

The Role of District-Level Political Elites in Education Planning in Indonesia: Evidence from Two Districts

Masooda Bano and Daniel Dyonisius

Abstract

Focus on decentralisation as a way to improve service delivery has led to significant research on the processes of education-policy adoption and implementation at the district level. Much of this research has, however, focused on understanding the working of the district education bureaucracies and the impact of increased community participation on holding teachers to account. Despite recognition of the role of political elites in prioritising investment in education, studies examining this, especially at the district-government level, are rare. This paper explores the extent and nature of engagement of political elites in setting the education-reform agenda in two districts in the state of West Java in Indonesia: Karawang (urban district) and Purwakarta (rural district). The paper shows that for a country where the state schooling system faces a serious learning crisis, the district-level political elites do show considerable levels of engagement with education issues: governments in both districts under study allocate higher percentages of the district-government budget to education than mandated by the national legislation. However, the attitude of the political elites towards meeting challenges to the provision of good-quality education appears to be opportunistic and tokenistic: policies prioritised are those that promise immediate visibility and credit-taking, help to consolidate the authority of the bupati (the top political position in the district-government hierarchy), and align with the ruling party's political positioning or ideology. A desire to appease growing community demand for investment in education rather than a commitment to improving learning outcomes seems to guide the process. Faced with public pressure for increased access to formal employment opportunities, the political elites in the urban district have invested in providing scholarships for secondary-school students to ensure secondary-school completion, even though the district-government budget is meant for primary and junior secondary schools. The bupati in the rural district, has, on the other hand, prioritised investment in moral education; such prioritisation is in line with the community's preferences, but it is also opportunistic, as increased respect for tradition also preserves reverence for the post of the bupati—a position which was part of the traditional governance system before being absorbed into the modern democratic framework. The paper thus shows that decentralisation is enabling communities to make political elites recognise that they want the state to prioritise education, but that the response of the political elites remains piecemeal, with no evidence of a serious commitment to pursuing policies aimed at improving learning outcomes. Further, the paper shows that the political culture at the district level reproduces the problems associated with Indonesian democracy at the national level: the need for cross-party alliances to hold political office, and resulting pressure to share the spoils. Thus, based on the evidence from the two districts studied for this paper, we find that given the competitive and clientelist nature of political settlements in Indonesia, even the district level political elite do not seem pressured to prioritise policies aimed at improving learning outcomes.

The Role of District-Level Political Elites in Education Planning in Indonesia: Evidence from Two Districts

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List of Abbreviations

APBD	Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget
APK	Work Participation Rate
CSOs	Civil society organisations
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
Demokrat	Democratic Party
Disdik	Department of Education
Disdikpora	Department of Education, Youth, and Sports
DPD	Regional Representative Council
DPR	People's Representative Council
DPRD	Regional People's Representative Council
Gerindra	Great Indonesia Movement Party
Golkar	Party of Functional Groups
Hanura	People's Conscience Party
HDI	Human Development Index
HMI	Islamic Student Association
K3S	School Principals Working Group
Kaca Geulis	Karawang Reading and Writing
Kahmi	Alumni Corps of the Islamic Student Association
Kesbangpol	National Unity and Politics Agency
KKG	Teachers Working Group
Kominfo	Ministry of Communication and Information Technology
MPR	People's Consultative Assembly
MUI	Indonesian Ulema Council
Musrembang	Development Planning Deliberations
Nasdem	National Democratic Party
OPDs	Regional Apparatus Organisations
PAN	National Mandate Party
PATEN	Sub-District Integrated Administration Services
PAUD	Early Childhood Education
PBB	Crescent Star Party
PDIP	Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle
Pemda	Regional government
Perbup	Regent Regulation
Perda	Regional Regulation
PGRI	Indonesian Teachers' Union
PKB	National Awakening Party
PKS	Prosperous Justice Party
PMMS	School Managerial Quality Improvement Programme
PPDB	Registration of New Students
PPP	United Development Party
PUPR	Department of Public Works and Public Housing
RKPD	Local Government Work Plans
RPJPD	Regional Long Term Development Plan
SBMC	School Based Management Committee
SD	Elementary School
SIKS-NG	Social Welfare Information System-Next Generation
SMA	Senior secondary school
SMK	Vocational high school

