

## HUMAN GEOGRAPHIES OF DECENTRALIZED INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the aims of this short paper is to sketch human geographical dimensions of decentralized Indonesia. The paper is structured around a series of sub-disciplinary issues that arise from processes evident over the past decade. In each case, I seek to develop a theme around existing work by geographers published in English language internationally-refereed journals. In this way, a second aim of the paper is to provide (especially for Indonesian geographers who often do not or cannot access these 'international' journals) a sense of the range of work that is considered to constitute 'human geography' in English-speaking academic worlds. In other words, I suggest pathways for human geographical research in an era of decentralization in Indonesia building upon existing scholarship published in the English language.*

**Keywords:** human geographical, decentralized, sub-disciplinary issues

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has gained international visibility in recent years in both media channels and geographical scholarship. A series of major geophysical events have reaffirmed Indonesia's prominence for environmental and physical geographers. The tsunami which struck the northern and western coastline of Sumatra on 26 December 2004, in particular, opened possibilities for a 'wave of geographical research' on the restoration and management of coastal ecosystems as well as on hazard mitigation [Wong, 2005]. Yet, as Wong Poh Poh has recognized, work on the biophysical environments affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami also have important human geographical dimensions. Habitat restoration, for example, 'should be seen as a process that must include the restoration of a livelihood for the local people' (p.260), and hazard mitigation measures are dependent upon local community contexts, including possibilities to draw upon traditional ecological knowledge. To date, however, published human geography research on post-tsunami Aceh in English language international journals has focused on rather different issues, including the migrant connections of Acehnese overseas [Nah and

Bunnell, 2005], relationships between the 'natural' disaster and post-conflict diplomacy [Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007; Gaillard *et al.*, 2008], and the geopolitics of international humanitarian responses [Mamadouh, 2008].

The in many ways exceptional context of Aceh provides evidence of a more widespread series of processes transforming human geographies across Indonesia. Comparison of a political map of Aceh from ten years ago with an up-to-date one provides clear clues to this transformation. Between the years 2000 and 2005 alone, the number of districts in Aceh increased from 13 to 21 (or from 11 *kabupaten* and 2 *Kota*, to 17 *kabupaten* and 4 *Kota*). Similar patterns of *pemekaran* are evident in many other regions of Indonesia. Indeed, the number of district governments in Indonesia outside Jakarta rose from 292 in 1998 to 434 by the end of 2004 [Fitriani *et al.*, 1995] and has now reached almost 500. Most of this increase took place following the so-called 'Big Bang' of decentralization in 2001, a process which has geographical implications extending way beyond the creation of new administrative units and associated additional lines on political maps. Yet while issues of decentralization, devolution and regional autonomy have attracted considerable academic attention – see for example the edited collections by [Kingsbury and Aveling, 2003] and by [Erb *et al.*, 2005] – relatively little of this, to date, has come from geographers.

## THE METHODS

### Geographies of decentralization and *pemekaran* in Indonesia

The beginning of the era of decentralization in Indonesia was marked by Laws 22 and 25 of 1999. The former concerned regional governance including election of the head of a region and associated local political accountability. Law 25, meanwhile, introduced new fiscal relations, in which local revenues would be provided largely from *dana alokasi umum* (DAU, general allocation grant) and shared taxes, including from natural resources such as oil and gas. [Fitriani *et al.*, 2005] note that following the introduction of these laws in 2001, the regional share of total government expenditures rose from around 17% to over 30%. In addition, Government Regulation 129/2000 established new criteria for the formation (*pemekaran*) of new regions. What follows is a consideration of some of the 'geographies' of these policy shifts. These include (in Section B) their implications or effects and wider human geographical transformation in an era decentralization. However, I begin in Section A by considering geographical issues which lay behind Indonesia's decentralization 'Big Bang'.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Anti-Balkanization: Unity in decentralization**

Given the apparent fragility of the Indonesian state after the fall of President Suharto in 1998, there were fears of territorial disintegration. Political scientists in particular have noted widespread resentment towards Jakarta, including demands for secession in some of Indonesia's 'outer islands', most notably in Papua and Aceh see for example, [Aspinall, 2003; Miller, 2004]. The independence of East Timor in 1999 appeared to confirm the possibility of a 'Balkanization' of Indonesia. It was in this context that political elites in Jakarta brought about policies which ran against 32 years of centralized administration under Suharto. Following the new strategy, somewhat paradoxically, decentralization and devolution of power was considered to be precisely what would hold the archipelagic diversity of the Indonesian nation-state together.

