

# DECOLONIZATION AND THE MAKING OF MIDDLE INDONESIA<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Indonesia contains about 200 provincial cities with populations between 50,000 and one million, yet they have attracted far less scholarly attention than the country's few million-plus cities. Recent democratization and decentralization have brought to light patterns of communal and local mobilization in these cities, centered on elections and other political events, that have not been seen in Indonesia since the 1950s and early 1960s. Provincial cities have talked back to the central state in ways that belie their supposed passivity as expressed in the term "urban involution." This study attempts to build a synthetic and historical explanation for those patterns by examining the social embeddedness of the state in the provincial city. Most of Indonesia's towns and cities, particularly beyond Java, became urban only through the formation of the modern colonial state from the mid- to late 19th century onward. After decolonization began in 1945, the expanding but chronically underfunded bureaucracy became an arena for contestation among the emerging middle classes in these urban centers, which lacked manufacturing. The new provincial classes were politically significant because of their numbers and their mobilizing skills rather than their wealth. They successfully seized the state at the local level. The central state, anxious to establish political stability, appeased them with substantial political transfer rents, particularly during the oil boom years of the early to middle New Order.

When democracy came to the cities of Indonesia's Lampung Province in southern Sumatra in 1998, it acquired a strong ethnic dimension. Politics in the two main urban centers, Bandar Lampung, population ca. 800,000, and Metro, ca. 130,000, played out under menacing demonstrations of power by the native Lampung ethnic organization, Lampung Sai. "Javanese" had been running the place for too long, was their argument. World Bank experts wrote a report warning of possible ethnic violence (Diprose, 2002; Barron and Madden, 2003). Residents of Lampung also love government, and the Minister for Utilization of State Apparatus (Men-PAN) personally chided Metro in May 2003. Ideally, he said, district-level government should have 11 to 14 provincial offices (*dinas*) plus statutory authorities:

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But if there are 17 or more organizations, that's just wasteful and ineffective. There are districts and towns that have an office of marine affairs and fisheries, even though they are not on the coast. Metro Town in Lampung Province is an example. How appropriate is that for their region, that's what needs to be thought through, and if not it shouldn't be necessary. (Menneg, 2003)

These two characteristics, localist politics combined with a careerist approach to expanding the bureaucracy, are today found in intermediate-sized cities all over Indonesia. The present era of democracy (Bünte and Ufen, 2009) and decentralization (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003) has made them more visible than before. In a few cities communal conflict even broke out during the transitional period 1999–2001 along with these new kinds of mobilization (Klinken, 2007). Movements demanding the subdivision of existing administrative districts into smaller units also swept across provincial centers in the thinly populated islands beyond Java (Schulte Nordholt and Klinken, 2007). The economy of many of these places is pre-industrial, dominated by the state and by trade. Socially they are conservative, with more organizing around ethnic and religious concerns than explicit class interests. Yet the communitarian myths that figure so prominently in their politics are not pre-colonial vestiges but modern inventions. These cities are the setting for a dynamic social zone that can be called *Middle Indonesia*. The purpose of this article is to develop in a preliminary way a synthetic, historical account of the origins of Middle Indonesia. Contrary to the claim that the global communication revolution and the rapid expansion of new middle classes now makes Southeast Asian cities no different than western ones (Dick and Rimmer, 1998), urban centers such as Bandar Lampung lie on a divergent historical path vis-à-vis the typical U.S. suburb.

The appearance of sociological stasis led Warwick Armstrong and Terry McGee to derive the term “urban involution” to describe Indonesia's cities (Armstrong and McGee, 1968). By that is meant that cities' enormous capacity to absorb poor migrating peasants into their informal bazaar economies had dulled the revolutionary social changes that usually accompany urbanization. The term was borrowed from Geertz's (1963a) fertile, though later much criticized, notion of “agricultural involution,” which similarly conveyed the idea that “shared poverty” made revolution unlikely. Hans-Dieter Evers (1972, 2007) subsequently picked up the term and made it his own throughout his career. It encapsulated for him the lack of modernization and functional differentiation in the Indonesian intermediate-sized city. He also highlighted a new element, the dominant but stultifying role of the government bureaucracy. In a curious twist, Mike Davis (2004) again deployed the term “urban involution” recently, but in an opposite sense to that of Armstrong and McGee. Far from suggesting stasis, he used it to underscore the potentially revolutionary, rapid growth of informal labor in Third World urban slums around the world. Davis may not have thought too deeply about the origins of the term, and he had in mind megacities rather than provincial-level centers, but he has done the topic a service by reintroducing dynamism into it.

The term urban involution usefully suggested that Indonesian cities need not follow the Chicago pathway to modernity. But it came out of an essentially ecological perspective that has since then been challenged by the “new urban sociology,” which emphasizes political struggle rather than quasi-natural growth processes (Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988). Here I draw on existing case studies to investigate the historical interplay between

state patronage and local social forces that has shaped today's provincial city. This study consists of three parts. The first shows how new most provincial cities are and how closely their growth paralleled that of the modern state. The second focuses on the historical sociology of the bureaucracy that links the state and the city. The third examines how the social forces that emerged in these provincial centers under state patronage, particularly in the years following the watershed decolonization of the late 1940s, help us understand the characteristics identified in the opening paragraphs.