SMP
TLC
UMK
WJLRC

Junior Secondary School
Karawang's Teacher Learning Centre
Minimum Wage
West Java Leader's Reading Challenge

Introduction

The focus on decentralisation and district-level education reforms to improve the quality of education provision in state schools has, in the last twenty years, resulted in many studies assessing the processes of prioritisation of specific education policies at the district-government level, and the factors influencing their successful implementation (World Bank 2004; Westhorp et al. 2014). Two sets of questions have in particular attracted much attention: one, the impact of increased community participation on improving the quality of education in state schools through increasing the community's ability to hold teachers and principals to account (Levy 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019); two, the role of district-level bureaucrats in the adoption of specific education reforms and their implementation (Grindle 2004; Mangla 2015). While there has been a recognition of the role of political elites in pushing forward the education-reform agenda (Kingdon et al. 2014), not many studies have examined the nature or extent of their involvement. A few recent studies have started to fill this gap by undertaking rich empirical studies using the 'political settlement' framework (Levy 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019). This framework argues that the interests of the existing power-holding elites, combined with the formal and informal nature of the governance structure prevalent in a given context, would determine whether political elites will prioritise positive education reforms. Despite this growing interest in the subject, empirical studies of political elites' attitudes towards education reforms, and the extent of their engagement with the education sector, are limited in number, especially those examining these processes at the level of the district government.

This paper draws on evidence from two districts—Karawang (an urban district) and Purwakarta (a rural district)—in the state of West Java in Indonesia, to address three key questions:

- (1) do the district-level political elites seem engaged with debates on education in each study district?;
- (2) what policies do they promote, and what do those policies suggest about their commitment to reform of the education system?
- (3) does the extent and focus of prioritised reforms vary across the two districts?

The paper shows that for a country where the commitment to education reforms seems weak, given the low level of learning outcomes, the district-level political elites do seem reasonably engaged with education debates. Fieldwork suggests that these elites are aware of growing community expectations that government should be committed to improving state schooling: governments in both districts under study allocate higher percentages of the district-government budget to education than mandated by the national legislation. However, the approach of political elites towards meeting the challenges to the provision of good-quality education appears opportunistic and tokenistic: policies prioritised are those that promise immediate visibility and credit-taking, help consolidate the *bupati*'s authority, and align with the ruling party's ideology. Future studies need to explore whether such prioritisation is a result of a lack of vision on the part of the political elites across the different tiers of government, or of a genuine shortage of resources to commit to a holistic and long-term approach to education reforms, or simply a result of a lack of incentives for the elites to prioritise education reforms, given the existing political settlements.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section presents the conceptual framework covering debates on decentralisation and education reforms, with a particular focus on highlighting how the role of district-level political elites in shaping education reforms remains inadequately studied. Section 2 presents the method. Section 3 presents evidence from both the

districts to establish that engaging with education debates does appear important for political elites' popular image building. Section 4 demonstrates how the *bupati* can use education policies to advance personal authority. Section 5 shows how party politics as well as party ideology does influence the adoption of specific policies. Section 6 presents the conclusion linking the findings to political settlement literature.

Section 1: Decentralisation and Education Reforms: A Role for Political Elites?

In the past two decades, much of the focus of education reforms in the developing countries has come to rest on decentralisation, which has been interpreted in two distinct but related ways: one, decentralisation of policy planning authority from the center to states, which some refer to as 'federalism'; two, district level decentralisation or localisation where the community and units below the district government exercise greater control on decisions linked to implementation and provision of service provision (World Bank 2004; Westhorp et al. 2014). Decentralisation at both these levels is argued to enhance the ability of the public to hold state institutions to account. Within the field of education, much attention has been paid to studying the impact of decentralisation on increasing bottom up accountability through interventions aimed at enhancing community participation such as the establishment of School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) (Westhorp et al. 2014). The international community's support for these decentralisation processes has ensured that their implementation has been accompanied by research and evaluation studies aimed at measuring the impact of increased community participation on school performance and the working of the education bureaucracies (Westhorp et al. 2014). Thus there has been a steady growth in literature on district-level education reforms and community participation, as well as studies assessing the impact of decentralisation on the working of the bureaucrats staffing the district-level education authorities (Westhorp et al. 2014). The research on district-level education bureaucrats has focused normally on understanding how policies are communicated from the central government to the district government, and how those policies are implemented on the ground in schools (Levy 2018). A particular area of interest has been to study variations in the implementation of reforms across districts, which is expected to be linked to attitudes or capacities of the district-government bureaucrats (Mangla 2015).