The policy of decentralization was associated with new political and administrative geographies. One which is particularly worthy of note concerns the scale to which administrative decentralization occurred – namely, the district (*kabupaten* and *kota*) scale rather than to provinces. While this was often said to have been motivated by a desire to bring the government 'closer to the people', it is clear that this was only part of the story. As the geographer [Muriel Charras, 2005] has noted,

The choice of *kabupaten* as the unit for decentralization without provincial coordination was expressly made by former Jakartanese elites as a means of averting tendencies towards separatism, federalism, or even perhaps so that the process would come to naught and force a return of power to the centre later on. The "centre" was always aware of – if not obsessed with – the danger of a powerful province, since most provincial capitals are historical, political and economic centres (p.94).

In other words, the district scale was chosen in part because of the absence at that scale of powerful claims for secession which could threaten Indonesia's national territorial integrity. And so provincial scale secessionist claims were a factor in the decision to devolve power and resources to the scale 'below'.

### **Global networks: Geographies of neoliberalization**

While decentralization policies emerged directly from Jakarta-based elites' responses to post-Suharto regional politics, they were not played out in an international vacuum. There were important international or supranational influences on policies implemented after 1998 and these too may be understood in terms of distinct 'geographies'. Supranational organizations such as the IMF and World Bank (WB) came to play expanded roles in Indonesia. If the financial 'crisis'

allowed the IMF to dictate economic reform, political crisis cleared a path for WB-style policies of decentralization and devolution. Indonesia had experimented with limited decentralization earlier in the 1990s, but there is no doubt that the WB played an important role in shaping the form that these eventually took in the post-Suharto era.

For some influential geographers, transformations in Indonesia associated with organizations such as the IMF and WB are evidence that Indonesia has become bound up in global trends of neoliberalization [Harvey, 2005]. Recently, a leading English language geography journal, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* [Klein and Smith, 2008] gave attention to [Naomi Klein's, 2007] book, *The Shock Doctrine* which argues that crises – whether in the form of political events, warfare or natural disasters – have been used as opportunities to for agents of neoliberalization. If such global scale arguments are somewhat over-generalized then there is important work to be done in examining the relationship between ostensibly 'neoliberal' policies and institutions on the one hand and actual political, economic and social spaces on the other. Leaving aside the question of the extent to which the IMF and WB (and its various offshoots) should be labelled collectively as 'neoliberal', one way in which to do this would be to trace the institutional networks through which international organizations enter into and operate within Indonesia. These associations may be understood as forming part of networked political spaces which have potentially powerful effects in shaping more conventional geographies. Yet it must also be borne in mind that such 'global' processes are intertwined with other constitutive geographies, not least the kinds of national(ist) concerns noted in (i) above.

### **Regional blossoming: The making of new political space**

Post-Suharto political alliances and networks within Indonesia have given rise to the *pemekaran* or (literally) 'blossoming' of new regional territories. In some cases, regions created through Government Regulation 129/2000 gave administrative and cartographic expression to long-suppressed or marginalized sub-regional groups and collective identities. But there is also no doubt that Laws 22 and 25/1999 provided additional incentives for the formation of new regions (and, more specifically, districts) in terms of both regional political power and control of revenues. As such, the scores of new lines of political maps of Indonesia were at least in part a result of local elites mobilizing regional territorial and ethnic identities in order to capture resources in the new political era.

There are important issues to be considered here in terms of the cultural geography (and associated cultural politics) of Indonesia. In a context in which generations of Indonesians have been socialized into understanding the national territory as comprising a mosaic of regional cultures see [Hellman, 2003], the identification or imagination of territorialized cultural markers provide powerful

resources for the construction of new regions. Put another way, if Indonesia has long been understood as comprised of regions containing their own 'cultures', then any visibly distinct 'culture' would, in turn, appear to be worthy of its own region. Nonetheless, even in the absence of such cultural resources, in decentralized Indonesia it has proven very difficult for the national government to reject proposals for the formation of new districts once they have been approved by the originating (*induk*) district and provincial authorities. Local cultural resources, in other words, may have added to the apparent legitimacy of proposals for new regions but only in the context of broader political manoeuvres.

