

## BOOK REVIEW

## Intellectuals in Post-Soeharto Politics

FREDICK BROVEN EKAYANTA\*

Department of Political Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara  
Email: frbrov@icloud.com

Kusman, Airlangga Pribadi. 2019. *The Vortex of Power: Intellectuals and Politics in Indonesia's Post-Authoritarian Era*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

The collapse of the New Order paved way for changes in many aspects of Indonesian politics, including those pertaining to the role of intellectuals. The term 'intellectuals' refer to university academicians, student activists, journalists, and members of non-governmental organizations. During the New Order, intellectuals were coopted by the government, limiting their ability to influence and criticize government policies. The opportunity to assert influence came during the reformation era, which was characterized by democratization and decentralization. Due to their expertise, the intellectuals were expected to become the agent of change who can promote good governance in accordance to the demands of the reformation. Consequently, the intellectuals became a new actor in the country's political arena.

However, the course of democratization and decentralization have not led to satisfactory results such as good governance and inclusive development. Törnquist et al. (2017) suggests that Indonesia's democratization has come to stagnation. This lack of development begs the question pertaining to factors that have led its democratization to stagnate and the roles that intellectuals play in it. This book aims to explain this problem by analyzing the roles of intellectuals in Indonesia's governance and development. The role of intellectuals in Indonesia's governance and development can be analyzed through three approaches:

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\* The author is a lecturer at Department of Political Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara

the neo-institutionalist approach, the neo-Foucauldian approach, and the neo-Gramscian approach. By taking case studies at the local level, the author criticizes these approaches for not reflecting the realities he found.

The neo-institutionalist approach assumes that intellectuals or technocrats support the building of democratic institutions through their expertise. This approach states that intellectuals contribute to the development of discourse and implementation of good governance. Kusman proves the approach to be contradictory to how, conversely, local intellectuals have formed alliances with business-politics predators, instead of supporting the process of democratization. The neo-Foucauldian approach assumes the existence of international factors that promote the agenda of good governance to become a 'regime of truth.' Intellectuals act as an instrument to produce and reproduce a particular form of discipline for society to absorb and condition its perception towards principles of neoliberal agendas. On the contrary, realities show that alliances between intellectual and business-politics predators at the local level reject the neoliberal discourse. The neo-Gramscian approach claims that intellectuals are connected to the global capitalist class. Through the network, intellectuals act as comprador agents to these elites. The book proves the claim false, as the power structure at the local level hinders the penetration of international capital.

These three approaches ignore the social and political contexts in which intellectuals are situated in. Consequently, the approaches failed to consider that intellectuals, along with their business-politico alliances, may take advantage of the neoliberal agenda to accumulate wealth and serve their own economic interests. This may happen in historical contexts where relations between local or national intellectuals and business-politico elites continue to pass onto contemporary politics as discussed in Chapter III and IV. The New Order was able to tame intellectuals to not direct criticisms towards the government's development agenda. As a result, the academic environment inherited the legacy of the New Order's bureaucratic character, where academicians are more focused on the struggle for administrative positions rather than to focus

on academic achievements, such as carrying out prestigious research and being published in international journals or books. Students activism were also obstructed due to the 32 years of depoliticization (Kusman 2019, 109–110). Progressive groups, especially those on the left of the political spectrum, were not given room to organize. The New Order conducted de-ideologization of the society through the ‘floating-mass’ strategy (*strategi masa mengambang*) and the establishment of corporatist state organizations. As a result, intellectuals were detached from their grassroots base.

This condition is different from the experiences of other countries like the United Kingdom and the United States or countries in Latin America (Kusman 2019, 41–45). Intellectuals in the United Kingdom and the United States formed alliances with the bourgeoisie through the building of research institutions and think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Studies and Heritage Foundation. The alliances provide room for intellectuals to conduct the implementation of free market reform. This factor was behind the success of the neoliberal regime in those two countries in the 1970’s. On the other hand, the neoliberal experiment in Latin America was met with resistance from the nationalists on the left, socialists, and social democrats. These groups were able to consolidate through their organic intellectual base in society, campuses, and mass media. The movement, which was supported by the working class and indigenous communities, even attained leadership in the end of the 1990s until the beginning of the 2000s.