Thus, while studies aimed at understanding the impact of district level decentralisation on a community's ability to hold state actors to account, or its impact on the working of the district-government authorities, have steadily increased, relatively limited effort has been made to understand the role of political elites at the district-government level in initiating or advancing educational reforms. This is despite the useful lessons learned from some recent studies emphasising that in order to understand the root causes of the current learning crisis in many developing countries, we need to understand the political-economy processes influencing decisions about investment in the education sector (Kingdon et al. 2014; Hickey and Hossain 2019). While the traditional political-economy analysis of the education-sector reforms focused on mapping the key actors and identifying their incentives and connections to see why pro-poor education reforms are difficult to implement (Kingdon et al. 2014), recent studies have favoured studying this process by applying the 'political settlement' literature which 'refers to the broad configuration of power within society' (Hickey and Hossain 2019: 24).

This approach focuses on inter-elite bargaining, 'whereby powerful groups within society struggle with each other for influence over the rules of the game that distribute resources and status,' (Hickey and Hossain 2019: 25). This approach aims to analyse 'how the balance of power between social groups tends to ensure that institutions function primarily to distribute goods and status to powerful groups, in order to maintain their agreement with the basic rules

of the game' (Hickey and Hossain 2019: 25). A political settlement is argued to emerge when enough elites are sufficiently satisfied with the existing power balance and the distribution of status and resources in society. Within this framework, elites are likely to commit to education reforms only if such an investment is compatible with the material interests or ideological commitment of the actors, dominant within the existing political settlements, or if the ability of these actors to stay in power is threatened unless they redistribute some power or undertake certain reforms. As we will see in this paper, in the case of Indonesia the response of the district-level political elites to growing community demands for improved education suggests that existing elite settlements are not feeling enough pressure to undertake serious education reforms. Political elites across both the districts under study are cognisant of community demand for improved schooling, but are only committing to policies that help them to gain political visibility, instead of initiating reforms that can address the learning crisis. Despite having a unitary form of government, Indonesia offers a good context to study this question as the 1998 constitutional reforms devolved much power to the local governments making it in practice a quasi-federal system (Bertrand 2007).

The paper thus focuses on studying the role of the Commission IV, which is responsible for overseeing educational policy and planning, within the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), the main elected legislative body at the district-government level, and that of the *bupati*, the highest political office at the district-government level, akin to being a chief minister of a small state or province, in shaping education policies at district government level. The political authority to shape educational reforms at district government level resides at these two levels.

Section 2. Methodology

The fieldwork for this paper took place over the course of 2020 in two distinct phases: the first phase lasted from January to March 2020, when it had to be stopped in response to the global COVID-19 outbreak; the second phase started in late August and lasted until December 2020. The first phase began with visits to the SMERU Research Institute, RISE local partner in Indonesia. The purpose was to discuss the selection of the two districts, which represent some variation in educational outcomes as well as their socio-economic profile: SMERU had under RISE developed a sophisticated set of indicators that could help rank districts based on different analytical criteria; rural urban or socio-economic variation, high performing versus low performing districts in education, the most innovative districts, etc. Such a ranking provided an effective starting point for identifying factors that could potentially explain the variation in educational outcomes. As a result of the discussions with SMERU team, Karawang and Purwakarta, an urban and a rural district with different socio-economic dynamics but a shared history, were selected as field sites. Official permission to conduct interviews with district-government officials was secured through the West Java National Unity and Politics Agency (Kesbangpol) located in Bandung, which has the authority to provide permits to conduct research with district-level bureaucrats within the district-government authorities, Department of Education, Youth, and Sports (Disdikpora) in Karawang and the Department of Education (Disdik) in Purwakarta.

