The informality trap

Democracy against governance in Asia

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The Informality Trap: Democracy against Governance in Asia

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Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, Geacht curatorium van de leerstoel, Geacht bestuur van KNAW, Geachte directie van het KITLV, beste collega's en lieve vrienden en familie,

For the past 16 years I have been lucky to have had the opportunity to study election campaigns in India and Indonesia. In these countries I followed candidates on the campaign trail, I immersed myself in the networks of campaign organisers, and I studied how these politicians ruled after winning elections. In this lecture I want to reflect on these experiences, and discuss an uncomfortable conclusion that I gradually arrived at. That uncomfortable conclusion is that democracy as it is practiced today in Indonesia, India and, more tentatively argued, other Asian countries, is not conducive to strengthening governance. Democracy is not conducive to tackling corruption, it is not conducive to strengthening the rule of law, and it is generally not conducive to fostering equality and social justice. And this tendency of democracy to undermine governance is not due to the selfishness or silliness of politicians – even though there is plenty of that. No, it is that key ingredient of democracy itself – elections – which is undermining governance, because of a particular conundrum which I will call the 'informality trap'.

Before we can start to explore that argument, some points of clarification and some reassuring. As will, I hope, become clear, this is not a lecture defending or promoting authoritarianism. Whatever one might argue about its record in terms of governance, democracy has proven itself the best guarantee of individual rights and liberties – which is all the more reason to reflect on its more problematic record in other areas. Second, some definitional yardsticks. I will also be using words like 'informal' and 'informality' a lot, by which I refer to state-citizen interaction (and state-business interaction) marked by the use of personal connections and relationships as a means to influence the implementation of state regulations[1]. I will be using the term governance in the very narrow sense of the capacity of states to implements its laws and policies. I am not focusing on the character of these laws and policies, but rather on whether states have the capacity to actually implement them[2]. In this sense democracy often works to the detriment of governance: democracy undermines the capacity of state institutions to uphold and implement state laws and regulations.

That is an uncomfortable conclusion because democracy is not supposed to undermine governance. One of the very reasons why we value democracy over all other systems of government, is precisely because it is supposed to generate incentives for politicians and bureaucrats to strengthen governance: democracy is supposed to incentivize politicians to tackle corruption, improve the functioning of bureaucracies, and, more generally, make governments more capable of solving societal problems[3]. In theoretical terms, this hopeful expectation is sometimes called a principal-agent theory. According to this theory, democracy strengthens governance because it empowers us – the principals – to better monitor and control politicians and bureaucrats – who are, or should be, our agents. If principals can punish and reward their agents – through, for example, elections – then these agents face - compared

to an authoritarian regime – stronger incentives to perform well[4]. In short, by making principals stronger, democracy should generate incentives for their agents to function better.

This principal-agent approach is pretty convincing. It has provided the theoretical underpinning for a range of initiatives from NGO's and governmental agencies like the World Bank who seek to promote good governance by strengthening democracy through, for example, efforts to boost transparency, to strengthen civil society or to support the media[5]. Yet the evidence is stacking up that there is something wrong with this approach. Across Asia (and beyond) this expected positive effect of democracy on the character of governance is failing to materialize. If we look, for example, at Transparancy International's Corruption perception index – a widely used measure of intensity of corruption – we see not only that countries in Asia score quite badly, but also that some of Asia's most vibrant democracies – Indonesia, the Philippines and India – are scoring worse than authoritarian regimes such as Singapore or China. What is more, countries that have democratized in recent decades – such as Indonesia (in 1998) and Philippines (1986) – have since then not seen a much of a decline in corruption[6]. And if we switch focus to indicators of other dimensions of governance, such as the World Governance Indicators, we see a similar pattern: not only do most Asian countries score, comparatively speaking, quite badly, but also that their scores have, at best, flatlined, while democracies like the Philippines and, to a lesser extent, India, have actually seen a decline in their governance scores over the last twenty years. These quantitative indicators are not showing this expected positive effect of democracy on governance. Studies employing these indicators conclude that there is "little correspondence between democratic practices and civil liberties in the region, on the one hand, and effective and capable governance, on the other"[7].

