

**Airlangga Pribadi Kusman's *The Vortex of Power: Intellectuals and Politics in Indonesia's Post-Authoritarian Era***

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This book was originally Airlangga Pribadi Kusman's PhD dissertation at Murdoch University Australia and explores the role of intellectuals and governmental processes in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Focusing on the East Java case, Kusman believes that intellectuals have played an increasingly direct and practical role in governance at the local level of Indonesian politics.

According to Kusman, intellectuals are considered a strategic asset in Indonesia's efforts to implement good governance and create egalitarian democratic institutions in the country. But who are these intellectuals? In Kusman's book, the term "intellectual" refers to members of an Indonesian demographic who contribute to the country's efforts in establishing good governance.

Intellectuals are academics who contribute to the production of scientific knowledge; experts, consultants, and technocrats who produce policy and political recommendations; social and political practitioners such as parliamentarian, executives, journalists, and NGO activists, whose position (i.e., members of parliament, regents or advisors to regional heads) is based on their capacity to create public discourse in civil society; and artists, writers, and columnists commonly called "public intellectuals," who are involved in debates about moral principles governing society. Their—some of them belong to pressure groups—avenues of expression are public discussions, mass media, as well as street demonstrations (1). Kusman's view is parallel to that of Goldman and Gu, who affirm that "intellectuals are people of high social standing and/or have substantial influence within society in which they are able to influence or sway public opinions to their desired effects" (11-20).

However, Kusman sees that in political practice, the power of the predatory oligarchy continues to dominate the political arena of democracy and governance in Indonesia. This happens because not only does domination require material

resources and the mastery of state and non-state violence, but also the approval of a wider collective society through hegemony and the dissemination of the ideology of dominant social forces. As we know, oligarchs or any political grouping regardless of ideological color, often have a symbiotic relationship with various “knowledge workers,” including intellectuals who, inadvertently or not, support them in one way or another because of the complexity of the problems and the weakness of the intellectuals’ power. Thus, Kusman reveals not only what constitutes political society, such as the legislative, executive, and judiciary—the apparatuses of bureaucracy and violence—which are the target of the oligarchy and in which oligarchic-predatory forces operate, but also the formation of public agreements that conceal the plundering of resources, public authority, and government projects (e.g., energy, food, and infrastructure) in such a way as to make the thoughts and actions of oligarchic forces appear in line with democratic projects and the agenda of good governance.

In chapter one, Kusman argues that intellectuals and experts have played an increasingly direct and practical role in the administration of governance at the local political level in contemporary Indonesia. In understanding this development, the authoritarian period and its reality cannot be ignored. During the Soeharto regime (1965-1998), the government was clear about suppressing large-scale intellectual activity, such as banning press freedom and restricting student assemblies at universities, thereby effectively subjugating intellectual life while simultaneously incorporating several intellectuals into the administration as junior partners. Kusman’s findings show that the Indonesian intellectuals’ ability to challenge predatory power is substantial, but is unfortunately compromised because of their social circumstances in the context of certain social struggles. To be specific, the social position of intellectuals in contemporary East Java cannot be separated from the power relations created during the authoritarian Soeharto era, which continued to prevail in the era of democracy (287-89).

Kusman clearly shows that in the Lapindo affair, for instance, some intellectuals such as the Muslim intellectual Emha Ainun Nadjib and NGO activist Emmy Hafild, among others, did resist the Bakrie-owned Lapindo Brantas Corporation’s ploy to manipulate public opinion by distorting the contents of media. Their efforts, however, were inconsequential when pitted against the tremendous resources of their opponents. The support of intellectuals for the Lapindo mudflow victims failed as a result of their weak connections to civil society at large and the fact that other fellow intellectuals were at the service of the oligarchy (238-39). In Surabaya, according to Vedi R. Hadiz’s observations (200-04), the dominance of the rulers of the New Order regime (1966-1998) in post-Soeharto politico-economic processes, on the one hand, and the weakness of grassroots groups on the other, had roots that

can be traced back to the period of Soeharto's New Order. There is no doubt that the experience of systematic disorganization and de-ideologization of the various forces of civil society under the New Order dictatorship that lasted for more than three decades had serious political consequences. Therefore, it is not surprising that various civil society groups, especially those in the grassroots movement, were not ready for the transformative agendas and opportunities that opened up upon Soeharto's resignation in 1998.