### Geographical effects and wider changes

#### Political geographies

It is in the realm of politics that contemporary Indonesia contrasts most sharply with the so-called New Order period. In place of the centralized authoritarian system under Suharto, local elections are now a prominent part of the Indonesian political landscape (including literally given political parties' propensity to advertise their candidates using flags, banners and billboards). The process of democratization has afforded a new importance to issues of geography particularly as regards electoral claims to local belonging. Just as local cultural identity has been mobilized in efforts to create new regional territories (through *pemekaran*, as we saw above), it is also a resource for winning votes in local elections. As such, ostensibly progressive trends of democratization may in fact have re-invigorated longstanding *putra daerah* claims. And while these are not inherently problematic, they have been exploited in ways which give rise to new forms of *sukuisme* and associated in-place ethnic discrimination. This is particularly dangerous, of course, in regional contexts (such as in West Kalimantan, Ambon and Central Sulawesi) which are already scarred by inter-ethnic conflict. Geographers can play a role not only in studying political discourses of geographical indigeneity, but also in considering sites and spaces of interaction that have allowed often highly diverse regional populations to coexist peacefully – for the most part – for generations.

The new political era has given rise to new issues of local political accountability and emergent geographies of corruption. In the case of Indonesia, *pemekaran* in particular has opened new possibilities for rent-seeking and nepotism in the form of contracts for administration-related construction projects and allocation of new civil servant positions. The fiscal spoils of decentralization more generally have increased opportunities for corruption with the emergence of 'local coalitions of predatory interests' [Hadiz, 2006: 226]. To the extent that anti-corruption investigation efforts now reach down to the local level, one interviewee at BAPPENAS' *Direktorat Pengembangan Otonomi Daerah* (DPOD) in Jakarta noted that his department receives a steady stream of regional government visitors fearful of spending their budgets in 'improper' ways (15 January 2008). As this interviewee described, this trend both highlights lack of governmental capacity

among many local government leaders and undermines the mantra of their being 'closer to the people' (how can local people consult their elected leaders when they are always away in Jakarta?). This in turn, leads to other questions of propriety concerning the use of public funds for trips to the national capital. It is worth noting that corruption charges against the *bupati* of Riau Islands district, Huzrin Hood, included diversion of funds from the *kabupaten* budget for lobbying in Jakarta [Fitriani *et al.*, 2005]. Ironically, therefore, legally or otherwise, public funds from many parts of decentralized Indonesia flow back to Jakarta in the form of air tickets, hotel bills, *studi banding* and various forms of 'entertainment' [Bunnell and Miller, 2011].

While Jakarta may have benefited from flows of capital emerging from the complex and often dubious politics of decentralization, there is also evidence of a shift away from historically entrenched centre-periphery relations. Even prior to decentralization, geographers were giving attention to Indonesia's transborder regions, particularly the Riau islands of Batam and Bintan see [McLeod and McGee, 1996; Grundy-Warr *et al.*, 1999]. Yet while during the New Order period, co-operation in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT) – and, indeed in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand-GT – tended to revolve around central government interests, the era of decentralization allows expanded possibilities for regional governments to pursue such initiatives. This is particularly the case for Aceh given special autonomy afforded to this territory following the MoU signed between *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) and the Indonesian government in Helsinki in August 2005. Not only are efforts under way to revive the IMT-GT (which all but died during the conflict), but provincial leaders imagine Aceh as forming part of a historically-vibrant zone of cross-Straits trade. To date, the most promising co-operation concerns tourism development with efforts to re-invigorate the so-called SABPURA (Sabang, Phuket and Langkawi) region (interview at BAPPEDA, Banda Aceh, and 14 December 2007). Yet the Aceh Chamber of Commerce also has ambitious plans to open an 'Aceh World Trade Centre' in Kuala Lumpur (interview at KADIN NAD, 17 Jan 2008). Aceh is thus imagined to form part of a transborder economic region around the Straits of Malacca rather than merely a peripheral province of a Jakarta-centred Indonesian nation-state. It remains to be seen – and studied – whether local government efforts in Aceh and elsewhere can turn formerly lagging peripheries into new centres of transborder development.