The country’s lack of organized and strong social power, like those in the United Kingdom and the United States or the working class in Latin American countries, paved way for oligarchs from the New Order to remain in politics and adapt, both at the national and local level, to the neoliberal institutional changes (Hadiz 2010). The oligarchs reorganized their power through control over political institutions and markets (Robison and Hadiz 2004). Not only did they adapt and reorganize their power, the oligarchs also dominated political contestations, which resulted in the marginalization of civil society (Fukuoka 2013).

These arguments demonstrate the contradiction between the strengthening of the international economy through neoliberal globalization and the resistance of old political powers at the local level. The assumption of the neo-institutionalist approach that good governance would be established through intellectual contribution did not accrue. The neo-Foucauldian and neo-Gramscian approach that criticized the good governance agenda as the product of intellectuals and the global capital network, were not proven at the local level either. Kusman then directs his attention to the intellectuals involved in the political and economic contestations at the local level (Kusman 2019, 49).

Kusman employs an alternative approach to explain roles, functions, and positions of intellectuals in the process of development and governance in East Java after the New Order: the embedded social conflict approach. This approach views the process of development during the democratization process as part of the contestation between the interests of actors related to the power structure of the New Order (Kusman 2019, 7). The difference between those periods lies within the rampant practice of money politics. According to this approach, intellectuals become part of the predatory business-politico elites instead of the agent that fights for the establishment of good governance. Based on Gramsci's approach, intellectuals act as articulators of the predatory elite coalition's interests in the contestation of power.

One of the roles that intellectuals play in contemporary Indonesian politics is in the emergence of political consultants (Kusman 2019, 114). Intellectuals commodify their knowledge to support and provide justification for the elites' fight for power. Political consulting became the business of intellectuals that caused the costs of politics to rise. One of the examples that this book uses is the political consulting body PolMark by Eep Saefullah Fatah that was involved in the 2017 DKI Jakarta local elections.

Kusman's findings in East Java show that intellectuals do not take part in the support for good governance, such as the enhancement of transparency and eradication of corruption (Chapter VI). On the contrary, intellectuals embolden the interests of local business-politics

predators. This reality confirms Robison's and Hadiz's argument that old oligarchs are able to adapt to the market and democratic institutions in the post-Soeharto era. This ability is due to their alliance with the intellectuals who provided legitimacy to their interests. In short, old oligarchs are able to absorb a new power group—the intellectuals—into their business-politico alliance. The author provides two cases to prove this argument, which are the political contestation in local elections and the case of *Lumpur Lapindo* in Sidoarjo.

The local elections analyzed in the book are the gubernatorial election[s] in East Java in 2008 and 2013 as well as the Surabaya mayoral election in 2010 (Chapter V). The roles of intellectuals in this context range from assisting the campaigns of business-politics predators, providing academic opinions in support of the candidates, conducting propaganda and positive framing about the candidates, to assisting political dispute in court. The compensations for the intellectuals' contribution range from money, commissary positions in local state-owned companies, to their inclusion in projects. Instead of clean and democratic competitions, Kusman (2019, 150) finds that local elections in East Java are embedded with vote buying, donations that exceed the legal limit, and abuse of power and public resources. This finding strengthens Fukuoka's argument that predatory alliances dominate political contestations.

In the case of *Lumpur Lapindo*, the intellectual and business-politico alliance put the people affected by the eruption at a disadvantage. In this context, Kusman divides intellectuals into two categories: those who sided with the company and those in support of the people. These intellectuals debated on whether the mud flow was caused by the Yogyakarta earthquake or Lapindo's negligence and mismanagement. As the company is owned by the Bakrie family—who is close to power—the intellectual's and people's fight for justice became difficult. The struggle to restore the rights of the people thus failed to obtain support from the state.

Overall, this book, which is based on the author's dissertation at Murdoch University, have complimented previous studies on the para-

dox of democratization in Indonesia (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Hadiz 2010; Fukuoka 2013; Törnquist et al. 2017). This book's biggest contribution is its analysis on the role of intellectuals as agents who contribute to the paradox, as the subject of intellectuals have not been a major focus of studies in the field. What makes this book applaudable is how the author systematically bases his argument on the structural-historical foundation of Indonesian politics during the New Order. The argument's systematic foundation helps readers to digest the author's main argument. The book highlights the shift of the intellectuals' position and role, from being subject to cooptation by the centralized national government, to being coopted by local governments through the process of decentralization.

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