Meanwhile, the wave of reform also apparently lacked the ability to challenge the dominant groups of the "ex" New Order. In fact, these groups were able to adjust to the logic of reform. Through parliamentary membership, political parties, elections, and the decentralization of government, dominant groups quickly restructured themselves and continued to have very strong access to politico-economic processes in Indonesia. This required the availability of apparatuses of the hegemonic power at the level of civil society (e.g., universities, mass media, community organizations, NGOs, and social movement institutions) to ensure moral and intellectual compliance with the domination of oligarchic and predatory alliance networks in Indonesia.

Kusman provides insight into how collaboration between local intellectuals and politico-business elites shaped democratic procedural government and curbed the building of democratic institutions, validating the power structure that continues to hinder political participation in the country. He explores the ways in which the relationship between intellectuals, business and political elites, and NGOs in local political and economic practices intersect with national struggles for power and resources. Kusman also reveals the contribution of local intellectuals in resolving contradictions between technocratic ideas and governance practices in the interest of the local elite.

Theoretically, the ethos of the public intellectual in the vortex of power must be maintained, as explained by Michael Burawoy in his article "For Public Sociology" (347-48). Intellectuals devote their knowledge to the health of civil society, social engagement, and political activism. As stated by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, the role of intellectuals in power circles requires reasoning power, which includes the capacity to understand and convey how problems that appear as cultural dimensions are related to historical and structural social problems. According to Kusman, intellectuals have to make authorities aware that social inequality is not only an economic problem but also a cultural and political one that exacerbates social inequities and fanaticism. In the context of East Java, Kusman's findings show that intellectuals—especially academics and public consultants who have authoritative knowledge of governance and democracy—along with journalists,

cultural observers, and activists take part in solving social issues of contemporary society. Their involvement and social position as intellectuals provide them more legitimacy and access to knowledge, which enable them to fight the dominant political and economic elite that carry out primitive accumulation of capital and power.

In Surabaya, as in Jakarta, the strengthening pattern of alliance between intellectuals and oligarchic forces does not deny the presence of public intellectuals who try to fight for the interests of marginalized groups. Progressive political agenda cannot be separated from the role of intellectuals, and Kusman notes that even during the colonial period and Sukarno's reign, the absorption of intellectual groups within the political sphere was a basic feature of state-society relations. However, Indonesia's history up to the post-authoritarian period shows that such public intellectuals were unable to transform themselves into organic intellectuals (e.g., students, NGO activists, lecturers, journalists, and professionals), who would articulate changes during the Reformasi Order post-Soeharto. Given the presence of old regime actors (New Order rulers) who tried to dismantle the ideas of good governance and democracy through the looting of public resources, there was no success in fighting for the political agenda of social-democratic groups and the interests of liberals. The absorption of intellectual groups as strategic actors in civil society to the predatory oligarchy-business-political alliance was also due to the relative absence of the social base for reform.

In Kusman's analysis, the struggle between social classes that takes place through the formation of hegemony and the spread of ideology in the realm of civil society does not mean that Gramsci's findings emphasize the supremacy of the superstructure over the material base. Gramsci was not alluding to Hegel when he emphasized ideological contestation in the realm of civil society through intellectual agencies. Instead, he expanded, enriched, and detailed Marxist political traditions related to the reality of the struggle between social classes in the politico-economic structure which worked through acts of repression and the formation of hegemony.

