



Hyper-centralization of political power and fragmentation of local authority networks in Banten (Indonesia)

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Hyper-centralization of political power and fragmentation of local authority networks in Banten (Indonesia)

Gabriel Facal *

On 20th December 2013, the governor of Banten, Atut Chosiyah, was officially conveyed to the Pondok Bambu jail, East Jakarta, after her accusation by the Anti-corruption commission (KPK) in two cases. The first concerns allegations about her participation in payments to the then Constitutional Court's chief justice, Akil Mochtar, in an attempt to procure a favourable ruling in a regency election dispute in South Banten's Lebak regency. The second case involved corrupt practices in the management of health tools projects by the provincial government.

These cases indicate important transformations to the political landscape at the inter-regional level and the relationship between regional and the national government. Indeed, since its creation in 2000, a regional hyper-centralization of political power and a remarkable concentration in the management of governmental funding has characterized the province (Hamid and Masaaki 2008). This situation is notably the result of the political hegemony of Governor Atut Chosiyah's family, a dynasty whose power traces its roots to the period of President Suharto's regime (1965-1998). Therefore, the reconfiguring of this family's political control introduces a level of uncertainty about the future of Banten province and its ten million citizens.

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To elaborate, the progressive exclusion of former political partners provided a basis for the monopolistic power that Atut Chosiyah's family achieved. By excluding former political partners, the family centered its political alliances on its own members, a strategy that some Indonesian journalists call "political clanism" (*"klanism politik"*). Another aspect of this hegemonic control was the corralling of regional resource management with a concomitant domination of economic sectors previously controlled by national linked actors. At the same time, family member integration into the national level political strata, particularly through the Golkar party's networks accompanied this distancing from national control. The regional and national rivalries provoked by this monopolistic hold on power surely led to the challenges faced by Atut Chosiyah's family and it will probably shape the future building of Banten's decentralized political framework.

Previous studies on Indonesia's decentralization process (*otonomi daerah*) have underlined that the reconfigured patterns of politics that are emerging require analysis through a regional context in order to understand better the diverse, contested and uneven character of decentralization's implementation. This regional focus enables a mapping of the distinct and contrasting local political dynamics when considering Indonesia's democratization process especially in terms of the complex interplay between political action and institutions (Carnegie 2009). In the specific case of Banten, the study of decentralization also suggests that decoding the current dynamics involves a fine-grained understanding of the formation and evolution of the different forces that struggle for local power in conjunction with national forces pressuring the internal regional dynamics.

Background of Atut Chosiyah and her family

To understand the concentration of power by Atut Chosiyah's family we have to look back at the emergence of her father, Haji Chasan Sohib. He belongs to the local category of strongmen called "*jawara*". These kinds of figure have played a central role in Banten's history although in different configurations. Strongmen are linchpins forming informal networks that have prevailed at least since the peasant revolt in 1888 (Kartodirdjo 1966). They led large-scale protest movements, like the communist rebellion in 1926 (Williams 1990), the revolution for independence in 1945 (Suharto 2001) and latent resistance thereafter to establish regional autonomy (Facal 2012). Rooted in brotherhoods and evolving as national integrated movements, the government gradually co-opted and controlled the militant

networks essentially through a tactic of “divide and rule”. This was a strategic move used to counter the influence of the autonomist Islamic movement Darul Islam in the region and it gained political power under Suharto’s regime. Haji Chasan Sochib, as a prominent *jawara*, was appointed to co-opt both religious leaders (*ulama*) and *jawara* forces in two organizations, respectively Ulama Work Squad (*Satkar Ulama*) and Jawara Work Squad (*Satkar Jawara*), founded in 1971 and 1972. *Satkar Jawara* later became *Pendekar Banten* organization. The word *pendekar* refers to a martial arts master and a defender of ethical values. It was designed to replace the term *jawara*, which already had negatively connotations due to links with criminal activity. Under the supervision of the Siliwangi military division and Golkar party, *Pendekar Banten* organization successfully maintained order and control in Banten during the New Order era. After President Suharto’s fall in 1998, Haji Chasan Sochib, who initially obtained his position through his opposition to demands for regional autonomy, quickly changed his mind and pushed for provincial autonomy in 2000 (Masaaki 2004). Since then, partially released from the hold of central control, the influence of his networks grew progressively.



