

## **Flawed Democracy: Beyond Agency and Structure A Book Review**

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*Flawed Democracy in the Rent Seekers' Hands*

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The failure of democracy still becomes the main theme of most of the discussions in many countries, either the ones that have implemented a well-established democracy or the ones that are implementing democratic transition. Along with democracy becoming widespread, the democracy practice still deals with many problems, especially related with the quality and sustainability of the democratic process. The democratic transition does not always lead to democracy consolidation, even sometimes it leads back to the previous non-democratic practices instead (Huntington, 1991; Sorensen, 1998; Diamond, 1999). This tendency then resulted in the study about institutionalization of democracy, which aims at identifying the preconditions needed to strengthen the development of democracy and then recommend the strategy to make it happen.

The institutional approach used in the study of democracy consolidation is justified with a democratic achievement measurement based on various democracy indexes. However, the institutionalization of democracy needs more than a measurement. As one of the exchange processes, democratic transition is always related with the past experience and the current dynamics. A study done by Hadiz (2003a, 2003b) emphasizes the importance of studying the historical process to uncover the structural conditions that hinder the institutionalization of democracy. The results of the

study indicate that oligarchy power structures that cause predatory behaviours in political elites never change even when the power regime has. Hadiz believes that the political actors will always be subject to the oligarchic structure because it is their obedience that will make the actors remain in the power circle.

Will the actors ever go against that oligarchic structure? A study done by Demos concerning democracy practice in Indonesia (in Priyono *et al.*, 2007; Samadi *et al.*, 2009) indicates that political freedom has created new political actors, including ones from the pro-democracy activist groups, who enter the power arena to change the power relation pattern to become more pro-public. This finding shows that the actors also respond to the structural conditions around them. The emergence of the new actors also causes positive changes. They are indicated by the strengthening of the function of the formal political institutions (Priyono *et al.*, 2007; Samadhi & Warouw, 2009; Savirani & Törnquist, 2015), but democracy practices in Indonesia in the post reformation era also stimulate critics towards the weakening function of political representation. Although the formal political institutions are available, the public prefers to use alternative channels to fulfil their needs. To obtain public supports, many political elites then choose to develop direct relations with the public, which later encourages the emergence of figure-based political practices.

Democracy practices which are diverse are not only caused by the structural conditions but also by the actors' response in interpreting democracy. The interaction between the actors and the structure become the determinant of the political character that is produced. The structure provides the rules to play that form the actors' mind-set and behaviour but the actors have the capacity to reform the rules. The problem is not because the actors do not want to change their behaviour following the new rules but because the actors also have the capacity to get involved in reconstructing the rules to play. This situation can become as if there is no change in democracy practices although the new actors come and occupy the

power arena because the particular actors, especially the dominant ones only use the rules to play to serve their own interests. In this context, the present state of democracy as an institution is as if it were just formality because the power relationship pattern remains working on an undemocratic framework.

Democratic stagnation because of the framework stagnation which underlies power behaviour becomes the important reason for doing a study to learn the power logic about how actors are empowered and at the same time are constrained by structure. This is important to give deeper understanding about actors' point of view towards power, why such point of view is formed, and how that point of view is transformed in the actors' behaviour. This transformation process becomes a crucial part in the institutionalization of democracy, but there are not many researches done to uncover how the point of view about power proceeds in becoming embodied behaviour. It is not enough to explain this process with the structural approach because it only sees the actors' behaviour as the formed result of social, economic and political contexts that is applied while the actors have the capacity to respond to the context. On the other hand, the actors' approach believes too much that actors are fully able to control their behaviour so that they neglect the existence of various factors out of themselves that give legitimation for a particular behaviour until they are accepted as equity. The transformation process from the mind-set that embodies a behaviour is not a mechanistic process which is only determined by a single cause, but a multidimensional process that is the interaction of the contexts and actors.

This book analyses democratic failure at the local level which is indicated from the political issues that happened in Asahan, North Sumatera. The four political issues are: (1) the limitation of public access toward information; (2) the discrimination in social policy; (3) the ignorance of public aspiration; and (4) the land disputes that followed together with the criminalization towards public activists. In those four issues, public matters management becomes the arena that happens outside public control. Issues about the weakening

of public control have become an analysis project that colours the development of democracy study. In the structural perspective, the relationship between the ruler and the public is believed to be in a lame position, because the capital accumulation always gives benefits to a particular group. As it is in the agent perspectives, the figures that have the greater access towards the resources dominate the power relationship. Both approaches have given significant contribution to the development of democracy study, but the classification towards the structure and agent dimensions gives limited comprehensive understanding about the interaction between the two, especially in understanding the thought logic of the actors that create particular behaviours in power relationships. This book offers the way of analysis to bridge both approaches using Bourdieu's (1977, 1970) conceptual frame in uncovering the roles of the actors in the structural context.

Structure in Bourdieu's concept is explained as habitus<sup>1</sup>, capital<sup>2</sup>, and arena.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile the roles of predatory political actors are analysed by identifying the strategies used by actors in gaining and defending capital in the efforts of changing its structure and status in the social and political arena. This Bourdieu's concept is used to complete the previous study done by Hadiz which was dominated by the structural approach. The combination between

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu formulates the habitus concept as the social values that are lived by human beings, and created through the socialization process of values for long periods of time, so it settles becoming the mind-set and behaviour pattern in the related human beings. One's habitus is strong, so it influences the physical condition of the person. The conditioning that is related with a particular class results in habitus, sustainable system, and structure that form practice and representation (Bourdieu, 1990). The principles of distribution in logic classes that determine the perceptions from social world themselves are the product of the internationalization of the social class distribution (Bourdieu, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Capital is the modal that enables us to get chances in life. There are many types of capital, such as intellectual capital (education), economic capital (money), and cultural capital (background and networking). Capital can be gained, if someone has an appropriate habitus in his life.