### CITIES

Although megacities dominate the news, 52% of the world's urban population lives in settlements containing less than 500,000 people (UNFPA, 2007, pp. 9–10). Yet urban research agendas (e.g., Savage et al., 2003) continue to overlook these intermediate cities, especially when located in the developing world. Indonesia has hundreds of such provincial centers, and they cannot be understood through the lenses of the Chicago or Los Angeles Schools. Rather than being transformed by the penetration of capital, as is the prevalent theme in the (no longer new) urban sociology of Castells and Lefebvre, these cities continue to revolve around smaller-scale trade and the government bureaucracy. Yet they are not static, nor should they be viewed as oversized villages whose residents retain pre-urban patterns of socialization. The most striking feature of provincial urban life is not alienation and individuation, but vigorous organizing, which combines themes of “traditional,” family-like ethnic or religious community with modern techniques of mobilization as well as an interest in capturing the institutions of the state. Low income levels and the absence of mass markets make politics indispensable to getting ahead. By situating politicized ethnicity in the geography and political economy of intermediate-sized cities, and approaching this historically, we gain insight into some key driving forces in Indonesia's current phase of democratization and decentralization.

Before the Dutch colonized it, the Indonesian archipelago had no true urban centers. The most highly developed pre-colonial states were in Java, but they were “states without cities” (Wisseman Christie, 1991), both decentralized and personalized. The royal court moved constantly and was never surrounded by more than villages, which also were quite mobile. Towns first acquired a distinctly urban character with the arrival of the imperial Dutch. Rutz's (1987) baseline study of Indonesia's cities and towns, when projected through 2005, shows that Indonesia now contains more than 200 urban centers, including Bandar Lampung and Metro, with populations between 50,000 and one million. Nearly half of these are located beyond Java.<sup>3</sup> Rutz illustrates the history of these places by means of a color-coded map (Rutz, 1987, Map II; see also pp. 62 and 64). Each color indicates the era in which that center became urban. Adopting a generous lower limit for the urban, Rutz traces a few back to the Hindu period before AD 1400. Most of these (11 of 16) are located in Java. This key island also dominates those towns established during the Islamic and early colonial periods between AD 1400 and 1700 (42 out of 73), such as Banten and Semarang.

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<sup>3</sup>Rutz deployed a functional concept of the urban that results in different urban population values than those arising from the administrative boundary concept used by the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Between 1700 and 1900, a new pattern emerges: the number of newly urbanized centers rises dramatically, and the trend decentralizes toward the outer islands. Eighty-nine of 133 new urban centers, colored blue on Rutz's map, are located there. Most date to the mid- and late 19th century, and are the direct result of Dutch imperial conquest. A cluster of blue dots appears on the map in the Minangkabau area after the Padri Wars of the 1820s and 1830s. The same occurred in the hinterland of Palembang after Dutch troops suppressed indigenous resistance in 1848, in the plains north of Banjarmasin after the war of 1859, and on the west coast of Celebes (Sulawesi) following the Bone Wars that lingered for decades after 1835. Some were entirely new places, others had been settlements with a tributary relationship to a nearby sultan. By the end of the 19th century, only remote parts of the archipelago remained blank—the interiors of Sumatra, Borneo (Kalimantan), and Sulawesi, and most of the eastern regions of the Moluccas (Maluku), Nusa Tenggara (Lesser Sunda), and western New Guinea. With the last serious resistance in Aceh on Sumatra crushed by 1904 (fighting was still to take place in Toraja in 1905 and Flores in 1907–1908), and the Netherlands committed by its 1901 “ethical policy” to expanding its presence into many new social and geographic spaces, a period of intensive state-building commenced. This was the background against which all the remaining blank areas of Rutz's map became evenly sprinkled with black dots throughout the 20th century. Ninety-seven of the 106 new urban centers are located outside Java. The map of new urbanization is therefore simultaneously a cartographic record of evolving Dutch imperialism and colonial state formation.

Once the state had given birth to these new urban centers it continued to impress itself upon them in various ways (The Siauw Giap, 1959). Sometimes this occurred indirectly. Protected by a Pax Neerlandica established through superior arms, capital moved into the frontier areas in order to extract their resources, so that the state's role in the urban genesis had been that of midwife rather than mother. The tobacco plantations of North Sumatra spawned new towns in the late 19th century, such as Pematang Siantar and Tebingtinggi. Oil towns such as Pekanbaru, Balikpapan, Cepu, and Tarakan sprang up at about the same time, again mostly in blank areas. Coal and base-metal mining towns appeared in other places. But many other new centers served little purpose beyond the needs of the burgeoning state. As roads were constructed into inaccessible areas, administrative as well as military cantonment centers grew along them, as Indonesians say, like mushrooms after rain. Manufacturing did not play a significant role in even the largest cities—the Dutch were mainly interested in the extractive possibilities of their sprawling colony, not in stimulating competition for manufacturers at home.