These statistics resonate not only with regular newspaper reports about corrupt politicians, but also with a steady stream of studies from more qualitatively oriented scholars, expressing in various ways a concern about the impact of democracy on the character of governance across Asia. The sense of disappointment is palpable in books with titles like 'the crisis of democratic governance in Southeast Asia'[8], 'Why India lets its people down'[9], or 'Indonesia betrayed'[10] .These studies are raising the alarm about how democracy is fostering corruption[11] and undermining bureaucratic capacity[12]. Other scholars are worrying about how economic elites – often referred to as oligarchs - have obtained an outsized influence on governance due to their capacity to fund election campaigns[13]. I contributed to this genre by writing, together with Edward Aspinall, a book that worried about Indonesia's democracy being 'for sale'.

So, what is going on? Why is, despite both common sense and theoretical expectations, democracy not boosting the quality of governance? To look for answers to such questions, let us move down to the place where, as a political anthropologist, I prefer to be: the street. Let me take you to a street-corner in Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat in north-west India. I moved to Ahmadabad in 2005 to do fieldwork for my PhD dissertation on what then still seemed to be a very different topic: communal violence between Hindus and Muslims[14]. In my attempt to understand how such violence is organized and instigated, I ended up at this street corner. Every morning from 7:30 to 9:00 one of my key informants, the local politician Pravin Dalal, sits here to meet his constituents. To understand the complex relationship between democracy and governance, it is worth exploring the character of these meetings. Every morning a stream of constituents comes to Pravin, to ask him for help in their dealings with

state institutions. For example, they ask him to call the municipality to fix a broken streetlight or an overflowing gutter. They ask him to arrange a hospital bed for a sick family member, or to arrange school admission for a son or a daughter. In response, Pravin Dalal calls the public works office when public amenities needed to be repaired, he calls hospital administrators to forfeit bills, arranges budgets to repair streetlights and helps local businesses to circumvent paperwork[15].

Pravin Dalal does this work on street corners, and, later in the day, in the hospital and, in the municipal office. In all these places his work focuses not on policymaking. Rather, throughout the day he uses his influence over bureaucrats to influence the ways in which existing policies are *implemented.* And he is not the only one, as mediating politicians like Pravin can be found at across India and beyond[16]. And surrounding these politicians one can find another fascinating type of intermediary, called political fixers or brokers. Brokers are individuals who use their political connections and knowledge of procedures to help ordinary citizens deal with state institutions. Local brokers help their neighbours to convey their requests to politicians and bureaucrats. For example, my friend Mohanbhai received a similar stream of visitors at his house, whose requests he subsequently relayed to his political patrons[17].

People like Pravin Dalal and Mohanbhai provide an informal avenue for citizens to deal with state institutions. Their 'constituency service'[18] often has a clientelistic character[19]. Clientelism refers to the practice of exchanging personal favours for electoral support, and constitutes an important aspect of informality. Politicians engage in these efforts with the expectation that voters will return the favour by voting for them. The exchanges between brokers and politicians also have a clientelistic character: politicians respond to the requests from brokers with the expectation that, at election time, brokers will deliver a large number of votes.

Clientelism is an informal institution that builds on norms of reciprocity: the gifts or favours that politicians like Pravin provide, imposes a moral obligation on the recipient to return the favour with, for example, a vote[20]. For this reason this mediated state-citizen interaction taking place at streetcorners is more than altruistic community service. It is politics. Providing personal favours to supporters constitutes an important strategy to win electoral support. The more effective a politician is in 'getting things done' for supporters, the bigger his or her electoral changes.

Such electoral incentives have an impact on the functioning of bureaucracies and, hence, the character of governance. In order to provide potential supporters with a privileged access to state benefits, politicians and their brokers need to be able to influence who gets, for example, a hospital bed, welfare support or admission in a school. They need, in other words, to develop discretionary control over the distribution of these state benefits. Politicians like Pravin have no interest in an impersonal, rule-bound distribution of jobs, welfare or access to public services, because such a distribution would not serve to attract voters. Instead, political actors need to develop and maintain control over the bureaucracy in order to ensure that bureaucrats would do their bidding, and direct state benefits to their supporters. Using their control over promotions and demotions of bureaucrats as carrots and sticks[21], politicians make the implementation of state laws and regulations subservient to political needs and personal wishes. As a result, state institutions become informalized, in the sense that personal

relationships regularly undermine a rule-bound, impersonal implementation of rules and policies.

