

Nordholt, Henk Schulte and Gerry van Klinken, eds. 2007. *Renegotiating Boundaries. Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 562 pages ISBN 978 90 6718 283 4

The new decentralisation: 'blossoming' ethnic and religious conflict in Indonesia

KAREL STEENBRINK

From October 1966 until his forced abdication in May 1998 General Suharto was the dominant figure in Indonesian politics. His so-called New Order delivered rapid economic growth, improved infrastructure and political stability while sternly emphasising unity. His political agenda of a unified and prosperous Indonesia could not be reached without a robust and centralised administration. While many military and civil personnel moved from Java to the so-called Outer Islands, many young students came to the dominating but very densely populated island of Java to seek education and often a career.

General Suharto was succeeded by his Vice President, Bacharuddin ('Rudy') Habibie, a keen and energetic engineer who had established an ambitious but rather inefficient and overly expensive naval and airplane industry. To address the biggest problem in the country's east, the former Portuguese territory of East Timor, he promised the possibility of independence after a referendum; to address the biggest problem in the west, the freedom fighters of Aceh, he promised the possibility of the full application of *shari'a* law and a strong Islamic identity. Immediately, there were complaints: giving away East Timor was seen as a Christian attack on the unity of Indonesia and likely to be followed by giving away other eastern regions with a strong Christian presence, such as Papua and Maluku. Meanwhile, Papua Christians reacted to the introduction of *shari'a* in Aceh with the request that Christian law be introduced, beginning with a 10% religious tax in favour of churches and their ministers.

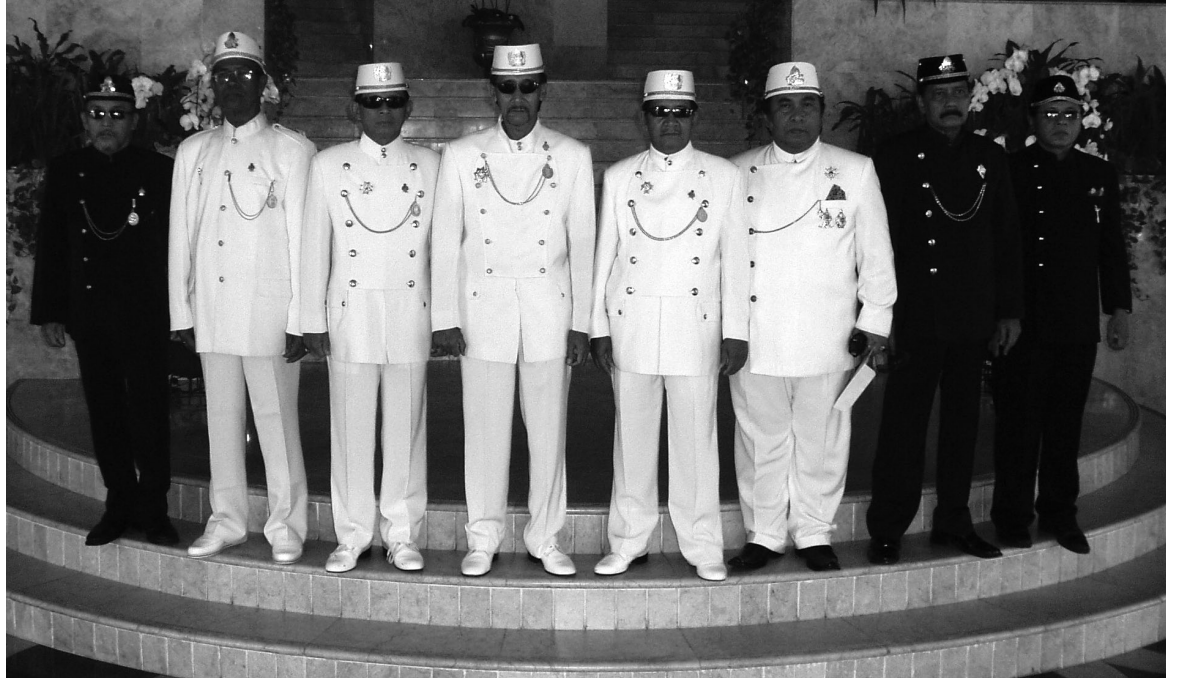
This process of *reformasi* soon resulted in a nationwide call for decentralisation, comprised of a dual process: a devolution of power from top to bottom, especially from the central government to provinces and districts; and the division of provinces and districts into smaller administrative units, a process referred to as *pemekaran*, literally, 'blossoming', or the growth of more flowers on a tree. *Pemekaran* was often based on ethnic and religious identity, and it eventually also referred to the general fragmentation of power resulting from the broader process of *reformasi*. In June 1999 parliament agreed to implement Laws 22 and 25, which gave much more power to the 26 provinces and their districts (*kabupaten*) and spawned the creation of new ones; between 2001 and 2002, for example, the number of districts increased from 341 to 370 and has continued to increase, while the number of provinces today stands at 33. Also as a result of these laws, provincial governors and district heads are no longer nominated in Jakarta but directly elected by regional parliaments; income from gas, oil and forestry are to a large degree allocated towards local administrations; and regions have more authority to introduce elements of Islamic law. In 2004 a new regional government reform law restored some of the state's former centralism, but the basic changes introduced by Laws 22 and 25 have remained intact.