The process of state-sponsored urbanization continues today. After a long hiatus caused by foreign invasion, revolution, and political instability, the developmentalist New Order of President Suharto constructed new roads in the 1970s and 1980s that encouraged small-scale urbanization in previously remote areas all across the outer islands (beyond densely populated Java)—particularly in Nusa Tenggara, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua. Indonesia developed more administrative centers than other Southeast Asian countries, according to Milone (1966, p. 73), because it has historically been governed by a greater number of administrative levels. Whereas Thailand and Malaysia have known three levels, and Burma, the Philippines, and Vietnam four, Indonesia experienced six (center, governor, resident, *bupati*, *wedana*, and *camat* [the residency was later abolished]). After the end of the New Order in 1998, many new

districts and some new provinces were carved out of pre-existing ones, a process of administrative involution that Indonesians call *pemekaran*, or “flowering.” Each new district/province required a new capital. The number of districts has grown by 75% since 1980, from 246 to more than 430 today. Sometimes these were already administrative centers, such as Ternate, which was upgraded from a district to a provincial capital; but others were mere villages, such as Maba in North Maluku, now the capital of a new district. Doubtless visitors to Maba in 10 years time will find a thriving urban center built around the already crumbling offices of the district head. *Pemekaran* has been under way since the beginning of the 20th century, sometimes rapidly (such as after the achievement of independence in 1950), sometimes slowly (such as during the early New Order). Most often, it has taken place in the outer islands. In 1980, district capitals ranged in size from 25,000 to 100,000 (Rutz, 1987). Growth since then has about doubled their average size.

Despite an impressive record of transformation by an activist late colonial state, the new towns were at first small and sleepy. Urbanization proceeded slowly until the New Order period (1966–1998). As late as 1920, only 5.8% of the Netherlands Indies’ population lived in urban areas, justifying the exotic, rural, serene image the Dutch projected about their colony. By 1945, this figure had risen to 10% (Hugo, 1996, p. 150). Only in the late 1960s and 1970s did urbanization rates begin to accelerate. Today about 45% of the population is urban, slightly below the global average of just over 50% (Firman, 2004, p. 423).<sup>4</sup> The fastest growth during the 1970s, according to Gavin Jones (1988), took place not in the biggest cities but in provincial capitals whose populations ranged from 200,000 to 500,000. An internationally funded study of Indonesia’s intermediate-sized cities confirmed this finding, thought it was a good thing, and recommended that the government support it (National Urban Development Strategy Project, 1985). Nonetheless, governance in these centers remained poor and self-help was the norm. In the mid-1980s, piped water reached only 30–40% of urban households in Indonesia, electricity reached 46–64%, and housing was “temporary” for 11–59% of households (Jones, 1988, p. 152). In every instance, the percentages were worse for smaller cities. The stereotypical image of peasants who migrate to a city but retain their semi-rural living conditions while eking out a living in the bazaar are, in this respect, not far wide of the mark.

As in the late colonial Netherlands Indies, provincial centers in New Order Indonesia were the footprints of an imperial, modernizing state expanding into ever remoter places. Rutz (1987, p. 123) described the growth of provincial towns outside Java mainly as being “a result of the establishment of an administration and the development of transportation systems” (see supporting data in Dürr, 1982). Private investment was a significant growth factor as early as the 1970s in some timber-, mineral-, and oil- and gas-rich provinces such as Aceh, East Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya (Papua) (Rietveld, 1988).<sup>5</sup> But the enclaves in these areas, such as Lhokseumawe, Balikpapan, and later Timika, were exceptions to the rule. Whereas the growth of industry during the New Order, in a pattern

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<sup>4</sup>Precise growth rates of provincial cities are difficult to establish. Definitions of what is urban vary among authorities and over time. The 1930 and 1960 censuses cover a large number of urban centers, with sparser data for other years before 1960. Since 1960, data have become more abundant.

<sup>5</sup>Rietveld combined the NUDS data with data on large domestic and foreign investment approvals. He did not investigate state investment in the provinces, and acknowledged that private investment approvals were not always realized.

reminiscent of the West, had stimulated urban growth in Java (Rutz, 1987), that was more rarely the case outside Java. A meticulous process of counting central service facilities such as banks and government offices throughout Indonesia led Rutz (1987) to distinguish towns according to whether private or state services were dominant. Large cities such as Jakarta or Medan were dominated by private commercial facilities, but smaller ones, particularly beyond Java like Kendari, Bengkulu, Palangkaraya, Kupang, Palu, and Mataram, exhibited a greater proportion of official facilities. Today's visitor sees row upon row of government offices lining the major streets of urban centers that otherwise lack a shopping mall or a decent bookshop. Official services in many remote district capitals constitute more than one-third and up to one-half of all central services in the settlement. They are the legacy of New Order state investments of oil boom revenues in infrastructure for administrative and general economic development.