Figure 1: The Informality Trap
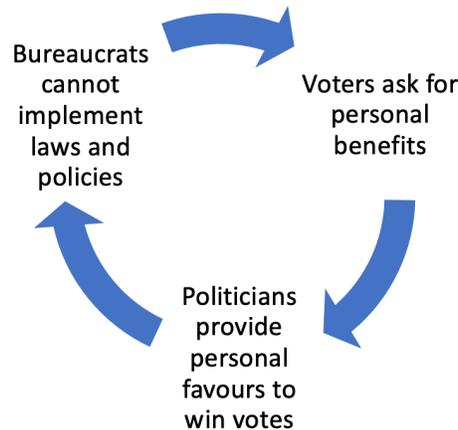
In this way Pravin's morning routine at this streetcorner provides an illustration of something which I call the 'informality trap'. The informalized nature of state institutions produces a particular kind of democratic competition which, in turn, reproduces this informalization. In political science-speak: informality constitutes a self-reinforcing equilibrium. When state institutions are informalized and citizens cannot rely on an impersonal, rule-bound implementation of policies, citizens gain the impression that they need to cultivate personal connections with influential politicians and bureaucrats in order to obtain access to state benefits[22]. In turn, as politicians realize that their popularity and political career depends on developing and maintaining such a capacity to arrange this access to state benefits, they do their utmost to strengthen their grip over the bureaucracy, which, as a consequence, undermines the capacity of state bureaucracies to implement rules and policies in an impersonal, rule bound manner. This again reinforces the impression among citizens that they need personal connections to deal with the state[23].

This informality trap helps understand why the quest for good governance in not a principal-agent problem. In the context of informalized state institutions voters cannot be the kind of 'principled principals' that the principal-agent theory expects them to be. Voters cannot be expected to punish politicians and bureaucrats for undermining the implementation of rules and regulations when they themselves depend on such undermining. This means that the challenge of ensuring the impersonal implementation of laws and regulations is not a principal-agent problem. It is, instead, a massive collective action problem. A collective action problem occurs when individuals in a group all prefer a particular change to occur, but lack the ability to coordinate their actions to bring about change. Each actor in this triangle – voters, politicians, bureaucrats - might wish to be behave differently, but they all face powerful incentives to contribute to the reproduction of informality. And democratic elections, however open and free they might be, are unlikely to change that because they help generate these incentives.

It is important to pause and reflect for a moment on how this informality trap came into being. Summarizing a range of studies in a perhaps overly briefly fashion[24], I would argue that the informality trap is largely a post-colonial condition. This informality trap is not the product of dumb voters or selfish politicians, nor can it be attributed to culture or something like 'Asian values'. No: the informality trap is largely a product of how Asian state institutions developed and, particularly, how they were imposed by colonial rulers. Colonial states were often oppressive, extractive institutions that had not grown organically out of society. Colonial rulers used state institutions as an instrument to maintain order and to facilitate the extraction of wealth[25]. At the same time these colonial states also had relatively little to offer to citizens in terms of welfare or security. A consequence of this history is that personal social networks and norms of reciprocity have usually been more important for the quality of life of people than the institutions of the colonial state. Such a history does not breed love and respect for state institutions. In that sense it is not surprising that after independence many people continue to value informal institutions and norms of reciprocity more than the formal rules and regulations of the state. The informality trap is, in this sense, a product of colonial state formation processes.

In that light you might object to my usage of the word 'trap' because of its negative connection, as if informality is something that one needs to get out of. One might argue that there is no need for governance in Asia to take a less informalized, less mediated form. Is all this informality not simply fine? [26] That was indeed my opinion after returning from my fieldwork in India in 2006. But I changed my opinion, for two reasons.

A first reason is that I gradually realized that my informants themselves often expressed the feeling of being trapped between irreconcilable pressures. The politicians I spoke to, complained about how their voters expected them to be clean and incorruptible while also demanding personal favours and monetary gifts. Bureaucrats complained about the impossibility of adhering to state policies with politicians breathing down their neck. And voters resented their dependence on politicians to get things done. Yet they all felt they could not easily break away from such relations. My former colleague Sylvia Tidey captured this beautifully: in her study of bureaucrats in Kupang, eastern Indonesia, she described how bureaucrats struggled to compromise between on the one hand – in her terms - 'the ethical' (meaning personal obligations to friends and family) and, on the other hand, 'the right thing' (meaning following formal rules)[27].

Another reason for becoming more concerned about the informality trap, is that in subsequent fieldwork I became more aware of the damage that it is doing. When, from 2009 onwards, I started to do research in Indonesia, I encountered a similar informality trap being played out in the dealings between business actors and politicians in a way that was highly damaging, both for the personal welfare of citizens and for the environment.

