Muslim Politics Review
Vol. 2 No. 2, 2023, 345-351
https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v2i2.207

Book Review

Democracy, Corruption and the Politics of Spirits in Contemporary Indonesia (London and New York: Routledge, 2014)

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Nils Bubandt, the author of *Democracy, Corruption and the Politics of Spirits in Contemporary Indonesia*, discusses three important topics in this book: democracy, corruption, and the politics of spirits in contemporary Indonesian society. In exploring these three things, Bubandt discusses through the lenses of five objects: *kyai*, bloggers, politicians, sultans, and prophets. Bubandt also discusses the charm of democracy, the paradox of Indonesian democracy, the 'ghosts' of politics in democracy such as corruption, elitism, nepotism, and patrimonialism (the 'meeting' between the modern political system and traditional political culture rooted in past kingdoms), and secularism. Bubandt's discussion of these interesting themes is framed within the framework of a study of the world of politics and the world of *jin*/unseen worlds or 'other realms'.

The author conducted ethnographic research in East Java and North Maluku provinces between 2001 and 2002. This book was written based on the fieldwork in the two provinces. Bubant's multi-sited ethnographic method attempts to systemically identify local realities from several locations, then examine the world system of these

localities. For this reason, a researcher immerses himself in the community to obtain their stories and metaphors, then travels from one location to another. According to George E. Marcus (1995) in his writing *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multisited Ethnography*, a multi-sited ethnography researcher needs to "follow the thing" related to circulation, networks, distribution of commodities, money, works of art, or intellectual property which is an approach in researching the circulation process of the capitalist system.

In collecting his data, Bubandt looked for information on topics related to his research, such as people, policy makers, metaphors, stories, conflicts, and biographies of relevant figures. It seems that Bubandt chose to focus more on key figures rather than interviews with ordinary citizens. This is perhaps understandable because of the view that the magical world, politics, and corruption are mostly controlled by key figures in the community.

Bubandt places himself as the main instrument (the self) and his informants as the others to examine democracy, corruption, and politics of the unseen world in contemporary Indonesian society, represented by East Java and North Maluku. According to Bubandt, these three topics cannot be separated from modern Indonesian politics. In fact, Indonesian democracy and the unseen world are very close to each other. As a researcher from the Western world educated at Denmark's Aarhus University and The Australian National University, of course Bubandt understands that democracy is a rational choice, but democracy and the supernatural world are unusual and strange, and, as Bubant uncovers in this research, Indonesian democracy is not set apart from the magical world.

Bubandt's study can be an opening for further studies. Bubandt's focus on exploring these three topics in their entirety required him to move from East Java to North Maluku—two regions that are very rarely studied comparatively. Indeed, I think Bubandt's reasons for researching these two regions are very rational, considering that North Maluku is a

predominantly Muslim area which tends to be sufistic and has a certain kind of paradigm about the world that is unique, as well as having magical components, such as the sultan's crown and the sacredness of a sultan. Meanwhile, East Java is a region which is a strong base of Islam in Indonesia, and which, in certain respects, has not abandoned Javanese mysticism, even though it has embraced Islam. In my opinion, Bubandt's comparative focus in his book is appropriate because it examines relevant topics that drive contemporary Indonesian politics.

Efforts to deny the unseen world in politics also occur in the study of political science and philosophy in the 20th century. However, emerging facts have shown that secular democracy is something that is very soft and open to interpretation by people wishing to adopt democracy, such as in Indonesia. There is a tendency in Indonesia to adopt Western ideas such as democracy but go through various 'naturalisation' processes, involving Indonesian people's ways of thinking, which are inseparable from magic. This means that the implementation of democracy in other countries is not the same because it is often greatly influenced by local cultural factors which are very different between the West and the East. In fact, it is no longer relevant to separate West and East diametrically because our societies are connected to one another, although the general belief is that there are still differences in views between Western and Eastern people, or, in another sense, there are differences between people who tend to be rational and people who tend to be spiritual.

This book is significant for its research on democracy and the politics of spirits. First, by using multi-sited ethnography, Bubandt has succeeded in abstracting a seemingly ordinary phenomenon into an academic concept worthy of study and debate. For two years, he carried out participant observation, meeting several key figures such as Kyai Muzakkin, the Sultan of Ternate, Pak Muhammad, and Hajjah Nur, to dig deeper into information from these deliberately selected informants. As far as the author knows, Bubandt is a researcher who actively

participated in various cultural events in North Maluku to further immerse himself in the local community.