The observed pattern of provincial growth was to a significant extent the result of deliberate New Order strategy. In keeping with the regime's militarism, political stability appears to have been uppermost in planners' minds. Gavin Jones (1988) wrote that the central government worried about the constant flow of the potentially insurrection-prone rural poor into Jakarta's teeming slums. Building provincial cities was seen as a way of keeping the pressure off the megacity. At the same time, the anti-communist national government chose to stimulate the provinces by building loyal cities rather than risk disloyalty in the countryside through land reform. With very low personal tax rates and few local taxation powers vested in the regions, the urban centers could be kept loyal by making them depend on flows of politically easy cash from oil-flushed Jakarta. It is true that building distant cities involved a degree of decentralization that might also stimulate regionalism. But that was one reason why Jakarta maintained a forest of regulations that kept most industrialists within handy negotiating distance of the national capital. Loyalty in the outlying regions was important in view of the history of regional revolts during the 1950s. In any case, most strategic natural resources lay in the regions beyond Java. Hans Antlöv (2003, p. 143) recently put it more boldly: loyalty not performance determined central government funding for local governments:

A massive patronage system was created in which the central government awarded local governments with budget allocation in exchange for loyalty. Budget allocations were not based on performance or need, but rather on how close local governments were with the central government, and how well local elites could lobby decisions-makers in Jakarta. The resulting rent-seeking system was effective in rapidly building the economy, but was not transparent or sustainable and created great regional dissatisfactions (there are demands for independence from all the above-mentioned resource-rich provinces).

Case studies of several urban centers conducted during the New Order underline the importance of government in their economies. In his study of Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province, Colombijn (1994, p. 15) wrote:

The city has lived most of the twentieth century on the export of smallholders cash crops and state expenditure, and not on big capitalist enterprises. The most important

means of production, the cement factory, has not been owned by private entrepreneurs but by the state (since 1958).

The twin pillars of small trade and the bureaucracy typify the economy of smaller towns to an even greater extent. They make up roughly similar proportions of both the urban GDP and the workforce. But it is the bureaucrats who occupy the dominant social positions, claiming nearly all the available educated workers. A study of three small cities in Central Java, with populations ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 in the 1990s, concluded that

due to the discriminatory allocation of development projects, the concentration of civil servant salaries and the construction of public sector facilities, the research towns receive a disproportionate share of the government funds. This definitely has a positive impact on the towns' economies, although it may be detrimental to their rural hinterland development in the long run. (Wouden, 1997, p. 157)<sup>6</sup>

### BUREAUCRACY

Thus far the growth of provincial cities has looked like a unilateral process dictated by the central state, peaking when it was strongest in the late colonial and especially the New Order periods. In reality the process was far more dialectic. The bureaucracy is the key environment for interactions between the state and society, and case studies of it in provincial centers reveal that state institutions are embedded much more deeply in urban societies than heretofore suggested. Evers (1987) has documented quantitatively how bureaucratization progressed in several Southeast Asian countries from the late 19th century until 1980. During the first major thrust in the late 19th century, opportunities for employment in the bureaucracy opened up even for commoners, while their power as officials grew far beyond the dreams of any "oriental despot." Nevertheless, the number of bureaucrats in the Netherlands Indies remained small in proportion to the population. This began to change around the moment of decolonization in each case. This moment was *the* watershed in the 20th-century history of Middle Indonesia. The absolute number of civil servants in Indonesia tripled between 1930 and 1950, a much bigger jump than in Thailand and Malaysia. They were concentrated in the urban centers, which were still small in comparison with the rural population, and which experienced significant changes as a result. The new state had to establish its control over a vast territory after years of debilitating revolutionary violence; it had to make good on the promise that independence would bring welfare for all; and it had to reward the huge number of fighters who had put their lives on the line for the new republic. In particular, the notion of reward—a payoff to prevent rebellion, to put it in Machiavellian terms—helped turn the bureaucracy into a massive job-creation machine in which, as many observers were to note, the average clerk had hardly any real work to do.

For those who qualified, exciting opportunities for upward mobility within post-colonial Middle Indonesia now opened up. The European elite who had filled the top

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<sup>6</sup>See also Titus and Wouden (1998). Franck (1993) reached a similar conclusion for small cities in East Java.

administrative and business layers in the provincial centers disappeared. So did most of the Indo-Europeans who had occupied the next-lower tier. Although some lingered as managers in major undertakings until the mid-1950s, the executive positions they had once held in government had already passed to indigenous Indonesians at the time of the Japanese victory in March 1942. The substantial proportion of ethnic Chinese in most provincial towns (as seen in the 1930 census [Milone, 1966, pp. 122–128]), most of them engaged in retail and services, were excluded from the opportunity for upward mobility because the nationalist movement had overwhelmingly portrayed them as alien, rich, and pro-Dutch. Thus it was indigenous Indonesians, often lower-ranking aristocrats as well as commoners with a nationalist record, who moved into positions of control. For them the town had always been essentially a place of government, and they were determined to keep it that way (Milone, 1966, p. 33).

The expanded post-colonial bureaucracy did not come with expanded budgets. What the Japanese military forgot to destroy during their three-year occupation (1942–1945), Dutch–Indonesian armed conflict finished off over the ensuing four years. Like many newly independent countries, Indonesia adopted its own version of state socialism. The independent state promised more than its colonial predecessor had ever done, but it could deliver less. The state expanded its economic ambitions, but no longer had the capacity to exert its will regardless of social forces. Self-funding was to a greater or lesser degree the rule for all government departments. The loss of discipline within government had less to do with Indonesian cultural failings than with structural constraints arising from the expectations raised by democracy amidst economic collapse. Indonesia became an archetypical “soft state” (Myrdal, 1968, pp. 895–900). The politicization of the bureaucracy that followed, and the corruption that soon disillusioned so many Indonesians who had supported the anti-colonial struggle, also made its mark on life in provincial urban centers. Most political parties used government departments as patronage bases (the Communist Party, PKI, was an exception). Their generally statist ideologies arose as much from their own practices of primitive accumulation as from popular demands for welfare. Paralyzed by factionalism, the bureaucracy tip-toed around policy issues rather than dealing with them.

