Defending the Sultanate’s Land: Yogyakarta, Control over Land and Aristocratic Power in Indonesia

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the political economy of the revival of aristocratic politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia. It attempts to explore why some aristocrats have staged successful political comebacks in post-Suharto politics, while others have failed to do so. Using the case of the Yogyakarta Sultanate as my main case study, I argue that those aristocrats who have been the most successful in post-Suharto politics are those who – over time – have developed and maintained their capacity to control land as an essential power resource.

This thesis uses the theoretical framework of land access. According to this framework, control over land is determined not only by legal ownership but can also be established through a web of informal power relations. By opening access to land, it can be used as a resource of power accumulation, just as would be the case if its status was legal property. Subsequently, access can be transformed into legal property, codifying the official control over the power resource of land. Applied to the case of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, this thesis shows how the royal houses’ initial land property rights were first downgraded to land access after 1945; how the sultan defended this access amidst rapid political and social change until the 2010s; and how he ultimately succeeded in re-establishing property rights over land in 2012.

During the colonial period, the Yogyakarta Sultanate gained land control (in the form of property rights) from the Dutch as a result of the system of indirect rule. Tolerated by the Dutch, the Sultanate used land as the basis of its political economy through a land lease and apanage system. The sultan gave usage rights to his aristocrats in return for loyalty and military assistance. The peasants worked on the land in a crop sharing system under intermediaries.

The socio-political upheaval of the 1940s and 1950s threatened the Sultanate’s land control, as its land property rights were gradually undermined by the Japanese occupation, the revolution and the establishment of democracy. The sultan, however,
succeeded in defending land access through a series of political manoeuvres. These manoeuvres also helped him to circumvent the restrictions on aristocratic land ownership imposed by the Basic Agrarian Law of 1960. Even as the New Order regime pressured him to implement the Law in Yogyakarta in 1984, he found loopholes to prevent its full execution.

Thus, when Suharto fell in 1998, the Sultanate had a sound power base built on land and the clients that depended on its usage. From this power base, Sultan Hamengku Buwono X launched a campaign for the full restoration of aristocratic powers. Supported by his loyalists living on and benefitting from traditional land, he succeeded spectacularly: he first regained the position of governor that the Sultanate had lost after Hamengku Buwono IX’s death in 1988; then managed to get approval for the permanent entrenchment of the sultan’s family in that position; and finally was able to restore the Sultanate’s land property rights. Subsequently, he used his governorship to identify, register and certify this land.

After having analysed the Yogyakarta Sultanate in detail, the thesis tests whether the findings derived from this case hold in other areas. It finds that the level of land control also determined the outcome of aristocratic revival campaigns in Ubud, Ternate, Gowa and Palembang. In the first two cases, the aristocracies defended some forms of land control after 1960, allowing them to emerge as moderately powerful actors in the post-Suharto era. The latter two, by contrast, failed to have an impact as the Sultanate’s land bases had been destroyed either during the colonial period or through land reform. Hence, the thesis highlights the central role of land as a political resource available (or unavailable) to aristocracies after 1998. This perspective, in turn, adds a significant nuance to the literature on aristocratic politics that has often been dominated by anthropological studies in the mystical, religious or otherwise spiritual control of royals over their former subjects.