Bubandt has benefited from previous research regarding *suanggi* ('local devils') in North Maluku, which focused on studies in East Halmahera. His experience in completing his PhD at ANU certainly made it easier for him to build report cards, participant-observation and immersion which are very important in understanding important meanings in society (Emerson, Fret, and Shaw: 1995: 2). This means that in terms of language, which is the key to being familiar with local culture (Newman, 1965: 5), at least Bubandt had mastered it before this research. North Maluku, as a region that has been visited by foreigners since the 16th century, such as the Portuguese and the Spanish, the Dutch and the Japanese, is now open when dealing with foreigners. This, of course, made it easier for Bubandt to carry out his research to completion. However, in this book he does not explain what his research questions were to the reader and what questions were not answered by his informants. Except for Hajjah Nur, whose real name he kept secret, Bubandt described the other key informants openly.

In terms of references, this book is rich with theoretical and practical references from research by academics at home and abroad. However, there are not many references to the work of the Ternate people themselves about their culture. For example, writings by the Sultan of Ternate Mudaffar Sjah are not cited by Bubandt. Other sources owned by the Ternate Sultanate include the Copper Book, which is also not referenced, nor are books written by North Maluku writers such as Abdul Hamid Hassan, Jusuf Abdulrahman, Adnan Amal, Gufran Ali Ibrahim, and local academics from Khairun University, Muhammadiyah University of North Maluku, and STAIN Ternate. Surely these resources are relevant to see the connection between the supernatural world and politics in the Sultanate of Ternate. This shortcoming is quite disturbing, because local researchers also have skills in seeing the culture that exists in their community. However, this deficiency was overcome by

Bubandt's interviews with key informants.

In general, I think this book will help lead to new studies regarding the relationship between the supernatural world and politics in Indonesia, as well as being an interesting study using multi-sited ethnography. For the general public, this book will enrich their understanding of the socio-political changes occurring in Indonesia. Relatively rapid socio-political changes require researchers to use a multi-sited perspective so that they can see the global system from the perspective of localities that interact with each other, influence and produce various new ideas, as these ideas are also influenced by and can influence the global system.

Personally, I was also interested in the story about Soekarno and Sultan Jailolo, which states that Soekarno was a direct descendant of Mohammad Arif Bila, who came from North Maluku. Hajjah Nur's story also provides legitimacy for the election of Abdullah Harianto as the real Sultan of Jailolo in 2001. The connection between Jailolo and Soekarno can also be seen from Soekarno's descendants—namely Megawati, one of Soekarno's daughters, who became president—as the second resurrection of Sultan Jailolo. The synchronisation between Megawati's democratic rise as President of Indonesia and the restoration of the Jailolo Sultanate, according to Bubandt, can be seen as a democratic shift that exists as 'destiny' driven from the unseen world. What Hajjah Nur did (and the Sultan of Ternate as mentioned above) was part of the divine duty of the struggle to restore tradition and incorporate the position of ancestral spirits into politics in order to create a truly democratic political world.

These facts prove that democracy is not only considered as a connection between facts and logic, that separates it diametrically from religion and belief. Belief in democracy and the 'just king' in Hajjah Nur's 'prophetic' perspective reflects that the logic of government governance is also filled with trust, confidence, and predictions. According to Bubandt, the failure of the prophecy related to the return

of the missing Sultan Jailolo is a failure of Indonesian democracy. The identification of the long-lost Sultan with the spirit of Soekarno was driven by a 'millenarian nostalgia' for democracy both on a local and national scale. On a local scale, the story of the return of Sultan Jailolo is a form of promise for the return of democracy based on spiritual power (*barakat*) in North Maluku, which had historically been confiscated by European colonialism in the 16th century and by Indonesian nationalists in the early 20th century.

In this book, Nils Bubandt presents an ethnographic narrative of political paradoxes associated with corruption and the supernatural world in contemporary Indonesian society. The unseen world is something that is very important in ethnographic research because it can help in reading the successes and failures of democracy in Southeast Asia. In the context of anthropology, according to Bubandt political anthropological studies should study the unseen world as seriously as political actors because the political world and the unseen world are closely intertwined with each other. The unseen world has also been 'released' (or present) in various demonstrations, elections, administrative processes in decentralised governments, in the media, anti-corruption NGOs, and imaginations about national history, the late Indonesian president, and the political future.

Bubandt sees that, ethnographically, his research has expanded the paradox that corruption has become a very bad tool in democratic reproduction in Indonesia. Corruption can be seen as a "total evil fact" that negates social, public and good problems such as law, rights, markets, life and democracy. In another sense, corruption is the anti-spirit of contemporary momentum which is likened to a ghost in the democratic machine. In this context, what Kyai Muzakkin did by sending a thousand *jin* in a demonstration was part of showing the world of spirits in the real world.

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