Small though the bureaucracy was in relation to the population as a whole, within the provincial center it was well embedded. Donald Fagg’s (1958) dissertation on the bureaucracy in the small town of “Modjokuto” (actually Pare in East Java), the administrative seat of a subdistrict dominated by plantations, is a case study in a rapidly changing social hierarchy. The authority of the subdistrict chief owed almost nothing to his routine bureaucratic powers but everything to his cultural skill in living up to the image of seniority and modernity now expected of him by the town’s complex constituency. Pare’s population was only 15,700 in the early 1950s (Fagg, 1958, p. 259), with about one-third of them dependent on trade. About 1,000, or well over 10% of the working population, were bureaucrats, including teachers. Urban centers higher up the administrative scale had more officials, and civil servants made up the top social layer. “Free professionals” did not exist in Modjokuto: from doctors to bankers, they all worked for the government. It is no wonder, Fagg concluded (1958, pp. 562–563), that local government had become the focus of social stratification.

The military who took over in Jakarta from early 1966 quickly shut down the political mobilization that had been so heavily intertwined with bureaucratic factionalism until

then. At first, the civil service actually shrank as communist sympathizers were purged, particularly from the agricultural and rural development bureaucracy (although the Department of Religion actually burgeoned between 1967 and 1971; Emmerson, 1978). But in 1974, when the oil boom began to give the government the fiscal elbow room to start serious development programs, thereby earning it much-needed performance legitimation, a third burst of bureaucratization ensued. In this phase the absolute number of civil servants quadrupled in only 10 years. Logsdon (1998) has shown how the number continued to grow between 1974 and 1994. Civil servants made up one quarter to one-third of the (largely urban) nonagricultural working population in many outer-island provinces in 1990, as compared to a national average of 12%. More worked indirectly for the state as contractors (Klinken, 2007, p. 41). The educated middle class, especially, overlapped to a great extent with the bureaucracy. A survey in Jogjakarta and Padang showed that 85% of government employees in the sample fell into the middle-class category, whereas 63% of the middle-class members in the sample consisted of government servants (Evers and Gerke, 1994). A zero-growth policy on civil servant numbers, instituted in 1994 due to falling oil prices, caused them to level off since that year. The bureaucracy was certainly not entirely dysfunctional and antisocial. The increase under the New Order was due to the rapid expansion of services like education and health. By 1994, fully 46% of all civil servants were teachers. The number employed in state-owned corporations, meanwhile, had dwindled to an insignificant level.

Nonetheless, self-funding remained a widespread practice. Understandably, in view of the employment situation in many provincial cities, this ensured that, behind closed doors, bureaucratic factionalism remained intense throughout the New Order. A 1970s study of the newly empowered Health Department in the city of Makassar analyzed this factionalism anthropologically (Conkling, 1975, 1979). Officials spent an inordinate amount of time cultivating relations through “support cliques,” usually an ethnic, family, or friendship group. A clique either supported a superior for promotion, or planned a revolt over their abuses (Conkling, 1975, see pp. 96–155). Mutual suspicion was the norm, and everyone assumed that government contracts were awarded on the basis of favoritism, even though that was by no means always the case (Conkling, 1984). Another study on the life histories of civil servants in Bandung showed that, throughout the ranks, most spent a considerable proportion of their time and energy on commercial business activities in order to compensate for their inadequate salaries (Oostingh, 1970). Although the older ones, who remembered the more Weberian standards in the colonial bureaucracy, were embarrassed by the “unsuitable” commercial activities they now engaged in, the younger generation was less troubled by the non-Weberian favoritism that resulted from their plugging into urban commercial networks while activating networks of patrimonial obligation (*ibid.*, p. 173).

The civil servant-cum-entrepreneur was the key characteristic of what Riggs (1964) had called a “sala” bureaucracy, whereby the office merged into the drawing room, which paid lip service to new values while retaining powerful older ones of personal deference, and which showed a large discrepancy between norms and realities. Bureaucratic involvement in business (“bureaucratic capitalism,” according to Riggs, 1966 and Robison, 1978) was the economic backdrop to a paralyzing factionalism. Later case studies showed how this continued to work at the provincial urban level throughout the New Order. Nicole Niessen’s (1999) study of municipal government in Bandung described in

detail such practices as nepotism in civil service recruitment and contract tendering, the skimming off of project money to supplement low salaries, the use of blank receipts and dummy corporations to mask illegal cash transfers, and the influence of substantial third parties on secretive city planning practices at the expense of the poor.