The unavoidability of crony capitalism
To illustrate this 'business dimension' of the informality trap, let me take you to another place where I regularly conducted fieldwork, the district of Gunung Mas in Central Kalimantan. I first came to Gunung Mas to study local elections, but then kept returning there to study and help address the pervasive and intractable conflicts in this region between rural communities and palm oil companies.

In 2015 I happened to be in Central Kalimantan at the time of the gubernatorial elections. In the months before these elections, Central Kalimantan has been enveloped in a toxic, yellow haze which emanated from multiple forest fires. As this haze spread throughout southeast Asia, an estimated 140 thousand people acquired respiratory illnesses. Observers had pointed out that the intensification of forest fires was due to the rapid expansion of palm oil plantations. Digging canals to drain their land, highly combustible peatland was drying up. And this problem came on top of the many conflicts I mentioned earlier: many communities across Kalimantan were complaining that palm oil companies were stealing their land. In that light I was curious to see how the candidates for governor would address the land conflicts and the haze in their campaign speeches: would they tackle the palm oil industry?

As it turned out, nor the fires nor the land conflicts featured in the speeches of candidates. Their speeches revolved around touting their personal skills and their capacities, while engaging in subtle forms of identity politics. Behind the stage the campaigns spend most energy on cultivating the support of ethnic organisations, and on a quite generous distribution of cash to voters. Reportedly both candidates handed out 200 thousand rupiah (about 15 euros) per family – a practice that is quite common in Indonesia[28]. The policy proposals of candidates were largely irrelevant, because voters had little confidence in (and experience of) politicians ever implementing a policy program that actually made a difference.

The other reason why candidates did not talk about the problems caused by the palm oil industry, has to do with the ways they financed their election campaigns. The candidate who won the contest was Sugianto Sabran. He did not win because of his impressive resume – he had been a middling palm oil entrepreneur – but rather because of his uncle, a wealthy and notorious tycoon called Adbul Rasyid. Involved in industries ranging from logging, newspapers, ports and, particularly, palm oil, Rasyid had funded Sabran's campaign. Making your nephew a governor, turned out to be a good business decision, as this provided Rasyid with privileged access to lucrative business licenses and permits. Such exchanges between political and economic elites are hardly exceptional. There are documented examples of districtheads providing the entire family with licenses for palm oil plantations[29]. And there need not be family connections: a more common pattern is that (natural resource) companies simply build their ties with politicians by providing extensive campaign contributions as a kind of business investment: they expect that this donation will be reciprocated with privileged access to government contracts and business licenses and help to evade taxes[30].

Figure 2: The informality trap – the crony capitalist dimension
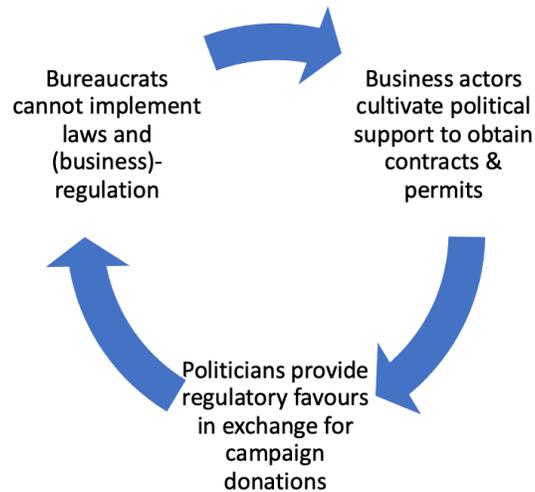
This brief sketch of politics in Central Kalimantan illustrates the business-side of the informality trap. These exchanges of favours between business actors and politicians are not exceptional cases of corruption. In a context where access to economic opportunities – through business licenses, permits and contracts – is not a matter of straightforward paperwork but rather depends on a skillful cultivation of political and bureaucratic contacts, business actors can hardly avoid doing favours for politicians who, in turn, desperately need their campaign donations.