Pemekaran: the fragmentation of power (and corruption)

KITLV Press in Leiden has published a vivid, but also academically solid book on this policy of decentralisation. This magnificent work's 20 contributions (six by Indonesian scholars, the rest by foreign experts) reviews *pemekaran*'s first results. The book's cover shows a military official sitting in ceremonial posture in his air-conditioned office, waiting for visitors: this is symbolic of the military's enduring power in post-Suharto Indonesia, although it has tended to act more often from the sidelines and through local civil politicians; only in violent regions, like the Poso district of Central Sulawesi, has the military exercised its full power. But even the military has taken part in *pemekaran*. Violence in various regions of East Indonesia is exacerbated by internal rivalry between army units that support conflicting local parties, as shown in the contribution by Arianto Sangaji on Poso. In her study on the tin trade in Bangka, Erwiza Erman cites close cooperation between local police and Chinese businessmen as the motor behind the informal economy that organises mass quantities of tin for export to Singapore. This is, indeed, corruption, which was common during the Suharto era but controlled by the highest levels of government. So while *pemekaran* has since decentralised power, it has also decentralised corruption. The latter is not official policy, of course, but it is unfortunately the reality.

Indonesia's 33 provinces are more or less the size of European countries or American states. They are divided into districts – some have five,

Re-invented aristocracy in Indonesia, Bali 2006.



others more than 25 – all of which, given the policy of *pemekaran*, want to stress their distinctive character. They do greatly differ, but they also share a common early 20th century colonial history and all became part of the Indonesian Republic in 1945. Thus the central government is still quite dominating, which is clear in the nearly humorous story of the people of West Sumba, who wanted their district to be divided into three new districts, mainly because of animosity between Catholics and Protestants. Jacqueline Vel describes the intense lobbying of local politicians who went to Jakarta and persuaded a parliamentary delegation to visit Sumba. About €80,000 was spent on air tickets, food and bribes, but the region was too poor to pay the minimum price for a government decision to divide their district.

With the exception of two articles on regions in Java (Banten and Jepara), the contributions all deal with the Outer Islands, where religion often plays a role in local conflicts. Lorraine Aragon cites religion as crucial to the struggle for power between Muslims in coastal areas and Protestants who dominate the mountainous regions around Lake Poso. Her article (like several others in this book) can also be read as a how-to course in corruption: how to set up a *panitia sukses* (a team that organises election lobbying and propaganda); how to obtain a high position in the civil administration, especially that of district (*bupati*) head; how political power produces financial and social profits. While religious and ethnic differences often cause conflict, so does migration. Granted, migrants often differ ethnically and religiously from those among whom they find themselves, but in Indonesia they often come from distant provinces and, because of the archipelago's vastness, must feel like strangers in their own land.

The islands off the western coast of Sumatra are not populated by a Muslim majority, but they were until recently administered by Muslims from the Minangkabau region on mainland Sumatra. The Mentawai archipelago was one of the first new districts created through *pemekaran*, separated from the Padang-Pariaman district but part of the majority Muslim Province of West Sumatra. In 2004 Edison Saleubaja, a Protestant minister, became the new district head after he allegedly had paid €130,000 to obtain the job. He had to borrow the money and so became a 'political puppet in the hand of the [Muslim traders in the] logging sector' (p. 80). Myrna Eindhoven concludes that the Mentawaians could finally control the civil administration but that 'corruption and money politics seem to have decentralized as well' (p. 86). For example, the local administration was unable to collect logging retribution fees; in the 1980s and 1990s several NGOs had campaigned against illegal logging, but then most of their activists joined the new civil administration and thus the general culture of corruption.

Religion: moral guide or instrument of power?

Religion is not a purely private affair in modern Indonesia, and the new decentralisation has intensified religious and ethnic boundaries. With greater emphasis on small communities as important political actors, the

role of religious identity has intensified, but not in a way that has led to a transparent, clean and efficient society. Religion is used more as an instrument of power than as a moral guide. Two contributions include an identical quotation of Burhan Magenda, stating that in the Outer Islands of Indonesia 'local aristocracies survive all changes in national politics and remain in power locally' (pp. 102, 373). This reminded me of the Dutch colonial policy from 1945 to 1949 to regain power through traditional chiefs. In both cases the political goal was not the renewal of *reformasi* but rather the restoration of an ancien régime. Religion has been used similarly: not to guide and critique but rather as a means and justification to seek popular support.

Shari'a law was introduced in Aceh Province through 1999 and 2001 national parliament laws, and further solidified by its governor, Abdullah Puteh, and his provincial parliament in 2002. It banned gambling and enforced strict Islamic dress codes, but one of the arguments in favour of introducing *shari'a* had been the hope that it would help eliminate corruption. Minor corruption cases involved Islamic charity organisations, but, more ironic, the most prominent wrongdoer was Governor Abdullah Puteh himself. Elected in 2000, he was forced to step down in 2004 and go to prison owing to several corruption scandals, including the purchase of a helicopter for the governor's personal transport.

Not all the book's stories are sad ones. In Minahasa, the northern section of the island of Sulawesi, it was feared that conflict between Christians and Muslims of the Maluku Islands would cause new conflicts. Among refugees from Ambon, for example, many Christians and Muslims thirsted for revenge. Some Minahasa hardliners created Christian militias, such as Brigade Manguni and Legium Christum, but close cooperation between the civil administration, military and religious leaders prevented violent conflicts. David Henley, Maria Schouten and Alex Ulaen conclude that 'even old, deep religious and ethnic divides need not lead to violent conflict provided the society divided is also a civil society, provided economic and demographic conditions are favourable, and provided the state is able to play its proper role as ultimate guardian of the peace' (p. 325).

Although the book has 22 contributors, it's not the usual patchwork of edited articles published one or two years after a short conference. Written in a detached, lucid style, with thorough knowledge of local developments across many different regions, the contributions express a strong collective identity, coherence and agreement in methodology and conclusions. In sum, *Renegotiating Boundaries* presents modern Indonesia beyond Jakarta: the many local quests for identity amidst new structures of power, corruption and economic growth.

Karel Steenbrink

is Professor Emeritus of Intercultural Theology at Utrecht University.
karel@steenbrink.nu