In a detailed analysis of the position, role, and social contribution of intellectuals and agencies, as well as the interests of those carried by them, social power struggles for the preservation of power and wealth are the main determinants of the political economy. In the case of Indonesia, the process of consolidating power since the New Order era through the practice of de-ideologization and depoliticization in order to marginalize resistance resulted in the isolation of intellectual groups from the social base of society. In my opinion, however, this does not apply only to "intellectual groups" which posed a threat to the regime's interest. To some extent, this also happened to other groups that did not challenge or were even supportive of the regime's interests.

The deep intervention of the New Order state apparatus did not only result in a history of control and submission, but also in the establishment of an interlocking set of interests among those who made intellectuals dependent on the state apparatus of the New Order. In-depth interventions and interest links between state apparatus and intellectuals since Soeharto's New Order era resulted in a process of inclusion and exclusion of the critical intellectuals in order to legitimize and nurture the power of the New Order regime (105-25).

According to Kusman, the fall of Soeharto in 1998 and the spread of ideas of liberal democracy, free market, decentralization, and good governance did not break the business-politico-intellectual alliance that relied on the primitive accumulation operations of state resources and authority. The economic and political spheres were still entwined, and the post-authoritarian state did not move towards a free market order as imagined by the so-called institutional neo-economic actors. These changes in political institutions merely affected the process of repositioning among business-political actors characterized by a shift from the concentration of oligarchic power to the spread of politico-business network alliances engaged in social battles in local politics (127-63).

As regards the persistent private accumulation through access to power, capital, and public resources, the role of intellectuals who had knowledge on governance and decentralization remained quite the same. This happened because the accomplices of the oligarchy and predatory powers adapted to new institutional processes and were able to provide legitimacy, through public discourse, to the operations of the oligarchy. It is important for intellectuals to understand the oligarchy's strategies and interests in local politics in the context of electoral politics, development practices through good governance schemes, and social conflicts that involve politico-business interests in opposition to the aspirations of the citizenry (165-90).

Kusman explains that the rise of the oligarchy in Surabaya (and Indonesia) has also been fueled by poor local governance and a weak neo-economic institutionalism which has an anti-political pattern. This fact is also made worse by the unavailability of an adequate social base in Surabaya, such as that in Indonesia's political constellation, which can lead to the creation of a liberal economic and political reform agenda as well as political transformation towards a social-democratic order. Kusman reminds us that managerial technocratic solutions that ignore the problems of power, interests, and social struggles during the old politico-economic order, especially in Surabaya, make it easier for academics, technocrats, and social activists to repoliticize the anti-political governance agenda in order to care for and serve the interests of the oligarchy. Kusman takes note of the fact that governance in Surabaya such as the ways of public participation that are found

in the technocratic model of governance through the practice of Development Planning Consultation (Musrenbang or Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan) becomes vulnerable to the process of excluding people who are critical of dominant politico-business forces. This happens because the knowledge technocracy scheme that characterizes the participation model offered by neoliberal governance tends to ignore the asymmetrical power relations and the nature of power which are contrary to the objectives of good governance itself.

From this perspective, it is not intellectuals who produce social movements, but rather the other way around. Social movements produce their own organic intellectuals, more or less in the Gramscian sense, when sufficiently organised. Much of this observation has been drawn from the failure of the social movement that coalesced, temporarily, around the Lapindo case. Kusman also explains the long-standing relationship between intellectuals and state power holders in East Java that completely contradicts the notion of non-partisan intellectuals practicing good governance without the interference of social interests.

After reading Kusman's book on local politics, I conclude that reforming the power constellation in post-authoritarian Indonesia is ultimately a political project, which will have revolutionary implications. This is definitely not a technocratic project, as neo-institutionalists understand it, which can rely on the dynamics between intellectuals and the state for its realization. Of course, determining the extent to which this situation can last more broadly requires similar research on other provinces in Indonesia.

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