Performing the state: Everyday practices, corruption and reciprocity in Middle Indonesian civil service
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Chapter VII

Conclusion

Discontent with the rampant corruption surrounding president Suharto and his cronies, and cries for governmental reforms colored the Reformasi-protests. Since the late 1990s many reforms have been realized. Indonesia has seen the implementation of regional autonomy and direct district head elections, and has witnessed many changes in the national legal framework aimed at decreasing corruption, such as legal changes concerning the construction sector addressed in Chapter Six. Nevertheless, despite these structural changes corrupt practices continue. It seems as if along with the shift of power from center to regions, KKN has similarly moved downwards. It is this question of persistent corruption amidst changes in the national legal framework that this thesis hopes to shed some light on.

This question is part of a more general paradox that has guided this thesis, which concerns how a state image of wholeness and coherence is maintained when actual office practices often contradict this image. By considering the interrelatedness of these two tiers, this research continues recent analytic trends among social scientists focusing on state-society dynamics that distinguish a ‘state idea’/‘state image’ from a ‘state system’/‘actual practices’ (Abrams 1988; Migdal 2001). In short, instead of viewing state-society relations in terms of distinct entities of ‘state’ and ‘society’ separated by an elusive boundary, this thesis focuses on the discrepancy between a state image and contradictory social practices. Furthermore, instead of concentrating on either the ‘state image’ (see for instance Pemberton 1994; Barker 1998; Li 2007) or ‘actual practices’ tier (see for instance Van Klinken and Barker 2009) this thesis also tries to tie the two tiers together by asking how to make sense of the discrepancy between the image of a coherent and controlling organization and everyday office practices that contradict this image of wholeness.

The first step towards answering this question was, nevertheless, by focusing on the ‘actual practices’ tier by considering the three practical questions of how to become a civil servant, how to get a construction project, and how (not) to become governor. In pursuing these questions those practices that were not quite in line with office rules and regulations - ‘corrupt’ practices- emerged as particularly interesting. Although regional autonomy has brought the issue of corruption in local governments more to the fore, thinking about corruption in Indonesian bureaucratic apparatuses is not new. One theoretical thread concerning corruption in Indonesian bureaucratic contexts explains corruption in terms of hegemonic patrimonialism or neo-patrimonialism. However, besides signaling that corruption persists despite structural changes aimed at countering corrupt practices, such neo-
patrimonial explanations also do not offer insights into why this is so. Furthermore, this line of thinking, as Gerry van Klinken and Joshua Barker (2009) note in relations to thinking about state-society relations more generally, runs the risk of overemphasizing the unique character of Indonesian civil service vis-à-vis civil service elsewhere and leans towards a view on ‘culture’ as a bounded meaningful whole.

Having conducted research in Kupang’s government offices, which topped Transparency International’s 2008 Corruption Perception Index, and having encountered many instances of what might be perceived as ‘corrupt’ practices I would add another objection to this neo-patrimonial explanation of corruption. (Neo)Patrimonial tendencies can certainly be discerned in intra-office relations in Kupang. Chapter Five, for instance, addressed institutionalized bapakism and the practice of balas-jasa, both of which might support a view of civil service characterized by neo-patrimonial relations. However, what I wish to highlight from such examples in which favors, support, promotions, and money are exchanged are, first, the importance of relationships in Kupang and second, the centrality of reciprocal obligations that characterize relationships in Kupang.

One thing that repeatedly came to the fore when asking how to ‘get things done’ in Kupang was that relationships matter. In Chapter Three, young Lina, before having even graduated from high school, obtained a temporary civil service position due to her influential uncle. In Chapter Five, Valentino, an ambitious career civil servant, used his closeness to the mayor to acquire promotions others would have to wait longer for. Contractors, furthermore, try to build ‘good relations’ with Public Works committees. Politicians, additionally, create imagined ethnic communities to forge a sense of closeness. I have argued that relationships matter because of their implication of (balanced) reciprocal returns. Being close to someone –having social capital- creates the expectation of reciprocal returns –whether in the form of economic, social, or cultural capital. Conversely, offering someone something opens up the possibility of a new ongoing reciprocal relationship -exchanging some form of capital for new social capital. Therefore, the formation and maintenance of relationships are informed by the three-part rhythm of reciprocity, which makes reciprocity or gift-giving imperative in understanding how to ‘get things done’ in Kupang. Following from this, ‘ethnicity’, which is a popular marker for social difference in Kupang, is useful only insofar as it can be translated into social capital.

As discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the ‘book of donations’, reciprocal obligations come to the fore most clearly in the ‘generalized’ reciprocity of family networks. However, as I showed, this logic is mirrored in other contexts as well: the balanced reciprocity of hierarchical office balas jasa, the negative reciprocity of post-elections unreturned favors, the reciprocity tied to recognition among political class members during elections, or politicians’ attempts at gaining reciprocal returns from non-political class members without intending to recognize them as political subjects. In civil service, this
reciprocal logic of family networks is supported not only ‘from above’ by an infusion of family analogies in the Indonesian bureaucratic apparatus in general that stress hierarchy, loyalty and an adherence to form, as we have seen in Chapter Five, but also ‘from below’ through importance put on family and intra-familial reciprocal practices in Kupang.

This does not mean that ‘corruption’ does not exist or is never worried about. Anderius, for instance, suffered a little ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon 2007) in Chapter Four when family members asked for his help in getting a civil service job. Feeling the pull of both obligations towards his family and a desire to follow office rules, he was not sure how to properly respond. Regional Secretary Jonas, in contrast, gladly helped his family members obtain a position in civil service when faced with a similar dilemma. In his view, family obligations override office rules. Some instances of corruption are, I claim, better explained as forming a part of existing relationships and the reciprocal obligations, which form a part of relationships. Therefore in order to get a better grasp of ‘corrupt practices’ in civil service in Kupang, it is necessary to take into account the embeddedness of reciprocal obligations in its local social fabric.

This embeddedness is specifically clear in a provincial town such as Kupang. As mentioned previously, in Kupang everybody can quickly make some form of connection to everybody else, for instance via family lines, church, or alumni associations. Creating –or, rather, strengthening already existing- relationships as a means to get a civil service job or construction project is easier than it would be in the larger Gesellschafts of metropoles Jakarta or Surabaya. Conversely, reciprocal demands made by relations are more inescapable as well. Although I argue that this thesis’ focus on the formation and maintenance of relationships and the reciprocal obligation that are a part of relationships offers important insights into ‘getting things done’ that exceed the spatial confines of Kupang, the visibility of the entrenchedness of reciprocal obligations does suggest its particular analytical use in provincial town settings.

Nevertheless, although a focus on the embeddedness of reciprocal obligations in networks helps understand what fuels some of the ‘actual practices’ in and around government offices in provincial town Kupang, this does not mean that everyone in Kupang is included in cozy networks of reciprocal returns. On the contrary, the formation and maintenance of relationships and reciprocity also work to exclude. Most of this thesis highlighted members of the state dependent political class (Vel 2008) to whom dealing with relationships and reciprocal obligations ensured a continued inclusion in political class ranks, or even a move up towards the political elite segment. However, Chapter Seven on the 2008 gubernatorial elections addressed interaction between the political class and those outside it, and showed how reciprocal ties are confined to political class circles and therefore work as a mechanism of exclusion of non-political class members. In short, whereas interactions within the political class are driven by reciprocal obligations and take on the character of gift
exchanges, interactions between the political class and those outside it take on the character of commodity exchanges. Because of this, political class members display their non-recognition, and exclusion, of those outside the political class.

‘Actual practices’ that contradict a state image of wholeness and coherence can thus be understood when taking into account the role of reciprocal obligations in relationships. Getting closer to a possible way of relating the ‘actual practice’ tier to the ‘state image’ one, it is, furthermore, imperative to see how adherence to form opens up space not only for a continuation of corruption, but also for new forms of corrupt practices to emerge. The clearest examples of this are given in Chapter Six on the tendering process at Public Works. Sticking to the form of regulations is carried out to the point where a misplaced comma is reason enough to disqualify a contractor from the bidding process. When looking past the apparent adherence of form as expressed in the bidding books, however, it becomes clear that good relations and money still matter in the informal bidding process, and that, moreover, this need of appearance of adherence to official rules has given Public Works officials—and anti-corruption agency employees—new opportunities for engaging in corrupt practices.