### SOCIAL FORCES

We are now ready to sketch in a synthetic way the social forces that play out in the provincial urban centers, where bureaucracy plays such a major role. It should be clear by now that the state is not an autonomous actor, able to impose its will freely on the population. Rather the pattern of state patronage reflects past and present power struggles. It created unintended consequences that in turn changed the way the state will work in the future. Mushtaq Khan in his study of rents and rent-seeking in Asia ascribed a key role to the rise in the 20th century of an “urban petty-bourgeoisie, the rich peasantry and other emerging middle classes,” who had the organizational abilities to assert themselves against the central government (Khan, 2000, pp. 35–40). The conventionally assumed autonomy of élites at the pinnacle of the state and economy is thus limited by less well-endowed but much more numerous and highly political groups farther down the social pyramid.

One of the first to point out the importance of these new classes for Asian studies was the economist Barbara Harriss-White in her study of small-town India. She used the term *intermediate class*: “Outside India’s metropolitan cities the economy is dominated by the intermediate classes, a loose coalition of the small-scale capitalist class, agrarian and local agribusiness elites, and local state officials” (Harriss-White, 2003, pp. 44, 241). The overwhelming informality of the economy at this level, regulated as it is by nonmarket social mechanisms such as patriarchy, ethnic and religious solidarity, and the threat of violence, makes it difficult for the government to establish its authority. Conversely it gives the intermediate classes, who are masters of informality, the ability to sabotage government policy and manipulate subsidies in their favor. Governments of developing countries, writes Khan (2000, pp. 35–40), seek to ensure political stability by awarding these political intermediaries substantial “transfer rents” in the form of state subsidies. The image of emerging (lower) middle classes who pressure governments not by their economic power but by their mobilizing skills echoes the observations quoted above, by Antlöv (2003) and Jones (1988), on the reasons behind Indonesian state subsidies for provincial urbanization during the New Order.

At first, foreign academics studying Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s looked for the modernizing, individuating professionals and entrepreneurs that Dan Lerner (1964) had described so influentially in the Middle East. When Clifford Geertz researched the small town of “Modjokuto” in the mid-1950s (the same one Fagg had investigated), he caught glimpses of Weber’s Protestant Ethic in the outlooks of the Islamic traders (Geertz, 1963c, p. 49). But he found a lot of communal organizing besides, which he called *aliran* politics and which became a classic concept for scholars of Indonesia. “This provisional, in-between, ‘no man’s land’ quality of Modjokuto social life,” he wrote (*ibid.*, p. 16), “is, in fact, its most outstanding characteristic.” Traditional loyalties had not “wholly dissolved,” whereas more modern ones had not “wholly crystallized.” Thus arose the image of the socially and economically stagnant Indonesian provincial town.

In hindsight it is clear that Geertz overlooked two important features of town life in the 1950s. One was the fluidity of these “traditional loyalties.” Other observers realized they were not pre-modern vestiges but new urban inventions. Edward Bruner (1961) noticed that Batak “traditions” grew stronger in the city of Medan than they had ever been in the countryside. The anthropologist Douglas Miles heard in the 1960s from a small-town Kalimantan Dayak politician named Mahir Mahar how he and his committee had toured the rural upriver Dayak communities before the war in order to stimulate his rural cousins’ ethnic awareness. The colonial Dutch were encouraging the infusion of ethnicity into provincial politics in order to keep “communists” at bay, and Mahar needed to create a constituency for himself.<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz himself (1963b, p. 270) even once wrote, but without elaborating, that

it is the very process of the formation of a sovereign civil state that [...] stimulates sentiments of parochialism, communalism, racialism [...] because it introduced into society a valuable new prize over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend.

Two decades later, “neo-patrimonialism” had become an important theme in studies of Indonesian national politics (Crouch, 1979; Jackson, 1980; King, 1982). It was used to explain the sultan-like behavior of presidents, political factionalism in Jakarta, communalistic voter behavior, the regionalism-based revolts of the 1950s, and corruption generally. Unfortunately, the grassroots concreteness of the concept became somewhat obscured as analysts looked to Jakarta during the centralizing New Order. But it is being recognized once again in post–New Order studies of the regions today. Vigorous communal organizing returned when democratization and decentralization came to the provinces after 1998. Though only occasionally violent, it was always part of competition for control of the local state (Schulte Nordholt and Klinken, 2007). Communal organizing was not only about internal competition but also about the provinces striking back at the metropolitan capital, Jakarta. One of the most popular localist battle cries was that top local bureaucratic positions and business favors should be reserved for “regional sons” (*putra daerah*).

Communal organizing has therefore repeatedly been a mobilizing technique used by well-embedded provincial élites to pressure collective rivals who, in other respects (money, official status), ought to be their superiors. The ability to rally masses of ordinary citizens into family-like solidarities, whether nationalist, regionalist, ethnic, or religious, gave provincial political entrepreneurs considerable bargaining powers with national political party apparatchiks, senior technocrats, and even captains of industry. They readily invoked their powers to sabotage policies designed in faraway places by, for example, threatening to secede. It had been their ability to make the archipelago ungovernable that drove the Dutch to despair of reasserting their authority after World War II. After

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<sup>7</sup>“He and his political associates acted on the assumption that in an administrative unit where Ngadju [Dayak] were a majority, ethnic loyalties of the hinterland population would keep their leaders in power against Banjarese-Malay rivalry. However, a campaign to bolster awareness of common traditional values and interests among people of various *utus* [dialect group] identity would be a necessary preliminary to the establishment of an autonomous administrative entity” (Miles, 1976, p. 126).

independence, their agitation forced the new government to abandon the market-oriented economic policies that might have saved the country from economic collapse.