Figure 1: Haji Chasan Sochib, the governor’s father and founder of *Pendekar Banten* organization

The success in politics of Haji Chasan Sochib's first daughter, Atut Chosiyah, constitutes the main public expression of this expanding influence. She initially held the post of Vice-Governor from 2001-2006 after an election mired in allegations of money politics and intimidation. In 2005, she took the place of the governor, Djoko Munandar, after his resignation for his involvement in a corruption case. Her subsequent victory in the direct local elections (*pilkada*) for Governor (*gubernur*) in 2006 opened a gate for a large influx of her father's familial connections into strategic political positions, both at executive and legislative levels. This nepotistic political strategy led to accusations of illegal grant funds especially after the provincial election in October 2011. However, opposition and protests against these practices suffer from a lack of resonance among the Bantenese society. The reasons for this absence of counter power may be explained as the result of at least two dominant factors. The first concerns the weakening of the political opposition, through a fragmentation and expansion of regional administrative units and the subsequent strategic positioning of Chasan Sochib's relatives as representatives in these newly established units. The second is related to the successful propaganda/campaigning strategy led by the governor's political team.

A political image based on philanthropy and “maternalistic” protection

Passing through Banten it is amazing to observe the large number of giant posters that hang above the main roads and promote the different actions of the governor. The enormous amount of money that Atut Chosiyah's family can draw upon serves to finance these mass political campaigns. The family successfully sidelined almost all political opposition in the last elections at regency, municipality and parliamentary levels. The electoral posters give the observer an image representation of the ideological referents mobilized by Atut Chosiyah. They are based mainly on two complementary iconic images. The first one presents Atut Chosiyah wearing the governor costume and serves to illustrate competency in official matters. The second one presents Atut Chosiyah wearing the religious veil, when posing alternatively as a nurse, a mother of the people, an attentive champion of peasants and laborers, a dynamic and modern businesswoman or even a trendy pop music fan designed to appeal to a youth constituency.



Figure 2: Atut Chosiyah promoting her image as protector of pregnant women

Through composite image projected by this political communication campaign, every strata of Banten society can recognize in Atut Chosiyah a reified icon upholding an ideal model of society. This marketing strategy is reinforced by “institutional ploughing”, mainly through the control and financing of institutions that act as intermediaries between government and citizenship, namely the so-called Community organizations (*Organisasi masyarakat*, Ormas). These encompass several hundred thousand members in the spheres of women, youth and humanitarian work. The political coordination at the grass roots level is led by the Volunteers of Unified Banten (*Relawan Banten Bersatu*, RBB that aims to replace the intimidation and coercive practices of the New Order era and the early years of *reformasi* (in the 1999-2004) (Hamid 2010). RBB is essentially charged with distributing gifts and money to village representatives. It organizes popular events such as concerts, culinary, sporting and artistic festivals. The Assembly of Unified Banten (*Lembaga Banten Bersatu*, LBB) supervises RBB in addition to co-opting the main information and education institutions under its umbrella. Their influence has increased substantially over the years and gives little chance opposition

voices being heard. Having said this, opposition does exist and remains active through other ways although severely constrained.

Panorama of the power in Banten since *reformasi*

To compete against Atut Chosiyah's family hegemony, the opposition itself also uses practices of collusion, notably between family members. At the political level, with the democratic electoral system and the emergence of political parties, most of the candidates multiply their affiliations and mobilize coalition mechanisms tactically. They do so predominantly on a short-term basis and according to electoral exigencies. The evolution and growing influence of political Islam also shows that prominent religious leaders are led to engage in the political system in order to obtain the funding necessary to keep their boarding schools running.