During this first phase, visits were also made to selected state schools across the two districts, and group discussions were also held with the communities. The focus of this initial phase of fieldwork was to understand how the district-government education authorities and the communities engage with and prioritise specific education reforms. The findings from this phase of the fieldwork have been presented in another RISE study (Bano and Dyonisius forthcoming). However, this initial fieldwork, which allowed for observing the socio-economic

and cultural contexts of the two districts, holding discussions with the communities and making visits to schools and district-government offices also informs the analysis presented in this paper, even though the main evidence for the paper was gathered during fieldwork carried out in phase 2.

The second phase of the fieldwork resumed in late August 2020, this time with a focus on understanding the role of the district-level political elites in the education reforms in the two districts. Given this focus, the fieldwork required conducting interviews with the chairpersons and members of the DPRD Commission IV in both the districts, as this commission represents the main political platform responsible for public welfare services, including education. Interviews were conducted with the heads of Commission IV in both districts, because, together with the *bupatis*, they are in charge of formulating education policies. The heads of the Commission in both districts were also requested to invite members of individual political parties to join the interviews. Since these interviews were conducted at the DPRD offices in the two districts, there were also opportunities for undertaking observations regarding the extent and nature of engagement between the community representatives and the DPRD members. For example, during one visit it was possible to observe an audience meeting between DPRD officials and labour representatives in Karawang. On another day, the interview location had to be moved because of a labour demonstration – an indication of an active interaction between the labour representatives and the DPRD members. In contrast, Purwakarta's DPRD was strikingly quieter and not crowded on the days of the interviews. It appeared as if the office was closed to the general public.

In addition, interviews were conducted with a range of actors who could elaborate on the extent of engagement by the political elites in the education sector and the details of the reform policies that they prioritised. In addition to the school principals, teachers, and parents, these actors included the heads of different educational programmes supported by political elites in the two districts: the head of the Karawang Cerdas (Smart Karawang scholarship programme) validation team / the head of online Registration of New Students (PPDB) from elementary (SD) to junior secondary (SMP) level; the head of Karawang's Teacher Learning Centre (TLC); an organiser of the Indonesian Teachers' Union (PGRI); and the organiser of Kaca Geulis (a literacy community in Karawang). The views, perceptions, and actions of these actors were identified as important for an understanding of the phenomenon under study. As expected of ethnographic research, the fieldwork was not guided by a set plan, nor were there pre-established rules about selection of specific actors to interview, or sites to visit. Instead, selections were made on an ongoing basis, according to what emerged as being important in the initial findings in the field. This flexibility associated with an ethnographic approach has its known benefits and limitations. When in the field, the researcher pursues all possible leads that appear important for answering the core question, in order to be able to look at the phenomenon in its entirety.

All the fieldwork was conducted under the Oxford University ethics protocol, under which this study has been approved. Informed consent, whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate, and the anonymity of respondents are the core principles guiding this research. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and then translated into English. Field notes were maintained in the form of a diary and shared between authors. These notes formed the basis of a discussion to identify the core themes emerging from the field. Those themes identified as important were prioritised during the following weeks of the fieldwork. This constantly evolving focus of the fieldwork in response to findings from the field is the core strength of an

ethnographic approach. In terms of data protection, as per Oxford University data-protection policy, the interview transcripts and diary notes were saved on the computer with an encrypted password. Also, as per the Oxford University ethics protocol, all respondents were promised anonymity unless they themselves expressed a desire to be quoted.

Section 3. Policies Prioritised: Showy Investments

In both districts, there is evidence that education is an issue to which district-level political elites feel a certain pressure to demonstrate political commitment. Governments in both the districts allocate higher budgets to education than mandated by national legislation. As a political party representative from Karawang's DPRD explained, 'We have allocated 40 per cent of the regional budget (APBD) for education, more than the 20 per cent mandated by the Act No. 20/2003.' The head of Commission IV of Purwakarta's DPRD similarly noted how the government has allocated 30 per cent of its APBD to education, 10 per cent more than what is mandated by the national regulations. It is worth noting that the mandated amount at 20 per cent of the regional budget, is in itself quite high. Similarly, the head of Commission IV of the DPRD in Karawang was keen to highlight that politicians are required to engage with education-policy planning and implementation under Regional Regulation (Perda) No. 8/2009 concerning the Education Implementation System in Karawang Regency. That education is an area that the political parties representatives deemed to be an important aspect of policy planning is thus clear in the case of both the districts. The specific policies endorsed by the political elites in the two districts, however, suggest that in engaging with education the political elites are more concerned with gaining popular legitimacy than attempting to remove the key hurdles to the provision of good-quality schooling.

