependent on public services and having low political interest in the city. Elite informalities have also rendered flood mitigation ineffective, explains Yogi Setya Permana, as local bureaucrats, the military and business owners collude in allowing industries to dispose of waste in the Citarum River. Informal relations between elites, however, are also strategically used by *kampung* dwellers to safeguard their livelihoods and neighbourhoods by allying with local patrons, thugs and the military. Ian Wilson writes that this form of horizontal security is sustained, along with the increasing use of transnational security companies, by high-end real estate projects, producing segregated space.

Secondly, this book offers a perspective on urban citizenship and inequality. Rita Padawangi exemplifies the contradictory production of public space, leading to the reproduction of inequality in the city. On the one hand, public space is contained within commercialised development (i.e. superblocks or shopping malls). Yet, on the other hand, public, ‘formal’ space is provided through the eviction of the ‘informal’ *kampung* such as in the case of Teras Cikapundung. The question of citizenship is perhaps best examined in Clara Siagian’s chapter: who is the ‘public’ serviced by emerging infrastructure development? As Jakarta’s rivers are buttressed with pylons and inspection roads to avoid flooding, *kampung* dwellers are evicted into *rusunawa* flats. Their


resettlement detaches them from their previous livelihoods in *kampung* and they harbour anxiety about their inability to progress forward, eventually producing more inequalities.

A third contribution of the book is examining the rise of local leadership and strong community engagement as key to managing urban problems in the aftermath of decentralisation. Mochammad Mustafa and Nur Azizah's chapters address how politicians with strong leadership, as shown in Surabaya, combined with strong civil society control, have resulted in a more organized bureaucracy and improved public service, such as waste management. From the bottom up, Sonia Roitman frames community participation in disaster mitigation and waste management as organic and community-led initiatives that embody the potential for solving urban problems. Despite the book also acknowledging how rent-seeking behaviour plagues effective local governance (mostly stemming from high political costs during the election), it illustrates that decentralisation has enabled a progressive transformation of urban governance practice.

Notwithstanding these important contributions to understanding Indonesian cities, the question of 'governing' urban Indonesia, specifically, remains somewhat latent. The case studies explore crises such as housing, waste management and flooding and examine them in relation to local governance reform. Yet, there is less consideration about what makes these problems specifically *urban*. If the urban constitutes—as the chapters by Meirina Ayumi Malamassam and Luh Kitty Katherina; and Erman Rahman, Ihsan Haerudin and Ronaldo Octaviano suggest—a changing landscape of formerly rural areas under *kabupaten* jurisdiction, then governing urban problems would mean incorporating actors and processes beyond the boundaries of the city's jurisdiction. Similarly, Muhammad Halley Yudhistira and Andhika Putra Pratama's chapter suggests establishing and rescaling the Jakarta Metropolitan Authority (to address transportation backlogs). Yet, governing the 'urban' pertains to more than just the political domain of local government(s). So, the question remains: What does governing urban problems look like on this scale?

Consider the spatial reorganisation of the national government through urban projects (Anguelov, 2023), including via the rollout of large-scale infrastructure as National Strategic Projects (PSN) during Joko Widodo's presidency (2014–2024). As Mayor Bima Arya Sugiarto suggests in the last chapter, the authority of local government, including environmental permits, has been shrunk through the Omnibus Law (Law 11/2020 on Job Creation) in an attempt to accelerate investment. Large infrastructure projects arrive from the top-down, often with little involvement of local government. For instance, there is a substantial rollout of water supply projects for Greater Jakarta to provide water for the city amidst the threat of land subsidence. The need for financing for this large infrastructure has facilitated private investment in water infrastructure and in doing so, has rendered civil society's long struggle against privatisation void. At the end of the 25-year private water supply concessions, Jakarta has again entered into a partnership with the private sector, despite the failure of many of these same actors to deliver equal water access within the city. In this instance, urban governance is undertaken by national governments in partnership with private investors, rendering cities and citizens a captive market for financialised urban infrastructures and undermining democracy and local community participation in the city and its services. This turn to recentralisation in the past decade – and perhaps also in the forthcoming years under Prabowo's presidency – remains an important task in understanding urban governance, its politics and its outcomes.

Finally, decentralisation, as the book has documented, is focal in enabling bureaucratic reforms and civil society engagement to drive positive change for the city and its citizens. This expansive book serves as a reminder to hold onto progressive change while constantly keeping sight of the collaboration and solidarity necessary for the improvement of our cities.

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