Thus, informal networks of influence still prevail and play a significant role in structuring the political sphere. Since the introduction of decentralization reforms in 1999, successive political instabilities and the privatization of publicly owned businesses has modified substantially the relationships between political institutions and traditional networks of authority (Metiala, Robison and Wilson 2007). Notably, the army's diminishing political power and reduction in its funding by the State has precipitated a massive privatization of the security sector. Many security groups now have a modified status towards the State and are largely autonomous of it. They have passed from an official integrated position in the administrative hierarchy of the New Order to multiform structures in the post-Suharto era (Nugroho and Wilson 2012). In the particular case of Banten with its highly centralized power structure, this has generated to forms of institutionalization in the security sector with links to criminal underworld networks. On the other hand, other parts of these networks have fragmented and formed opposition poles. This is particularly the case in the sector linked to politics, through political Islam groups, parties' coalitions and lobbying groups. Moreover, in the security sector, the Armed Forces *Kopassus*, and Communitarian organizations (*Organisasi Masyarakat*, Ormas) are linked to martial arts groups, like the Direction Body of Banten family's potential (*Badan Pembinaan Potensi Keluarga Banten*, BPPKB) and the martial arts organization Tjimande from Tari Kolot Kebon Djeruk Hilir (*Tjimande Tari Kolot Kebon Djeruk Hilir*, TTKKDH).

Hyper-centralization of power by Atut Chosiyah's family also resulted in internal conflicts, mainly among prominent *jawara* from South Banten and Menes coastal region. Moreover, close partners of the governor's father, Chasan Sohib, also tried to gain more independence and to impose themselves as political leaders. As a result, several prefects, like Aat Safaat (regent of Cilegon) and Dimiyati Natakusumah (regent of Pandeglang) created their own networks while staying under the tutelary of Chasan Sohib. Moreover, a minority of them radically split, like Mulyadi Jayabaya (regent of Lebak), who even considered to run as vice-governor in 2011, in partnership with Wahidin Halim, Tangerang city's mayor.

Finally, another step in the destabilization of the governor's network of influence was the death of her father, Chasan Sohib, in May 2011. It entailed a rupture with the values promoted under President Suharto's regime, as the defense of nationalism and local culture, notably martial arts.

Resetting of political strategies after Chasan Sohib's death

The death of Chasan Sohib in mid-2011 provided the possibility to his different opponents to make use of his ideological discourse. It was notable through the different strategies of the martial arts schools, which began to share the territories and activities previously monopolized by Chasan Sohib's partners. Indeed, these schools form the grassroots historical basis of political support. They are central in the coordination of the political mobilization of other groups. After Chasan Sohib's death, his eldest son, Chaeri Wardhana, took charge of trying to manage these informal forces of political influence. However, Chaeri Wardhana failed to maintain the same level of control his father exerted on local business and politics.

Another failure concerns the Lebak election case. Chasan Sohib carefully assured his self-security concerning his rivalry with Lebak's regent Mulyadi Jayabaya and he probably had an acute knowledge of his opponent's resources and political support. In contrast, his son Chaeri Wardhana took unconsidered risks. He became implicated in bribes offered to the former president of the Constitutional Court, Akil Muchtar, to recount the vote for the election of

Mulyadi Jayabaya's daughter, Iti Octavia. It seems highly significant that a former associate of Chasan Sohib threatens the network managed by Atut Chosiyah's family. It shows that the main risks facing the family result from generational ruptures and a loss of control over former allies and adversaries. This corresponds and overlaps with the dynamics of Indonesian decentralization with its strengthening of local networks in regional political management (Schulte Nordholt and Klinken 2007; Aspinall and Fealy 2003).

Despite the current difficulties faced by Atut Chosiyah's family, we should not underestimate the preservation strategies Chasan Sohib achieved in his last years. He placed his family's members in the main positions of economic and political control in both the executive and legislative branches of government. This was designed to improve the chances of family members' electoral success and maintain its capacity for financing political campaigns. Moreover, the grassroots support Chasan Sohib mobilized through intensive promotion of the family's image, and the strong links he favored with representatives at the national level and in political parties, form a complex web of influence that his opponents struggle to combat.

Potential scenarios of the political evolutions in Banten

There are a number of different possibilities that could emerge from the recent political reversals in Banten. Firstly, if Atut Chosiyah loses her post as governor, the probable replacement is the vice-governor, Rano Karno. In 2007, this former television movie actor made the list as vice-governor candidate for the Jakarta Special Territory, together with Fauzi Bowo, the leader of the civil militia *Front Betawi Rempug*. Rano Karno was then suspected in a case of money politics that was soon buried. In 2008, he won the elections for Tangerang regency against Airin Rachmi Diany, Atut Chosiyah's daughter in law. But in 2011, he stopped his mandate to chair as vice-governor with Atut Chosiyah. If Rano Karno is named as governor, there is little doubt he will continue to collaborate with Atut Chosiyah's family for the April 2014 legislative elections. In 2009, Atut Chosiyah's husband, Hikmat Tomet, became the head of the provincial Golkar party branch and he used this position to ensure that all the family's candidates were placed first in the Golkar list of candidates in the constituencies. In 2013, Hikmat Tomet passed away and Atut Chosiyah's younger sister, Tatu Chasanah, replaced him as the head of the provincial Golkar party branch.