The other feature Geertz overlooked was the state, rather odd when we recall how fresh the 1945 Revolution was. One reason for this was the choice of location. Pare was a subdistrict town (*kecamatan*), but its civil servants were present in “stupefying” numbers (Geertz, 1963c, p. 12) only in the district capital (*kabupaten*). Another was Geertz’s methodological lack of interest in the state, something he shared with American social scientists in general during the early 1950s. It was to be another three decades before some of them were to “bring the state back in.” One contemporary researcher who did not share in this neglect was Herbert Feith. In his definitive study of politics in the post-revolutionary period, he estimated the national “political public” at approximately 1–1.5 million by equating it with the number of newspaper readers (1962, pp. 109–113). This rapidly growing group consisted of “persons in white-collar occupations and their status equivalents,” people who had lost touch with their rural and traditional roots, and who “saw themselves as capable of taking action which could affect national government or politics.” Most of the country’s nearly half million civil servants belonged to the political public, as did religious functionaries, labor leaders, middle-level traders, and revolutionary veterans.

Although only a small percentage of the total population (ca. 80 million at the time), their overwhelmingly urban residence in a country only just over 10% urban made them a major force in the towns and cities. They could be seen as a democratized advancement of the earlier two-class division of Indonesian society into the spheres of the state and the village. It was this political public that provided the constituency for the political entrepreneurs Feith called “solidarity makers” (by contrast with the élite “administrators”). Gerald Maryanov, one of the few scholars of Indonesian provincial politics in the 1950s, thought some measure of education was the primary marker of the political public. It was they, he believed, who set the tone:

The definition of problems takes place within this group, and it sets the climate of opinion in which problems are discussed and solved. We would further suggest that the desirability or acceptability of particular policies will be entirely determined here. (Maryanov, 1959, p. 63)

Since about the 1930s, those problems had been defined almost entirely in statist terms. So few indigenous Indonesians were successful private entrepreneurs before independence that all political parties, from socialist to religious, were in favor of extensive state supervision if not outright state ownership of the economy (Sutter, 1959, Vol. 1, p. 114 ff.). During the national war of liberation of the late 1940s, Prime Minister Hatta, a Dutch-educated economist, led attempts to nationalize everything from sugar and textile production to rice distribution and land titles. Dutch and Chinese capital was the leading source of evil for all Indonesian politicians. The belief that private enterprise was dishonorable and the government should protect people from it was widespread (Sutter, 1959, Vol. 1, pp. 692–693).

Once independence was achieved, provincial town notables continued to favor a large state sector, because these places rarely had any industry to speak of. As told by Jamie Mackie (1971), the nationalization of Dutch industrial, trading, and plantation concerns

in December 1957 was the point when Indonesia turned away from *laissez-faire* capitalism to what was soon called “socialisme à la Indonesia.” The actual transformation of the economy fell short of its rhetoric condemning “free-fight capitalism.” Unlike in India, the Indonesian government did not regulate expenditures in the private sector, and no attempt was made to collectivize agriculture. But the government seemed unable to put a halt to spiraling state expenditures in the face of demands from what Mackie called the “political class.” Personal taxation largely disappeared, and the state drew an inadequate income mainly from highly complicated import taxes. This deficit spending led to runaway inflation by 1962. Yet townfolk (at least in Java) actually benefited from the mayhem by their control of scarce imports. They also persuaded the government to launch one welfare scheme after another for their benefit. Each one crashed on the rocks of the rent-seeking practices that dominated the bustling urban centers with their extensive populations of the disguised unemployed. The first of the Five Year Plans, in 1956, envisaged large investments in the public sector. Demobilized soldiers were assisted with sawmilling businesses, a Small Scale Industrialization Plan made loans for home industry, the “Induks” scheme aimed to help indigenous merchants bypass the Chinese, and the “benteng” system aimed to bring import licensing under central government control. Most of these efforts failed due to “poor administration” (Mackie, 1971, p. 47). The American economist Hans Schmitt wrote in a despairing tone (1962) that the political radicalism of the period was the result of Indonesia being run by a political élite with no real interest in capital accumulation, because the biggest enterprises (even after the end of 1957) remained in foreign hands.

The mobilizing skills of the political public—or we may say the provincial intermediate class—was constantly on display in the 1950s and early 1960s. Overcoming tremendous logistical challenges in an archipelago of thousands of inhabited islands, they created political party branches in the smallest towns, and ensured a nationwide election participation rate of 92% in 1955. The government’s inability to resist special pleading by importers was matched by more appeasement when others protested. In late 1956, areas that felt disadvantaged by Jakarta’s economic policies (mainly on Sumatra and Sulawesi) launched armed revolts with a secessionist undertone (PRRI/Permesta). Though desperately poor, Jakarta responded by awarding new provinces, with generous accompanying infrastructure budgets, in all the rebellious areas.<sup>8</sup> Effectively gifts of the means of primitive accumulation, these new provinces were the perfect example of the political “transfer rent” for the sake of stability that Khan was later to describe. Similar provincial threats to “secede” following democratization in 1998 have produced, as we have seen, another wave of new provinces and districts in recent years, despite technical advice that the new administrative machinery would be unlikely to improve governance.