In such a context any upright bureaucrat insisting on a strict implementation of regulations and licensing procedures has a hard time. Such a bureaucrat would risk getting – in the nice Indonesian word – *dinonjobkan*, which means demoted[31]. Furthermore, as senior bureaucrats in regional governments have often paid considerable sums of money in bribes to acquire their current position[32], they face incentives to play along and perhaps even pocket a bribe in the process. In doing so, they help to sustain the informalized implementation of state regulation – which again incentivizes business actors to turn to political actors rather than formal procedures to acquire or safeguard economic opportunities. In short, the point here is that, again, none of the actors involved – politicians, bureaucrats and business actors - can easily escape from this dynamic as each actor would put their career and income at risk by insisting on a strict, impersonal implementation of state regulation.

And while my earlier example was relatively benign, the business dimension of the informality trap is doing serious damage. One victim of such exchanges is the environment, as such exchange relationships make it very difficult to adhere to spatial planning or implement plans to, for example, protect forests[33]. Another victim of these exchanges are rural Indonesians engaged in bitter and lengthy conflicts with incoming mining or palm oil companies. As we documented in our POCAJI research project, these informal connections between palm oil companies and powerholders make it difficult for rural Indonesians to address the injustices associated with palm oil expansion[34].

What is important to note here, is the role of elections in deepening this embrace between politicians and business actors. While such collusive state-business relationships already characterized Indonesia's economy long before the advent of democracy in 1998[35], elections have actually deepened this collusion. The high expenses associated with election campaigns – such as the need to pay for campaign rallies and engage in vote buying – is generating a tight embrace between politicians and business actors. Indonesia's corruption eradication commission has estimated that candidates running for district head elections spend on average around 1.5 million euros, while those running for governor spend 6 million euros[36]. These high costs of election campaigns are enabling economic elites to either enter politics themselves, or – in the case of Abdul Rasyid – to arrange a preferential access to economic opportunities by funding the election of someone else. Due to the dependence of politicians on wealthy campaign donors the character of governance is skewed towards the interests of economic elites. And this is not just a problem in Kalimantan. This interaction between informalized state institutions, campaign finance and collusion is observable – in various forms – from India to Korea the Philippines[37].

By fostering such collusive relationships democracy is undermining the capacity of state institutions to implement laws and regulations, it is undermining the rule of law, and it is weakening struggles to achieve social justice, despite ongoing efforts of my friends in Central Kalimantan. What I also tried to show with these illustrations, is that informality is not an aberration. These personal exchange relationships are not exceptional practices of a few scheming individuals, they are a common, well-established aspect of how state institutions function, and how citizens and business actors deal with them.

Does the informality trap have an exit?
If, then, informality is so common, and if – due to this informality trap - democracy is indeed undermining rather than strengthening governance in many parts of Asia, how should we deal with this? Can or should something be done to get out of this informality trap? There are, broadly speaking, three types of answers to this question.

The first and most common response amounts to steadfast belief. Until recently I counted myself among this group. This response to governance problems amounts to call for patience, and to argue that the beneficial effects of democracy simply need to more time. Given time, voters will become smarter in selecting their leaders, clientelistic exchanges will lose their appeal and effective principal-agent relationships will develop. We just have to wait a bit longer[38].

The reason I lost faith in this approach, has much to do with the emergence and growing strength of a second type of response to the informality trap: a scaling back of democracy. Over the last decade we have seen across Asia the emergence of political leaders who make use of public frustration about corruption and regulatory failures to gain support for measures that, in effect, curtail democratic freedoms. A commonality of leaders like Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, the military junta in Thailand or the Taliban in Afghanistan is that they all present their authoritarian tendencies as a solution for governance failures. I would argue that such leaders come to power because of the frustrations generated by the informality trap. Voters vote "against the disorder"[39] that democracy generates. This is a dangerous development and points to the threat that the informality trap is posing to democracy.

This creeping authoritarianism makes it even more important to further develop and expand the third possible approach to the informality trap. This third approach involves dealing more explicitly with disadvantages of elections by trying to address the actual incentive structures that voters, bureaucrats and politicians face. This third response amounts to a 'collective action problem approach' to governance: if we accept that informality is likely to remain a feature of everyday governance, and that democratic elections generate these negative incentives such as those I outlined here today , then we need to become much smarter in dealing with these incentives. We need to stop assuming – as the principal agent approach does – that open and free elections will fix this problem. Instead, we need to better understand the nature of these informal dimensions of politics, and then employ that knowledge to identify piece-meal, step-by-step pathways out of the informality trap. We need, for example, to understand how vote buying practices can be curtailed, and how politicians might be dissuaded from meddling in bureaucratic appointments, how election campaigns might be funded in a way that reduces the dependence on business donors. I am not alone in reaching this conclusion: a growing number of studies and reports are highlighting the need for a close-up engagement with politics as it actually is, rather than as formal rules suppose it to be[40].