Considering another potential development, we also have to take into account the possibility that national level investors and politicians succeed in enhancing their positions in the Banten region. With the growth of some strategic areas, such as the suburban Jakarta area of Tangerang (it hosts the international airport and a large part of the capital's middle class), political interests are reinforced for these national forces. Even if Atut Chosiyah's daughter in law, Airin Rachmi Diany, succeeds in being elected as South Tangerang mayor, Tangerang City stays under the control of Wahidin Halim's family. It controls both the executive government and the legislative branch of local government. They enjoy the protection of the elder brother, Nur Hassan Wirajuda, who was Indonesia's foreign minister between 2001 and 2009. The challenges surrounding the control of this area in the last couple of years are obvious considering the large-scale mobilization of Banten's martial arts schools. They are trained intensively to act as pressure groups in both parts of the political rival groups. For example, as the daughter of Chasan Sohib, known as "the *jawara* of the *jawara*", Atut Chosiyah used the image of a defender of the Bantenese people. She claimed herself as a "*jawari*" (the female figure of *jawara*), particularly through her supporting of local martial arts (*penca*) organizations.



Figure 3: Atut Chosiyah promoting her support by 250 branches of the martial arts school Terumbu

Developments in Atut Chosiyah's bribery case and the next local elections in 2014 could lead to a major recalibration of the political landscape. As stated, there are a set of potential different scenarios for the near future. Considering these multiple factors and the strengths in struggle, it is difficult to give a short answer to the question of Atut Chosiyah's family political future. Even if outside private investors and national level politicians succeed in gaining political positions and markets, they will have to engage with strongly established networks of influence. These networks could either support or oppose Atut Chosiyah's family and they can change their orientations quickly according to perceived benefits.

National decentralization and the multiparty system may have increased the role of civil society in political life but at the same time, it has permitted the integration of local informal networks in the governmental apparatus. The Banten case corresponds to a large degree to similar analysis carried out by of a number of other studies. They illustrate that in the

Indonesian context, decentralization enabled oligarchic networks to reinforce their structure within the new framework of democratic institutions (Hadiz 2003). However, having said this, the latter dynamic is not as obvious in every Indonesian region. In fact, this sort of generalized structural analysis tends to give an over-determined characterization of political transformation in Indonesia. As Carnegie (2009: 516) points out, “there are no simple categorizations but rather matters of time and degree.” The politics of decentralization in Indonesia is far more complicated messy and nuanced. Indeed, in the case of Banten, even if local oligarchies consolidated and extended their field of activities, decentralization also opened a gate for opposition, mainly for external forces, through national scale supports and through inter-regional networks. Moreover, national decentralization was accompanied simultaneously by a regional hyper-recentralization of the formal political power and a fragmentation of traditional authority networks at the local level. This phenomenon makes it difficult for opposition forces to unify, but at the same time, it results in the weakening of control for the hyper-centralized center. This tension might lead to a rupture if the regional leaders do not pay attention to the growing discontent of lower classes of the population and periphery localities.

In addition, this paper underlines that the focus on democracy consolidation that some commentators defend is not as appropriate as it may first appear. For many Bantenese people liberal electoral democracy is not considered as an ideal social model for promoting the best way of living together. There is a variety of contrasting opinions concerning political action and institutional reforms, particularly concerning the link between politics and religion. For example, prominent authority representatives like Kiai Fathuladzim, the claimed representative of the past Banten sultanate, argues for the implementation of Muslim deliberation system (*musyawarah*). His voice echoes a large part of the Bantenese population, for whom the democratic ideals of freedom and equality and the institutions designed to promote them are subordinate to religious authority and local status hierarchy. Enhancing our knowledge of these local forms of representation and practice, may provide insights for the type of democratic reforms best suited to these contexts and the ways in which they could be implemented.

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