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The politics of dry feet: the political economy of flood risk management in Indonesia

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Summary

Based on the eclectic political economy approach discussed in Chapter 1, this dissertation argued that the outcomes of flood risk management (FRM) are significantly influenced by political-business collusion and how it can be countered. Political-business collusion can impede the effective implementation of flood risk management policies. However, cities that were able to curtail the collusion experienced better results, as evidenced by a reduction in the number of flood cases and the affected population. Civil society activism and its constructive partnerships with progressive political leaders have demonstrated their ability to oversee the public agenda, leading to improved drainage systems, spatial planning, and emergency response. I have substantiated these arguments through three empirical chapters focusing on flood defence (Chapter 3), flood prevention (Chapter 4), and flood preparation (Chapter 5), and recapitulate those arguments and findings below.

Chapter 3 aimed to explain why the results of flood defence infrastructure varies in urban areas across Indonesia. By comparing Surabaya with Semarang and Bandung District, I explored the reasons why a city with minimal investment in flood defence infrastructure outperformed two urban areas with larger and more expensive technical interventions. While there are also technical factors contributing to Surabaya's superior flood risk management, I found that the primary explanation for this variation lies in local political factors, particularly the varying capacity and willingness of local governments to enforce their drainage regulations – which in itself is a product of local political economy dynamics.

It is crucial to effectively enforce drainage regulations to prevent floods. This ensures that vital flood defence infrastructure, such as drainage channels and retention ponds, are in place, functioning properly, and exceed capacity. The capability and willingness of local governments to enforce these regulations are influenced by local political conditions, such as the linkages between local government and civil society. These conditions foster or prevent collusion between public officials, politicians, and business people. The more frequently such collusion occurs, the less successful flood defence outcomes will be. Conversely, less collusion generally leads to more successful flood defence. Additionally, the willingness of the local government to enforce drainage regulations depends not only on the nature of the government itself but also on state-society linkages. Cities with greater engagement and input from civil society and the citizenry are more likely to experience better enforcement of drainage regulations.

The Surabaya reform model has showcased a progressive state-society linkage since the early reformasi years, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The alliance between local government and society, established through such mechanisms, played a crucial role in ensuring regulatory enforcement, particularly in flood defence. Active participation by residents and civil society in local governance makes it more challenging for government officials to deviate from formal rules, for example, by colluding with companies that violate drainage regulations. Moreover, a government that is responsive to a broad popular support base is more likely to prioritise effectiveness. In the case of Surabaya, the mayor took action against corruption within the

bureaucracy by strengthening her ties with civil society organisations, universities, and the media. The media, in turn, helped expand her support base and reduce the sway of exploitative elites.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that the loss of green zones and water catchment areas is not solely a result of neutral policy, but is intertwined with political dynamics and power struggles within a city. Various stakeholders with vested interests in these areas can sometimes act against the public interest. Collusion between business and political interests can have a detrimental impact on flood prevention efforts by compromising rainwater absorption space. This underscores the need for scholars to reconsider the approach to flood prevention, recognising that success is not solely dependent on technocratic spatial policies, but is also influenced by factors such as civil society activism and politico-business collusion in spatial planning.

A city's success in reducing flood hazards by maintaining water catchment areas and green zones is attributed to the presence of a vibrant civil society that actively opposes collusion between politicians and businesses. This is exemplified by Surabaya's Sepat Reservoir Case, where collective action has effectively curbed such collusion, leading to a reduction in spatial planning violations and uncontrolled land-use conversion. Conversely, in cities lacking strong civil society activism, such as Semarang and Bandung District, the influence of politico-business collusion has hindered efforts to maintain water catchment areas and green zones, resulting in increased flooding and its detrimental effects.

The case in Surabaya demonstrates that civil “insurgent” activism relies on forming alliances among multiple actors to empower grassroots movements in both formal and informal arenas, across “invited” and “invented” spaces. This approach can sustain a movement over the long term by heightening the cultural significance and understanding of water catchment areas. Activists are able to engage in vigorous legal battles while also conducting public demonstrations and campaigns outside of state control. By adopting insurgent planning, spatial policy is no longer the domain of a select few experts, but rather becomes an inclusive space for all city residents, including the kampong community, who are advancing their own narratives and causes.

As discussed in Chapter 5 regarding flood preparation, the effectiveness of emergency response performance can be influenced by civil society activism and its collaborative efforts with the government. Political leaders have the ability to enhance the emergency response system by forming partnerships with civil society groups and media organisations, thereby establishing a new model of governance in public service delivery. This collaboration, exemplified by the cases of Surabaya and Bojonegoro District, empowered political leaders (the mayor or district head), to enhance governance while also securing their political positions and advancing their administration's agenda. By forming alliances with progressive non-state actors, political leaders can move away from the previously dominant clientelist mode of governance and counteract the influence of informal political-business elite networks. These alliances have yielded positive results in public service delivery, particularly in the realm of emergency response to flood hazards.

In Chapter 5, I demonstrated that flood emergency responses were notably more effective in Surabaya and Bojonegoro District due to increased organisational performance and independence from external influences. Conversely, in Semarang, the mayor was unable to act independently from the political-business elite, resulting in heightened flood hazards. Additionally, the mayor

failed to depart from the permissive politico-business collusion observed in the previous administration, leading to the inability to establish and maintain effective institutional arrangements for flood emergency response. It is essential to recognise that the effectiveness of flood preparation is not solely determined by technical factors such as organisational capacity, early warning system technology, or community engagement. Rather, it reflects the dynamic interplay of power and governance within a city. The political economy, which shapes the incentives and policy choices of political leaders, is a crucial factor in understanding the varying quality of flood preparation across different cities.