

# 1.7. Yanwar Pribadi Book Review BKI Volume 177 Issue 4 2021.pdf

*by Yanwar Pribadi*

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Abdul Gaffar Karim, *Menegosiasi Ulang Indonesia: Perubahan Politik dan Lembaga-lembaga Agama di Manado dan Sumenep dalam Era Awal Reformasi (1999–2005)*. Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2020, 418 pp. ISBN 9786237378631, price IDR 85,000.00 (paperback).

The book's title translates as "Renegotiating Indonesia: Political Change and Religious Institutions in Manado and Sumenep in the Early Reformation Era (1999–2005)". Its author, Abdul Gaffar Karim, finished his Ph.D thesis at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in 2018, where the sheer bulk of the materials in his book came from. He starts the discussion by highlighting two problems in contemporary Indonesian political studies. They are, firstly, the tendency in discussions on the country's regions (*daerah*) to focus on their internal political constellations rather than the political relations between the regions and the center (*pusat*). Secondly, existing studies of Indonesian politics are characterized by an abundance of highly electoral and evaluative procedural perspectives rather than explorations that approach the Indonesian Reformation (*Reformasi*) as a necessity of political liberalization. The latter option ultimately foregrounds the principles of liberal democracy as the main measure to evaluate the functioning of political reform in the country.

The book discusses the processes of political change and the role of religious institutions at the local level during the early days of Indonesia's Reformation period. Two regions, Manado (North Sulawesi) and Sumenep (East Java), are its case studies. The focus of the book is on institutional changes taking place in religious institutions: the church in Manado (and the larger Minahasa area) and the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Sumenep. The author argues that the church and the *pesantren* play a significant political role in the two regions, although the manifestations vary. He points out that the high tendency of religious institutions to play a political role is inherent to their interactions with other institutions. Karim divides the book in four parts and nine chapters. The first part consists of two chapters, and deals with the introduction and background of political consolidation in the early Reformation period. In the second part, the author discusses the case studies of Manado in three chapters. The third part focuses on the case studies of Sumenep, also in three chapters. The last part, as well as the last chapter, is the conclusion.

In Chapters 3, 4, 5, the author provides an overview of Manado and the larger Minahasa area, and describes the church as an important institution (especially since the area does not have local traditional aristocracy); the process during the start of the Reformation period of renegotiating social contracts by linking them to the national political context; and the process of reclaiming the identity of the Minahasa ethnic group. The author shows that Christian-

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ity is not only important among the Minahasa, but also the reason behind the formation of the Minahasanese as a separate community (p. 114). In addition, he emphasizes the role of the Christian Bible Church in Minahasa (GMIM) as the creator of social contracts in the modern Minahasa area (p. 151).

In Chapters 6, 7, 8, Karim explores the history of Sumenep and outlines the essential role of *pesantren* in everyday social and political life since the late nineteenth century, when there was a decline in traditional aristocratic power driven by the Dutch colonial policy of implementing direct rule; the processes of renegotiating social contract in Sumenep in relation to the dynamics of electoral politics; and the formal politics of *pesantren* and the way they propagate their socio-political projects. The author maintains that Islam is a determinant of the social and cultural character of the Sumenep people and that *pesantren* are its main social institution with strong and politically significant genealogical networks (p. 231). Furthermore, he asserts that Sumenep does not face big questions about regional identity or national relations, as is the case in Manado. The Sumenep people, although they constitute an ethnic minority, have no difficulty in retaining their identity in the face of the dominant Javanese and certainly do not see themselves as a religious minority (p. 264).

Moving back to the two problems in contemporary Indonesian political studies that Karim has highlighted, he is certainly right about the second problem. Much attention has been given to describing the behavior of political elites and their 'predatory' behavior (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Hadiz 2010; Winters 2011) and the characteristics of elections and political parties (King 2003; Mietzner 2006; Mietzner and Aspinall 2010; Aspinall and Fealy 2010) as indicators of liberal democracy to measure the performance of political reform. All these works accentuate the centrality of political elites, elections, and political parties as vital components of political liberalization. These ideas, for the most part, focus on formal political rights and duties of actors vis-à-vis the state. They largely neglect the informal dimensions of how actors interact with the state. Such a view of liberal democracy—which is typically applied in the context of high-capacity and liberal states, without adequate attention to more weakly institutionalized states and predominantly clientelist political systems as in Indonesia—is being questioned.

Karim's identification of the first problem, the tendency of academics to treat Indonesia's local politics as a regional phenomenon rather than a local-center relation, is not quite right. An increasing number of authors have focused on local-center relations in the post-New Order period. Edward Aspinall and Greg Fealy (2003) show that the rise of local powers have affected virtually every aspect of Indonesia's politics, economy, and society. The main

purpose of their work was to examine the impact of decentralization and democratization on local politics and power relations between the regions and the center. Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry van Klinken (2007) deal with the dynamics of decentralization in the 10-Soeharto era. The central argument in this study is that decentralization does not necessarily result in democratization, good governance, and the strengthening of civil society on a regional level. Instead, what is prevalent is the decentralization of corruption, collusion, and political violence that once belonged to the centralized administration of the New Order, and is now transferred to the existing patrimonial patterns at the regional level. Sakai et al. (2009) show that Indonesians have negotiated, created, or are trying to form their region as a distinctive entity against the nation—even beyond the nation—and are seeking to locate and secure it through organic, local, bottom-up processes in the face of concerted efforts by the center to integrate the 12 into the modern nation. The main shift caused by decentralization involves relocating principal administrative powers from central government directly to local governance. Legislative changes on administrative and fiscal reform have mainly focused on practical objectives for decentralization (Holzhacker et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, as many recent studies on Indonesian politics lack an anthropological or sociological touch, a detail-oriented work such as the one reviewed here, that focuses on two regional religious institutions and their interaction with politics, has value in itself. Karim meticulously scrutinizes the ever-evolving relation between the church and the *pesantren* on the one hand and religious and ethnic identity on the other, focusing on two peripheral areas. His study is at its most productive in the chapters dealing with the struggle for control over local posts (Chapter 5, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8). Karim's profound depiction of key actors involved in such contests and his illustration of the ways in which they shift between mild competition and out-and-out contestation is an important contribution to the study of local politics in Indonesia. Students and scholars of political science, anthropology, sociology, and history will find in the book rich knowledge of political activities in accordance with the socio-cultural context of the two Indonesian regions.

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