### **Economic geographies**

According to international proponents of decentralization and devolution, these processes serve to stimulate regional innovation, creativity and competitiveness, particularly in the economic domain. Yet apart from cases of outright corruption noted above, in many regions of Indonesia, decentralization has not yielded more business-friendly environments. Rather, especially in its early stages,

decentralized government saw a proliferation of local taxes and levies and the introduction of internal 'trade barriers' [Ray and Goodpaster, 2003]. A further limitation to economic development concerns the lack of capacity of regional governments to carry out existing basic functions let alone to innovate. Those regions which have benefited financially tend to have done so through locally-derived revenues (*pendapatan asli daerah*) and this in turn has led to concerns among geographers that decentralization is serving to speed-up rates of natural resource exploitation [Tacconi, 2007]. It is important to note, however, that there are also examples of regions which have successfully sought to improve their business environment and investment climate. One such example provided by *Komite Pemantauan Pelaksanaan Otonomi Daerah* (KPPOD) is Gianyar regency government, one of the first to establish a 'One Stop Shop' business licensing service centre [KPPOD, 2005], while at the provincial level, Gorontalo (on the island of Sulawesi) is commonly cited as an example of good practice (interview with Executive Director, KPPOD, 11 December (2007)). The work of organizations such as KPPOD is important in documenting and promoting examples of good practice. Geographers too can certainly play a role in providing further case studies and comparative analyses of local economic development.

What impact is decentralization having on geographical variation in levels of economic development across Indonesia? Some geographers have suggested that decentralization and devolution policies tend to exacerbate inequality and disparity in general [Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2004]. To what extent is this borne out in Indonesia? And if it is valid, then do emerging disparities simply map onto existing centre-periphery divides or are they associated with new ones? These, clearly, are questions which demand empirical study in order to provide substantive answers. In the absence of such evidence to date, it is at least possible to propose some new trends based on what little findings currently exist. First, the increased scope for regional manoeuvre provides possibilities for formerly 'lagging' (*tertinggal*) regions to close the economic development gap on more 'developed' parts of the country. Second, however, there is clearly a certain path dependency in that it is regions (and especially *kota* rather than *kabupaten*) with existing infrastructure, resources and capacity that are mostly likely to be able to translate new decentralized powers into further economic development (thus extending existing regional disparities, including between urban and rural areas). Third, exceptions to this include either highly innovative local governments or (more likely) those with large DAU from natural resource revenues, again subject to being able to develop the infrastructure and capacity to utilize these effectively.

Finally, it is worth noting that economic geographies of Indonesia are not simply contained within or bounded by the nation-state's political borders. Existing work by geographers has considered attempts to create industrial zones which are conducive to overseas investment in manufacturing, most notably in the Riau

islands bordering Singapore and Malaysia see, for example, [Bunnell *et al.*, 2005; Sparke *et al.*, 2004; Phelps, 2004a and 2004b]. In an era of decentralization, some regional governments have extended efforts at international as well as domestic investment promotion, in some cases by working collectively (interview with Operations Manager, IFC, and 13 December 2007). Yet while efforts to attract FDI into Indonesia in recent years have been largely unsuccessful when compared to many rival Asian economies, money continues to flow into Indonesia in the form of remittances from *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* (TKI) and especially *Tenaga Kerja Wanita* (TKW) overseas. Popular destinations include neighbouring regional countries such as Singapore and Malaysia as well as nation-states in the Middle East (see *Kompas* 19 November 2008 for an overview of the regional origins and national destinations of TKI). Studies of Western Union and other remittance agencies could reveal interesting economic geographies of TKI earnings and (re)investment. And money flows the other way in the form of Indonesian investments in property in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> Clearly none of these extra-national economic geographies are new to an era of decentralization, yet this forms part of a context in which some localities in Indonesia are perhaps increasingly reliant upon flows of money from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur or Dubai rather than Jakarta.

