

Book Review: Aspinall, E. & Sukmajati, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia. Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots.*

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In 2018, Indonesia will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its democratization process that was augmented after the fall of long-term authoritarian president Suharto in May 1998. Since then, Indonesia has witnessed four legislative elections (1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014), which were generally welcomed as largely free and fair. However, the extent to which Indonesian politics in general – and elections specifically – are being dominated by money politics, patronage, and clientelism remains one of the main concerns of many scholars and observers (e.g., Aspinall, 2013; Hadiz & Robison, 2013; Mietzner, 2013; Robertson-Snape, 1999; Simandjuntak, 2012; van Klinken, 2009). In this respect, it appears that the 2014 legislative elections marked a disturbing peak. In the introduction to their edited volume *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia*¹, Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati describe the role money politics played in the 2014 elections as “the most ‘massive’ it had ever been” (p. 2).

The research presented in Aspinall’s and Sukmajati’s volume aims at “identifying the chief mechanisms that Indonesian legislative candidates used to appeal to voters [in the 2014 legislative elections]” (p. ix). The volume originates from an impressive collaborative research project comprising 50, mostly Indonesian, researchers who observed the lead up to the 2014 national legislative elections in 20 of Indonesia’s 34 provinces.² All in all, 1,500 interviews with candidates and campaigners were conducted and hundreds of campaign events observed.

The book comprises 23 chapters – a comprehensive introduction and 22 case studies that present empirical data from across Indonesia. In their introduction “Patronage and Clientelism in Indonesian Electoral Politics”, Aspinall and Sukmajati give a brief overview of relevant works on patronage and clientelism in Indonesian politics, explain the research design and goals, summarize the main findings of the case studies, and last but not least, hint to limitations of the volume while pointing out desiderates for further research.

In reviewing the literature on the role of patronage and clientelism in Indonesian politics, the authors cite a wide range of publications that stress the key role of patronage and clientelist practices in Indonesian electoral as well as

1 An Indonesian version of the edited volume was published in 2014.

2 The research was conducted in the frame of a larger research project on money politics in South-east Asia, comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

party politics. At the same time, the authors criticize the limited knowledge that exists regarding the actual workings and functioning of such mechanisms as compared to other Southeast Asia countries (e.g., Thailand). Accordingly, the case studies presented in Chapters 13 to 16, describe in detail how vote buying actually works for the first time.

Although the research underpinning the volume did not exclusively focus on patronage politics by legislative candidates, the authors conclude that “patronage distribution is the central mode of political campaigning in Indonesian legislative elections” (p. 5). This is not only supported by the findings of all 22 case studies presented in the volume but also illustrated by statements of candidates quoted in the introduction who, after the elections, publicly regretted their decision to refrain from handing out monetary incentives. But, what is it that actually made patronage feature so prominently in the 2014 elections? Aspinall and Sukmajati go into depth to find answers to this question – which also is the main argument of the volume – by looking into the legal changes in the Indonesian elections legislation over the past 15 years. In its second³ democratic elections in 1999, Indonesia used a fully closed proportional representation system. In this system, the place of a candidate on the party list, and on the ballot paper accordingly, decided whether or not he or she would win a seat in an electoral district. Then, starting in 2009, Indonesia’s election legislation changed to a fully open-list proportional representation, which meant that the candidate who was able to accumulate the most individual votes in an electoral district would win the seat, provided that the party surpassed the electoral threshold. This led to the paradox that suddenly legislative candidates no longer see candidates from other parties as their main competitors but those coming from their own party ranks. In this logic, it became more rational for candidates to rely on highly individualist, not party-based campaign strategies and to pursue as many individual votes as possible.