The reason why this intermediate class activism is so effective is that, unlike the consumerist, often apolitical “middle classes” that fascinated social scientists during the late New Order (Tanter and Young, 1990; Pinches, 1999), these less privileged intermediate

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<sup>8</sup>New provinces created in the late 1950s following regional revolts in Sumatra, Sulawesi, Kalimantan and (earlier) in Maluku were: South-, Central-, Southeast-, and North Sulawesi; Jambi, West Sumatra; Riau; West-, Central-, and East Kalimantan; Bali; West Nusa Tenggara; and East Nusa Tenggara. Maluku was changed from an “administrative” to an “autonomous” province (Legge, 1961, pp. 66–68).

classes are culturally not so far removed from their social inferiors. They arose after 1945 from the same run-down semi-rural *kampongs* as the urban poor. We do not have good data on provincial inequalities in the 1950s, but around 1990 they were not high by global standards. Indonesia's Gini index of 0.34 is about the same as India's of 0.33, and lower than the 0.41 recorded by the United States. Outer-island inequalities—whether measured within urban areas or between urban and rural areas—are actually slightly lower than those in Java. This is due to the absence of industry and the dominance of agriculture, trade, and bureaucracy in those areas (Akita and Lukman, 1999). The neo-patrimonial relations between intermediate class members and their poorer dependents are simply unequal friendships—they exist between people who are not separated from each other by great distances on the social spectrum. This reflects the “shared poverty” that Armstrong and McGee identified as the key characteristic of Indonesia's urban centers. But these towns and cities have not been politically quiescent. It is true that they have not proven to be incubators of lower-class revolution. Their activism has been of the darker, more conservative kind, reflecting the interests of their careerist intermediate classes.

The locus for this activism is the informal economy—unregulated, untaxed, and excluded from official statistics. Informality, some of it criminal, figures largely in the economies of provincial towns all over the world (Datta, 1990). As in the 1950s, the informal economy today employs huge numbers in Indonesia. Almost two-thirds of the labor force today works in the unregistered (though not necessarily poor) informal economy. Most of this occurs in agriculture, but in urban areas, too, slightly more people now work in the informal than in the formal sector, and the gap appears to be growing steadily (Angelini and Hirose, 2004). Trade is almost wholly informal. Patterns of circular migration and commuting that link an urban center to its surrounding countryside pass substantially through the informal sector. Generally better-educated young people use ethnic networks to find a job first in the urban informal sector, before moving later into the formal sector, preferably the government (Costello et al., 1987; Hugo, 1996).

Whereas many studies have portrayed the informal economy as a valuable sink for excess labor and a buffer for revolutionary forces, others have highlighted its exploitative, organized crime-like nature. It is the crossover between the informal sector and predation by underfunded state officials that transforms key parts of the provincial city's stereotypical bazaar economy for the “little people” into a black economy that also benefits local élites. More open conditions after 1998 have permitted more research into this delicate arena than was previously possible. Jun Honna (2006), for instance, describes post-1998 military garrison commanders in provincial Java who sought to supplement their plummeting extra-budgetary incomes after the bankruptcy of “regular” military businesses (such as an airline and taxi cooperatives), by getting into the protection of illegal logging, human trafficking, the illicit drug trade, and stolen vehicles. The highly competitive, ethnicity-based, and sometimes violent post-1998 election of district heads in provincial West Kalimantan, meanwhile, appears to be fueled by trading in illegal timber, an activity that is about as large as the trade in legal logs (Klinken, 2008). Numerous other examples of lucrative shadow-state activities could be mentioned, ranging from prostitution to illegal fishing to scams involving land, labor migration, and the religious *haj* to illegal tin and gold mining. Much of this plays out in provincial cities, where it provides the hidden context for the struggles among élites that do not make the newspapers. The theft of public resources these activities represent exacerbates the problems of

governance delivery that the central government faces, and should be seen as yet another example of the hijacking of the state by Khan's "emerging middle classes."

### CONCLUSIONS

The emerging classes arising out of the social forces described in this study have grown enormously since the 1950s, whether one attempts to measure their size by political awareness (Feith's newspaper-reading public), white-collar occupations (another of Feith's criteria), a combination of self-employed small businesspeople and local officials (Harriss-White's criterion), or a high school education (Maryanov's criterion). Rather than being distinguishable by "objective" income or occupational criteria, however, they are known by their political activism. The typical features of Middle Indonesian urban centers—including localism, communitarianism, primitive accumulation, and manipulation of government subsidies—should be traced to the interests of these emerging intermediate classes. These differ markedly from the bourgeois concerns of those who live in the corporate, formal economy, who have had all the attention as the creators of Indonesia's "miracle" economic boom after 1965. The argument here—which I hope others will examine with better data and sharper analytical skills than I could muster—is simply that the middle class has not only grown at its upper end but even more so at its lower end. It is the latter group, with their very different outlook on life, that dominates the countryside through the cities and towns of Middle Indonesia. These places are not stagnant pools of immigrant peasants sharing their poverty, but places of political entrepreneurship able to impress themselves on the course of the state.

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