<sup>3</sup> Arena is the special place that exists in the society. There are many arenas: such as the education arena, the business arena, the artists arena, and the political arena. If someone wants to be successful in one of these arenas, then they have to possess suitable habitus and capital.

these theoretical frameworks uncovers a number of important findings concerning power practices in Asahan, i.e., *first*, the actors' behaviour is motivated by their interests to dominate the economic and social capitals. The ownership of the economic resources becomes the preconditions to gain social status needed as the capital to strengthen the bargaining position in political relations. This practice did not only happen during the New Order era, but also has happened since the colonial period and will continuously happen after the reformation, although in a different arena and with different economic resources.

The sustainability of the domination of economic resources and status created the *second* tendency, which is the rent seeking behaviour that is encouraged by the reluctance of the political actors to lose their access to those two capitals. This power is defended by maintaining economic and status capital, so although democracy has caused changes by the emergence of new political institutions and actors, including the pro-democracy activists, but their way of working does not change. The political actors, either the ones that are rent seeking actors from the previous regime or the ones that are not, gain power with the same logic. Political reformation has created new numbers of actors that are not related with the power practice in the previous regime, such as the bureaucracy apparatus which was recruited through the new system and the activists of the social institution activists who criticize the government policies. These new political actors also use their economic and status capital to enter the power arena to influence the policies, so that what happens is the old power logic is still used in modification practices by including the new logic, but for different purposes, that is to gain the acceptance of their status so that they can enter in the power system.

The *third* finding is that the old and new logic combination bears the form of rent seeking behaviour with a different purpose. The activists use the "oppression" technique to gain money (economic capital) and the recognition (status) so that they can go against the

ruling elite. The competition to gain capital encourages the actors to “oppress” other actors who are in a higher position so that they distribute the economic capital which they have if they do not want their corruption reported to the public. On the one hand, this strategy of “oppression” opens the access for more public control of the behaviour of the rules; but on the other hand, the groups that get more benefit than they should are the activists who are successful to place themselves as “dangerous actors” so that they can get more attention from the rulers, including getting more benefits, such as materials or strategic positions in the power circle. The strategies used by the actors to get power reflect the “weak patronage” pattern relation, in which close relationships exist between the patron and the client. The relation between both is based more on the competitive rent-seeking exchange. People will change the patron easily when they find other patrons who have more capital or higher status. This practice opens the competition that gives chances to the emergence of new political actors in the power constellation, but those new actors continue to act with the old logic. To defend their position in the power constellation, the actors should be able to use their symbolic capital skilfully. The needs to maintain the capital, status and followers become the reason behind the corrupt and coarse behaviour done by the actors.

The rent seeking phenomena that has happened in Asahan in fact uncovers the stagnation in power logic as a result of the democratic stagnation. Actors use their political capacity to hijack public control not as an instrument to defend public interest, but to gain economic benefits for themselves. The structural conditions that are inherited by the New Order power regime defend its sustainability as the justification for the new roles that are done by the political actors. This finding becomes the important reminder for the democracy institutionalization to begin to focus on the disclosure of thinking logic behind the power practice, and not merely how it reveals the structural conditions or actors’ behaviour in power relations. Democracy practice in Asahan indicates that

democratic stagnation is caused by the failure of the actors to go against the power regime which has been deep rooted for years, so that the struggle for democracy does not merely subvert particular regimes that are inherited from the previous ruler but goes against power logics of all time that form the mind-set and actors' behaviour, including the pro-democracy actors. The biggest challenge for the democracy institutionalization is on how to strengthen the ability of the pro-democracy actors to criticize various power logics that hinder the process of democratization.

Bordieau's theoretical framework provides sharp analysis about thinking logic behind the actors' behaviour by uncovering the relationship between habitus, capital, and arena, but this relation needs to be directed to improve the actors' capacity in dismantling economic and symbolic structures that dominate. Rent seeking practice in Asahan has been embodied in the behaviour of the political actors for a long time creating habitus that is in contradiction with democracy. Therefore, a new habitus that offers public awareness to come out of the symbolic oppression through economic and status capital domination needs to be created.

To change the habitus, habitus reformulation needs to happen by rejecting various categories and definitions that limit the behaviour, and in the process opens the arena for meaning negotiation. Although Bordieau (1977) claims that habitus allows agents to respond to dynamic situations, habitus that has become part of the behaviour is accepted as applicable public logic restraining the individuals from changing the habitus that they accepted instead. The habitus change is only possible to be done if the agents are not restrained by the structural conditions around them. When the structural conditions that form habitus change, the new habitus will emerge to adapt to the new reality. Progressive agents will be able to respond to the changes and reform habitus that can be accepted by other agents. A whole new capital, habitus and arena will become an alternative logic to manage present-day power practices.

Flawed democracy in Asahan gives important lessons for

the democracy journey in Indonesia because it reveals that so far the democracy process has not yet been successful in creating new habitus in power practices in Indonesia. Rent seeking phenomena are only those surface symptoms that prove the difficulties to change the mind-set that has grown and been accepted as equity. Therefore, democratization should become a radical process so that it is able to offer the new habitus to replace the old habitus that is not appropriate with democracy. Although in Bourdieu's perspective, an agent has the capacity to go against structure, but when the structure has become habitus, it can be resisted with another habitus. This change is the homework that should be done by the fighters for democracy in Indonesia.

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