While this may sound common-sensical, we are just starting to develop such an approach. For a long time, the study of informal dimensions of politics remained a relatively peripheral field occupied by a few area specialists. I would challenge my political science colleagues to leaf through one of the many handbooks of comparative politics, and search for entries on informal dimensions of politics such as clientelism, informal political networks, the politics-business collusion. If such topics are discussed at all, they are usually described as a deviation of 'normal' formal politics. These handbooks prioritize formal dimensions of politics such as electoral systems, party systems, cabinet coalitions[41]. The field of comparative politics needs, instead, to accept the normality of informality and pay much more attention to the identification and analysis how informal dimensions of politics vary between countries and between regions.

That has been my main research agenda over the last decade. I have, for example, undertaken an effort to identify how and why the intensity of clientelistic practices varies across Indonesia. As previously we lacked the research methods to study such variation, we could also not identify the conditions under which clientelism and this informality trap is most intense. I am proud of this research effort where, with the help of 34 colleagues from Indonesian universities, we could implement a new research method – an expert survey – to trace this variation in a quantitative manner[42]. We found that local economic conditions – and in particular the degree of diversification of the economy – impacts the intensity of clientelistic practices. I am similarly proud of a research effort I have undertaken with several colleagues to compare the character of clientelistic politics in different countries[43]. We found important differences: whereas in some countries politicians organise clientelistic exchanges through party networks, in other countries politicians rely on other social networks. In some countries vote buying is very important, in other countries politicians focus on distributing state benefits in a clientelistic manner, like Pravin Dalal in my example from India. Knowledge of this kind of variation is crucial to understand the incentive structures that politicians face and to use that understanding to identify pathways out of the informality trap.

Relatedly, I have been trying hard to get funding for a comparative research project om campaign finance which, in my view, is the root of a lot of evil in the world. The high costs

associated with election campaigns generate not only corruption, they also generate these kinds of collusive relationships between politicians and economic elites which is currently giving democracies across the world – from the United States to India and Indonesia – an increasingly oligarchic character[44]. Yet despite this importance of the topic, we know surprisingly little about what makes election campaigns so expensive. Motivated by such considerations I have been been trying, and getting very close to getting a big research project on campaign finance funded. Unfortunately, there are no silver medals when it comes to research funding. The least I can do now is to promise to keep on fighting to get this plan funded.

The connecting thread of such research activities is the conviction that knowledge of informal dimensions of politics is crucial to defend democracy and to strengthen governance. In the coming years I intend to further expand this comparative study of informal dimensions of politics. In that light I am very content to be appointed as a professor in comparative political anthropology. While this is much broader field – involving the study of 'the political' the broadest sense[45] – political anthropology is both in terms of methods and approach well-suited to study informal dimensions of politics. This field has important and inspiring examples, right here at the University of Amsterdam where scholars like Jeremy Boissevain and Anton Blok have spearheaded the study of brokers, clientelism and informality[46].

Another reason this field of political anthropology is important, is that it occupies a middle ground between two academic disciplines that have been growing apart in recent years: political science and anthropology. Political science has become increasingly preoccupied with employing ever more fancy statistical techniques to identify causal relationships between phenomena. Publish-or-perish has become randomize-or-perish. This preference for quantitative research methods has led to a devaluation of both area expertise and of close-up and qualitative fieldwork – both of which are so important to understand informal dimensions of politics. Political science has, in recent years, seen a revival in interest in informality, but its emphasis on quantitative methods has hampered progress[47].

Anthropology has moved to the opposite direction. With a growing disdain for structuralist analysis, and a preference for jargon-rich constructivist studies of perceptions and interpretations, anthropology has moved away from systematic comparative analysis in general, and of informality in particular. Anthropologists now generally consider Jeremy Boissevain as old-fashioned, and his research topics have been dismissed as 'banal'[48].

Given this growing divergence, I am happy to occupy this important yet perhaps shaky middle ground between political science and anthropology: a middle ground between the hyper-empirical attitude of political scientists and the post-empirical tendencies of anthropologists, between the political science obsession with causality and the anthropological disdain for it, between the somewhat narrow focus of many political scientists on the calculative, instrumental aspects of political behavior, and the loathing of many anthropologists for anything that reeks like rational choice theory. A middle ground that employs both some of the quantitative research methods favored by political scientists as well as the qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork associated with anthropology. I would like to use my new position to occupy and grow this meeting ground between disciplines.