Karawang: Ensuring Employment not Learning

In discussions with the political party representatives in Karawang, and interviews with the DPRD members, the approach to designing the education policy was clearly linked to the district's status as an industrial city, to growing urbanisation, and to the expanding labour market, which has been attracting workers from other parts of the country as well as from overseas. The common thread across education policies prioritised by the DPRD is the need to increase and protect the share of the local population within the district labour force. This outlook was the basis for introducing the Labour Perda, as the Head of Commission IV explained:

In our society, there is an orientation for people to attend school in order to work. Karawang has the *highest City/District Minimum Wage (UMK)* in Indonesia. Because there are many settlers, there were complaints, and so the Labour Perda was born. It regulates how the *native people of Karawang are prioritised* to be accommodated for work. The ratio is 60 per cent natives, 40 per cent urban settlers, and 10 per cent for overseas workers.

This focus on approaching education from the labour-market perspective has led local political elites to prioritise policies that are geared towards degree completion and employment. Thus, one of the highly prioritised policy interventions is the secondary-school scholarship programme called *Karawang Cerdas*. The Head of Commission IV explained: 'The ultimate goal of Karawang Cerdas is to increase school average/GPA and Human Development Index (HDI).' Investment in such a scheme is particularly revealing, as Act No.23/2014 delegates the responsibility for elementary and junior-secondary education to districts and allocates the responsibility senior academic high school (SMA), vocational high school (SMK) to provinces. Thus, for the district political elites to spend the district-education budget on a scholarship

programme for high-school and higher-education students demonstrates their keenness to ensure that the local population can capture a visible share of the local employment opportunities, which as a minimum often require a secondary-school certificate. A DPRD member explained the organisation's capacity to negotiate this national provision:

Karawang Cerdas was introduced as DPRD's own initiative, through *bupati* Regulation (Perbup) No. 26/2018. Scholarships are provided for the senior secondary–higher education levels. The purpose is to improve education levels in Karawang.

A school principal explained the reasons for introducing Karawang Cerdas in these words:

The policy aims to increase the GPA of Karawang. Karawang has the highest Work Participation Rate (APK) in West Java. As such, it is in the interest of the native Karawang people to study. In the past, people from Karawang went to study elsewhere. Now, they do not. Karawang students have become more competitive. This is definitely influenced by industrial status too. Karawang has the highest UMK, so the public has high interest for education and work. Interest in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) and equivalency packages [informal education] is also high. People are no longer junior secondary graduates. The dropout rate is also small in Karawang. The *bupati* made the right step in providing funding for students.

The scholarship programme is open to students from economically disadvantaged family backgrounds, to those showing exceptional achievements, and to children of civil servants (Disdikpora Karawang 2020). The scheme is open only to Karawang natives. As the school principal explained further:

The requirements are strict. Only Karawang residents are eligible for this scholarship. This means a person must either be born in Karawang or attended SD-SMP in Karawang (for SMA-level scholarship) or SD-SMA in Karawang (for Higher Education scholarship). Students with achievements come to me for validation. Through village operators, we input their Social Welfare Information System-Next Generation (SIKS-NG) data, so that it will be permanently recorded.

The scholarship provides 12 million Indonesian Rupiahs (IDR) (US\$ 840) per year for a duration of three years for those enrolled in higher education beyond secondary school. As the principal further argued, 'The scholarships are good because they put pressure for students to complete their degree within three years. For high school students, they give 1.4 million per year. Innovation capability becomes a priority for giving scholarships.'

Further, recent district-level efforts to provide teacher training or improve teacher motivation were also explained in terms of the need to produce an improved work force for the employment sector. As the head of Teacher Learning Centre (TLC) in Karawang explained:

In Karawang there are many industries. Teacher Learning Centre (TLC) was established due to the mismatch between the world of education and the world of work. Therefore, teacher training must be conducted. The current conditions in education are not suitable for preparing students to work. Many factory workers come from other locations in Java. We need to ensure that education in schools in Karawang encompasses schooling and additional skills. Quality is important, because companies

do not just see whether prospective workers are *putera daerah* [which translates into sons of the soil or more simply, the region's native population]. Skills must be verified.