The irony is that those aspects that help continue corruption and enable new forms of corruption—adherence to form, importance of hierarchy, loyalty to networks, and subordination to superiors—are also ideals that form part and parcel of proper bureaucratic propriety. In the various civil servant preparatory trajectories discussed in Chapter Four, civil servants are taught to follow office rules, regulations and routines; are supposed to follow orders from superiors; and are constantly reminded of their unity as a Corps. The disciplinary techniques employed to produce proper civil servants therefore unintentionally also prepare civil servants for bapakism and balas-jasa and other kinds of ‘corrupt’ practices.

Now I will return to my proposed question of why corruption persists despite changes in the national legal framework, and, more importantly, my paradox of how a ‘state image’ of wholeness and coherence is maintained when actual practices often contradict this image. Available ethnographic analyses have thus shown that structural changes aimed at curbing corruption have not unequivocally led to a decrease in corrupt practices (Choi 2004; Schulte-Nordholt 2004; Kristiansen and Ramli 2006). In many ways, this thesis provides new examples to buttress these findings. However, it also hopes to provide a new analytical viewpoint that helps explain why structural changes do not necessarily lead to corresponding practices and how such changes can, in fact, help perpetuate corrupt practices, by drawing on Yurchak’s (2006) concept of performative shift. To recap, in his description of late-Soviet socialism Yurchak shows how the performative dimension of authoritative speech and discourse took precedence over its constative meaning. The constant replication and reiteration of form opened up the possibility of a disconnect between performative and constative dimension. This performative shift left the performative dimension of authoritative
discourse quite empty of its constative meaning, while also enabling new opportunities for meaning making.

I suggest that looking at ‘actual state practices’ and ‘state image’ (Migdal 2001) in terms of a performative shift helps explain why corruption persists, and also how adhering to and maintaining a state image enables a continuation of corruption. I propose to view the various examples given throughout this thesis of adherence to office rules or maintaining a state image of coherence, such as the visual displays of hierarchy, the minutely stipulated office procedures, and the importance of proper form of documents, as examples of a performative dimension of authoritative bureaucratic discourse that has become unhinged from its constative meaning. What structural changes, in particular all anti-KKN efforts, have brought about is a further emphasizing of the importance of adherence to form, while actual practices still run counter to the constative dimension of that form. Although it will still take thorough historical research to see if Indonesia has indeed experienced a performative shift similar to the one Yurchak describes took place during late-Soviet socialism, I contend that for now it offers a means to understand how the upholding of state image is imperative to a continuation of corrupt practices.

Something left to address is whether I am making the type of claims about ‘culture’ that I previously disagreed with when discussing neo-patrimonial approaches to state-society relations. I claim that many of the corrupt practices in Kupang’s civil service can be better understood when seeing them as part of more general reciprocal obligations which are embedded in Kupang’s local social fabric. By doing this, I run the risk of falling into the same cultural trap I tried to avoid. However, I suggest that the importance of networks and implied reciprocal obligations that blur state-society boundaries are not something limited to Kupang, but can provide an interesting way of analyzing ‘how to get things done’ elsewhere as well. Ethnographic analyses from Africa have shown the use of such an approach there (see for instance Smith 2001; Smith 2006), but it would be interesting to see how a focus on the merits of relationships translate to corruption in ‘Western’ bureaucratic contexts, for instance, the Cologne metro scandal, Dutch Bouwfraude (construction fraud), or the role of soft money in US political campaigning. As such, I hope this thesis does not exoticize civil service in Kupang, but, rather, helps promote an anthropological project that, as Joel Robbins proposes, stresses a focus on the formation of relationships (Robbins 2003: 10).