I can hardly imagine better places to do this than my two academic homes, KITLV and the University of Amsterdam. KITLV is a bastion of academic freedom and creativity. It has also been a wonderful home base, because of the people that work there. While we did not get to see each

other much over the last 1 ½ years - we even did not get to do enjoy Fridus Steijlen's famous Christmas dinner – KITLV has, under the directorship of Gert Oostindië maintained a very friendly, supportive, and good-humored atmosphere. I cannot name all my colleagues here, but I want to particularly thank Marieke Bloembergen, Rosemarijn Höfte, Tom Hoogervorst, Yayah Siegers, David Kloos and Sikko Visscher for such good-spirited collaboration over the years. Particularly special and cherished has been my collaboration with Adriaan Bedner, Gerry van Klinken and Henk Schulte Nordholt, from whom I learned so much. I also want to thank here the Indonesian and Dutch NGO's I have worked with over the years, like Walhi, Scale Up, Epistema, LP3ES, Mensen met een Missie and Namati: these collaborations have been vital in shaping my work. Similarly inspiring have been collaborations with scholars like Edward Aspinall, Wijayanto, Afrizal, Ahmad Dhiaulhaq, Otto Hospes, Daniel Peterson and Chris Chaplin: I thank them for this privilege.

A little over a year ago I started working here at the University of Amsterdam. And while this was a socially distanced year, this was – and felt like – coming back home. The University of Amsterdam is the place where I entered academia, and where I met lasting sources of inspiration. Here I want to particularly mention Joep van der Vliet, Abram de Swaan, Jan Breman and the late Mario Rutten as examples that continue to motivate and guide me. Similarly I have felt inspired by old friends and now new colleagues like Laurens Bakker, Luisa Steur, Gerben Nooteboom, Yatun Sastramidjaja, Tina Harris and Imogen Hamilton-Jones. It is a joy to work with you. Another benefit of this appointment, is that I now get to work more with PhD students like Geradi Yudhistira, Yogi Pernama as well as – now further away – Zamzam Fauzanafi, Retna Hanani, Vita Febriani, Prio Sambodho and Sarthak Bagchi. I want to thank Ursula Draxecker, Abbey Steele and the new ACRN for drawing me back into political science circles, and fellow scholars of informal politics here in the Netherlands like Joop de Wit, Peter Mulder, and Simon Chauchard, for the inspiration and conversations. I would like to thank the Executive Board of the university, the Dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, the Board of KNAW, and especially the MT of the KITLV for making this professorship possible and for the trust placed in me.

Ik switch naar het Nederlands voor het laatste deel van mijn verhaal. Als een wetenschapper of – zoals Tamar en Isa dat noemen – een schetenwapper, ben ik schuldig aan al die cliche's van een wazige, vergeetachtige, en afwezige academicus. Ik kan daarom niet genoeg zeggen hoe dankbaar ik me voel voor de fijne, bijzondere, en nuchtere vrienden die daarmee om kunnen gaan – en dat velen van jullie vandaag hier zijn. Mijn ouders hebben me de interesses en het zelfvertrouwen gegeven waardoor ik vandaag hier kan staan. Mijn zuster Fleur is een onmisbare steunpilaar. Dat zijn ook Suzanne, Kas, Tamar en Isa. Dat jullie in mijn leven zijn – en dat we sommige van de avonturen waarover ik gesproken heb, samen hebben mogen meemaken, en dat we die avonturen samen zullen blijven meemaken - is het grootste geluk dat me is overkomen.

Ik heb gezegd.

[1] See Berenschot and Van Klinken 2018, where we develop this definition.

[2] See Rothstein and Teorell 2008, who define in this light 'good governance' in terms of an impartial implementation of laws and regulations.

[3] See, for example, Adsera et al. 2003

[4] For an influential application of this principal-agent approach, see the World Bank's development Report 2004, 'Making Services Work for Poor People'.

[5] Examples of such programs here.

[6] Discuss data here

[7] Pepinsky 2020: 2, see also Emmerson 2012 and Brewer et al. 2008.

[8] Se Croissant and Bunte 2011; Hadiz 2010

[9] Rajshakhar 2020,

[10] Collins 2007. See also Lemière 2019.