### Social geographies

The overseas sojourns of TKI are only the tip of an iceberg of human mobilities among Indonesians, some of which are clearly inflected by decentralization policy. Given that 'urban areas have better investment competitiveness than do rural areas' (KPPOD, 2005: 10), it seems reasonable to suggest that Indonesia will continue to experience rural to urban migration. And to the extent that resource-rich *kabupaten* appear to offer the greatest possibilities for new economic development, these might also be expected to receive net inflows of migrants. Neither of these possible demographic trends – which of course require empirical study by geographers and others – fit in with official attempts at population dispersal during the Suharto era (in the form of the transmigration policy). Similarly, and in less economically-deterministic terms, regional government investment in social services such as healthcare or education is likely to result in population movements to – rather than away from – more 'developed' regions. One way in which attempts have been made to mitigate against this has been to restrict the availability of services to locally-born residents [KPPOD, 2005]. In contrast, particularly for tribal minority groups, indigenous status has provided no such privileges [Duncan, 2007]. To the extent that such groups are displaced from traditional lands, the social implications of 'development' in the era of decentralization largely represent a continuation of earlier trends.



An issue which features prominently in existing English language social geography research on migration and mobilities among Indonesians is gender dynamics. Traditionally, men have been the primary bread winners and so have been more likely to migrate in search of work. But the past two decades have witnessed a significant feminization of the Indonesian workforce both domestically and internationally. 'Factory women' famously work in industrial estates in Java and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) such as on the island of Batam [Mack, 2004]. Among the workers moving to such zones are women from economically marginal parts of the country. In her recent work on women from Eastern Indonesia, [Catharina Purwani Williams, 2007] shows how *langgar laut* ('crossing the sea') is a process which challenges both geographical and gendered marginality. Yet for these women from Flores or Timor, possibilities for negotiating and even transgressing traditional gender relations exist alongside anxieties over conduct and notions of 'propriety'. Other geographical researchers, meanwhile, have considered what such female mobilities and associated new subjectivities mean for men who are 'left behind' both geographically and in socio-economic terms [Elmhirst, 2007].

Intra- and international mobilities and the widespread use of technologies of long distance communication are associated with new social geographies. If in political and administrative terms, decentralization has meant that the component regions of Indonesia inter-relate in new and different ways, the increased use of mobile telephones in particular mean that everyday social relations have also been remapped. Many factory workers or students or business travellers enjoy real time voice or SMS communication with 'home' in ways which were unthinkable only a decade ago. The same applies internationally too. At the time of writing, the advertising campaign for one Telecommunications Company in Indonesia centred on how it is now cheaper to call various overseas locations than other regions *within* the country. A signboard on the road to the airport in Yogyakarta in November 2008, for example, asked 'Kini, nelpon ke Singapura lebih murah daripada ke Singapura, Mau?' While it is important to resist technological determinism here, clearly such developments imply extended possibilities for transnational social relations. And while these are likely, for the most part, to map personal and/or familial relations, they may also facilitate new forms of activism see [Silvey, 2004]. Rachel Silvey's work on Indonesian women migrant connections with Saudi Arabia considers the 'transnationalization' of associated forms of political activism. This, in turn, raises the possibility of transnational flows of ideas and practices (rather than just gifts, gossip and remittances) influencing the ongoing transformation of decentralized Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

Almost a decade of decentralization in Indonesia has given rise to some significant social, economic and cultural – as well as political – transformations which have so far received surprisingly little attention from geographers. In the preceding sections, I have considered the geographies that gave rise to and emerge from an era of decentralization. I have focused on geographical research published in the English language. While by no means exhaustive, my review provides a sense of the varied forms of research and investigation that might be considered ‘human geography’. This ranges from the kinds of work on local and regional development with which many geographers in Indonesia are already familiar, to issues of cultural politics, neoliberalization and gender dynamics which, within the academy in Indonesia, might more readily be associated with other disciplines. The intention here is not to be prescriptive but to make visible possible pathways for empirical investigation which geographers in Indonesia are well placed to follow, either within their own institutions or in collaboration with geographers based elsewhere.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was written between September and November 2008 when I was based in the Faculty of Geography at Universitas Gadjah Mada. I am most grateful to Dr Junun Sartohadi for kindly facilitating this attachment. I also benefited from conversations with other faculty members, particularly Professor Hadi Sabari Yunus, during my time at UGM. I have drawn upon documentary and interview material collected as part of the National University of Singapore Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences research grant: R-109-000-066-112. My understanding of that material owes much to the collaborative insights of Professor Nick Phelps. All usual disclaimers apply.

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