In their analysis of the case studies assembled in the volume, Aspinall and Sukmajati offer a typology of different kinds of patronage that featured as reoccurring patterns in the elections. They distinguish between (1) vote buying, (2) individual gifts, (3) services and activities, (4) club goods, and (5) pork barrel projects. Vote buying (1), here, is understood as the distribution of money or goods to voters with the expectation that beneficiaries would repay the favor with their vote. The case studies presented in Chapter 14 to 17 on rural East and Central Java not only describe thickly the actual practice of vote buying but also reveal that, in these areas, it seemed to be more common as well as more socially accepted than in other researched areas. Individual gifts (2) consisted of different categories such as ‘election merchandise’ like calendars showing the candidate’s picture and name, food items like rice, clothing, or household items. These goods were both distributed on house-to-house visits and campaign events, either by the candidate him- or herself or by campaign teams. The authors admit that it is difficult to sharply distinguish between vote buying and individual gifts. What is more important, though, is that many of the interviewed candidates did not consider individual gift distribution as part of money politics. Services and activities (3) that were provided by candidates included sports competitions, community parties, prayer meetings, and cooking demonstrations, to name just a

3 The first democratic Indonesian legislative elections were held in 1955 (Feith, 1957).

few. This also included the 'distribution' of free health insurance or the assistance for voters to access government services such as health or scholarship programs. Club goods (4) were a kind of patronage that targeted social groups in a certain locality rather than individuals. They included, inter alia, donations for the renovation of public infrastructure or farming equipment. In many cases, candidates used community leaders as vote brokers to ensure the electoral support of their communities. Based on these insights, the authors conclude that many candidates considered club goods morally and legally superior to other forms of patronage but less reliable in garnering voters' actual support. As opposed to all other forms of patronage, pork barrel projects are not funded privately but are "geographically targeted and publicly funded benefits in repayment of, or expectation of, political support" (p. 24). This meant that candidates promised to fund public programs in their electoral district paid by the so-called aspiration funds (*dana aspirasi*) that Indonesian legislators have on their disposal to respond to their constituencies' 'aspirations'.

The 22 case studies in the volume are mapped out like a 'legislative journey' from Aceh, the westernmost province of Indonesia, to the central highlands of Papua in the east of the archipelago state. All in all, they cover seven election campaigns on Sumatra, ten on Java, one on Kalimantan, two on Sulawesi, one in East Nusa Tenggara, and two in Papua. The editors decided to group the case studies geographically rather than thematically as similar patterns of election campaigning emerged in all of them. Furthermore, the research project focused especially on the effects of different social, political, and economic factors as well as constituency size on campaigning strategies. Accordingly, the case study sites vary not only regarding ethnic, religious, and social composition but also in terms of scale and scope: While some of them closely observed campaigning in only one or two electoral districts of a city (*kota*) or a district (*kabupaten*), others looked at dynamics in a whole district or even province. In addition, while some focused on the legislative races for a district parliament only, others compared races for all three legislative levels (national, provincial, district/city) in one locality.

Although the book appears to present an inventory of cases rather than a deep comparative analysis, without doubt its value lies in the thick description and documentation of vote buying, patronage, and clientelist dynamics in Indonesian elections at the grassroots in highly heterogeneous localities. The case studies are well structured and profoundly rich in original research material as well as references. Also, the book convincingly demonstrates that there seems to exist what could be termed a 'unity in diversity' when it comes to the question of how prominently money politics, patronage, and clientelism actually feature in contemporary Indonesian politics. All studies assembled in this edited volume clearly conclude that money politics is considered to be a legitimate means to the end of electoral victory. Although no promise of winning the race exists for whoever spends most on the campaign, the findings of the case studies clearly indicate that there is a widespread belief all over Indonesia that electoral campaigns cannot be won without employing money politics, at least to a certain extent. Last but not least, although the richness of original and highly interesting fieldwork data assembled in this book speaks for itself, it becomes obvious to the reader that the volume comprises preliminary results of a larger research project, the outcomes of which are yet to be analyzed more comprehensively. It is

particularly these future insights, which everyone interested in Indonesia's highly dynamic democratization process should definitely look forward to.

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