

# Local politics in decentralized Indonesia: the Governor General of Banten Province

Research >  
Indonesia

'I am the governor general' says local boss H.Tb. Chasan Sochib. He is a peculiar (or typical) type of local boss in decentralized Indonesia. How and why did he become so powerful?

By Okamoto Masaaki

Six years have passed since Soeharto's fall paved the way for democratisation; three since Habibie's rise opened the door to decentralization. While researchers have addressed local politics and decentralization in post-Suharto Indonesia, few have concentrated on the political dynamics and structures of any one locality. We have a general picture of regents (*bupati*) and mayors (*walikota*) behaving like 'small kings' (*raja kecil*) and local politicians desperate on *bupati/walikota* for money, but these do not provide a clear picture about who controls political and eco-

Work Squad (*SatKar Ulama*). Local Jawa were organized into the Martial Artist Work Squad (*SatKar Pendekar*) in 1972, renamed the Indonesian Union of Bantenese Men of Martial Arts, Art and Culture (PPPSBBI). *Jawara* are men of prowess in traditional self-defence (*silat*) and wear black uniforms and carry machetes.

In Banten *jawara* are culturally recognized as robust and often reckless criminal types. The one hundred twenty-two PPPSBBI-affiliated *silat* schools in Banten were mobilized to support Golkar during the election, alongside the military and police. Chasan Sochib

(*Kadin*) and the Indonesian National Contractors' Association (*Gapensi*), putting his men on their local executive committees. Certifications from *Kadin* and *Gapensi* are necessary for government procurement. Chasan Sochib utilized this to coordinate projects in the Banten area. Coordination brought him more money; *jawara* under his control became his (sub) contractors and received a share of his profits.

Chasan Sochib's activities are not limited to the *jawara* and business worlds. One of the founders of a private university and the Banten Museum, he remains the head of the Serang branch of Generation '45 (the committee for ex-independent war fighters). He has become powerful in all aspects of Bantenese life; thus outsiders appointed as top bureaucrats relied on him and his network as a bridge to the Bantenese world. The fall of Suharto in May 1997 changed this informal governing system. Chasan Sochib, product of the New Order, was endangered.

## Birth of the reformed Chasan Sochib

The Reformasi echoed in Banten. Students mounted a nationwide protest movement against Suharto and his regime, demanding his resignation and the reformation of government. Student demonstrators criticized Chasan Sochib for his closeness to Suharto. He responded: 'You know, Pak Harto (Suharto) is still our president. We should respect him!' But his attitude changed when Suharto resigned. When students confronted him, he jumped on the *Reformasi* bandwagon. He quickly became reformed in utterance.

A favourable wind has blown for Chasan Sochib. The movement to establish Banten province began in February 1999, demanding the separation of the Banten area from West Java province. At first Chasan Sochib was far from supportive; his company was engaged in a large-scale road construc-



H.Tb. Chasan Sochib celebrates his seventieth birthday, 2000

Now Chasan Sochib could intervene in provincial government policies on personnel and budgeting. His construction company won tenders for the Banten Regional Police Headquarters, the Provincial Parliament, the Provincial Government Complex and several main roads at inflated prices. The provincial parliament is unable or unwilling to check his influence. Referring to the traditional market where Chasan Sochib and his associates have their offices, provincial legislators often say 'We just wait for the agreement from the *Rau*'. Referring back to an earlier era, Chasan Sochib proudly stated: 'I am actually the Governor-General. If he (Joko Munandar) goes wrong in leading Banten, I will correct him. As I am most responsible for him. He rose with my support.'

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conomic resources or how this takes place within the institutional setting of the regional autonomy law. The following sections trace the economic and political rise of one local boss in the Banten area: H.Tb. Chasan Sochib.

## The New Order in Banten

The Banten area, previously a part of West Java province, is comprised of Serang, Lebak, Pandeglang and Tangerang regencies and the cities of Cilegon and Tangerang. The north is the rich industrial area while the south is poor and agricultural. The New Order regime in Banten cemented the ethnic divide between rulers and the ruled, which had its roots in the Dutch colonial period. Mainly Sundanese hold the important administrative and military positions of *bupati*, regional secretary and district military commander.

Bantenese informal leaders – Islamic teachers (*ulama*) and local strongmen (*jawara*) – were co-opted into the political machines of the governing party, Golkar, in the early 1970s. In 1971 *ulama* were organized into the *Ulama*

was the *jawara* who became the *SatKar Pendekar's* general chairman and one of the executive committee members of the *SatKar Ulama*. He could act as a bridge between the military, bureaucracy and Golkar, and the Banten informal world. According to Chasan Sochib, three thousand *jawara* serve him and are on standby at all times.

## Product of the New Order

Chasan Sochib was born in Serang regency in 1930. He attended Islamic boarding schools before joining a guerrilla warfare unit during the revolutionary period. His working life began in 1967, providing logistical support to the Siliwangi military division. Two years later he founded a construction company, PT Sinar Ciomas Raya, which frequently won government tenders for road and market construction projects. His involvements spread to the Krakatau Steel State Company, the largest steel company in Southeast Asia, and into tourism and real estate while holding key positions in associations such as the Regional and Central Chambers of Commerce and Trade

tion project by the West Java provincial government. When he realized that the movement had deep-rooted and wide support in Banten, he became an enthusiastic proponent. He became the general adviser to the Coordination Committee to Establish Banten Province (*Bakor*) in February 2000. Mass mobilization, money and lobbying the centre bore fruit. In October 2000, the law establishing Banten province passed in parliament. Thousands of Bantenese welcomed it and Chasan Sochib was on their side.

## Entrenched power

Chasan Sochib turned to his old methods – reliance on *jawara* – to sway Banten province, first economically and then politically. Co-opted by the centrally appointed non-Bantenese provi-

Naturally there is opposition to Chasan Sochib's dominance in Banten. Ex-Bakor members have formed an anti-Chasan Sochib organisation, though it has remained ineffective thus far. Newspapers cannot be too critical of him; machetes may well be the reward for criticism.

## Conclusion

The 2004 general election passed peacefully in Banten, though invalid votes reached two million out of about six million votes and *jawara* were dispersed to various parties. There was no large-scale violence as political parties committed themselves not to mobilize *jawara*. Chasan Sochib was one of the Golkar spokesmen. Golkar barely won with about 21% of the valid votes. Is this a problem for Chasan Sochib? Seem-

*'the New Order regime in Banten cemented the ethnic divide between rulers and the ruled'*

sional governor to guarantee the security of the province, he was rewarded with numerous projects. He became the new Banten provincial branch head of *Kadin* and of *Gapensi*, and of the Construction Business Development Committee (*LPJK*).

He became politically powerful too. In December 2001, elections for provincial governor were held in the provincial parliament and a Javanese politician, Joko Munandar from the Development United Party (PPP) and Chasan Sochib's political lay daughter, Atut Chosiyah from Golkar, won the governor and vice governorships. This would have been impossible without Chasan Sochib's support and *jawara* pressure on parliamentarians.

ingly not, as he still keeps *jawara* in hand and holds top positions in business associations with his men on the board, keeps good relationships with the military and police and appoints his favourites to governorship.

Chasan Sochib or his successor's dominance may fade if Bantenese stop considering *jawara* as legitimate leaders. If not, the same pattern will most likely continue. ◀

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