[11] See for example Sun and Johnston 2009

[12] See Berenschot 2018b

[13] See for example Jaffrelot, Kohli, Murali 2019 and Crabtree 2019. In this vein a range of authors have worried about the oligarchic nature of democracy in Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines as well as mainland southeast Asia. See Ford and Pepinsky 2014; Winters 2013, Mohmand 2019, Quimpo 2015, Phongpaichit and Baker 2015 and Sidel 1999.

[14] This dissertation was published as Berenschot 2011

[15] I described Pravin Dalal's daily routine in Berenschot 2010

[16] See for example De Wit 2016, Auerbach 2019, Corbridge 2005, Bussell 2019

[17] On the role of brokers in mediating access to state services in India, see Berenschot 2011, Auerbach and Thachil 2018 and Berenschot and Bagchi 2020.

[18] Cf Bussell 2019

[19] On (definitions of) clientelism, see Stokes et al. 2013 and Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007

[20] On informal institutions and politics, see Raden, Levitsky,

[21] See, for example, De Zwart 1994, Berenschot 2018b.

[22] In this vein Partha Chatterjee (2004) argued that the 'politics of the governed' involved a strategic cultivation of personal connections through 'political society' rather than the claiming of citizen rights through civil society.

[23] For a nicely detailed illustration how this informality trap works out over time in Kupang (Indonesia), see Van Klinken 2014.

[24] E.g. Guha 1997, Lange 2009, Van Klinken 2018

[25] For a study on how the colonial state facilitated oppressive and extractive practices in Indonesia, see Breman 2015.

[26] See for example Auerbach 2019, who highlights how important effective brokers are in facilitating the developments of neighborhoods.

[27] Tidey 2016

[28] See Muhtadi 2018, Aspinall and Berenschot 2019.

[29] See Gecko Project 2017

[30] For studies documenting such exchanges, see Tans 2012, the Gecko Project 2018, Aspinall and Berenschot 2019: 203-228. See also October 18, 2021, edition of Tempo.

[31] See Berenschot 2018.

[32] For an insightful study on the role of bribes in bureaucratic careers, see Kristiansen and Ramli 2006

[33] See https://jpik.or.id/en/6-year-evaluation-of-forest-moratorium-millions-of-acres-of-forests-gone-untransparant-social-forestry-threatened-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-unprotected/

[34] See Berenschot et al. n.d.

[35] See Robison 2009

[36] https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-42664437

[37] For some examples, see Crabtree 2019, Hutchcroft 1998, Kang 2002

[38] In Indonesia, this continued faith in democracy has led to some highly unsuccessful democratic reforms. In 2004 Indonesia adopted direct elections for regional governments while in 2009 it adopted an open-list system for

parliamentary elections. Both reforms greatly drove up the costs of elections, and, consequently, the levels of corruption. While these new direct elections forced regional heads to engage in above-mentioned deals with business actors to finance their campaigns, the open-list system sparked a massive increase in vote buying practices because each candidate – not only those on top of the list – now believed they stood a chance in winning the elections (see Muhtadi 2018).

[39] Pepinsky 2017

[40] Fortunately, since about ten years a growing number of publications are appearing that call for, and develop such a 'collective action problem-approach' to governance. See, for example, Mungiu-Pippidi 2019, Hickey 2012, Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013, Booth and Gammack 2013. In its World Development report on Law and Governance (2018) even the World Bank departed from the principal-agent model it had previously embraced.

[41] Examples of such handbooks are Goodin and Klingemann, A New Handbook of Political Science; Goodin and Tilly, Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis. In contrast, Boix and Stokes, The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics, contains an excellent contribution by Susan Stokes on clientelism which, however, does not provide a framework for comparing different forms of clientelistic vote mobilization.

[42] See Berenschot 2018

[43] See Berenschot and Aspinall 2020.

[44] See, for example Mayer 2016 for the US, Kapur and Vaishnav 2018 for India and Aspinall and Berenschot 2019 for Indonesia. See also Cagé 2020 for a broad overview.

[45] For a sense of the breath of political anthropology, see Wydra and Thomassen 2018

[46] Two such very early studies on brokers and informality that inspired me are Boissevain 1974 and Blok 1974.

[47] Fortunately, there are still many political scientists writing about the importance of ethnography. See particularly Bussell 2020, Wedeen 2010 and Schatz 2017.

[48] Spencer 2007: 15.

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