The head of Commission IV further noted how the district government had issued a Perda to protect teachers, in order to improve their motivation: 'There are only two of such regulations in Indonesia. The principle of human rights (HAM) often led to misunderstandings. When a teacher tweaked a student's ear, the parents would get angry and report to the police, so teachers were criminalised. The DPRD released the Perda so that teachers became motivated again to educate.'

The head of Commission IV was also quick to note how public-private partnerships are essential in supporting teachers and school facilities:

In the past, honorarium teachers were not even recognised by the regional government (Pemda), so there was a demand for status and welfare improvement. That was why we introduced the School Managerial Quality Improvement Programme (PMMS) policy. We are also committed to improving infrastructure. Indeed, there are hundreds of damaged classrooms, so we ask the Department of Public Works and Public Housing (PUPR) to prioritise this. We cannot just rely on APBD. As an industrial city, there are thousands of companies here. We can pursue CSR, so we drafted a CSR Perda.

He further elaborated on DPRD's reason to introduce the CSR Perda:

With the CSR Perda, we want to encourage a pilot school programme, which was previously halted due to regional financial capacity. We hope to ensure quality school outputs, who are ready for work. We have already conveyed to Disdikpora that schools, especially SMKs, should engage in partnerships with companies. Companies should become their 'foster parents', and company directors/trainers should also teach at schools.

Another DPRD politician supported this claim: 'If people want to build a private school, they must include evidence of cooperation with three companies in the neighbourhood. Licensing also requires evidence of such cooperation.' The focus of district political elites on education as a means to formal employment, as opposed to ensuring actual learning, is best summed up in the head of Commission IV's explanation of why CSR regulation is needed:

The one thing we must address is why *companies are always looking for people outside Karawang*. As an international industrial area, we need to prepare our human resources. *Unemployment* figures always become the information that gets disclosed. Our homework is to make unemployment lower. At the moment, the number of graduates exceeds the labour force. Settlers get employed, while local people are unemployed.

Thus it is a concern to win popular legitimacy by bringing down unemployment rates that drives the political elites' education-policy prioritisation in Karawang. It is thus not surprising that the policies prioritised, such as the higher education and secondary-school scholarship scheme, or removal of checks on teachers' ability to punish students in order to incentivise them, are also those whose impact is very immediate and visible. Such policies help to assert a claim to supporting education reforms without actually addressing the real challenges. The scholarship scheme, which actually diverts to university and secondary-school students

budgets that should ideally be allocated to primary and junior-secondary schools, in fact could arguably be hindering rather than facilitating investment in improving basic learning outcomes.

Purwakarta: Promoting Tradition not Learning

In Purwakarta the policies prioritised are very different from those presented above for Karawang. The prioritised education policies in Purwakarta were explained by one DPRD member:

In accordance with Act No. 23/2014, regencies (districts) are only responsible for primary and junior secondary education. For this reason, we tend to spur moral education and shape students' character to have a *Sundanese cultural personality*... Character Education was an initiative of the *bupati*, introduced with a consideration to enhance the *cultural potential of the existing community*. He wanted to emphasise the character of our community through restoring its customs and culture.

Two things stand out from this explanation. First, the district chooses to abide by the national stipulation regarding the need for the district government to focus on primary and junior-secondary education. In this regard, instilling moral education at an early age is seen as the appropriate priority, given that districts are held responsible for the younger, primary, and junior-secondary school students. Second, the emphasis on restoring 'Sundanese cultural personality' is in line with the Character Education policy being promoted at the national level, which declares that 'character education in Indonesia must come from the culture of the Indonesian nation itself' (Wulandari 2017).

The emphasis on preservation of tradition and culture was justified on the grounds of the erosion of the Indonesian identity by increasingly dominant Western and, more recently, Arab cultural influences. As the *bupati* himself has argued: 'Indonesia's problem is that it has long left its identity. When Arab culture came to predominate, the Indonesian people made it as the antithesis of Western culture [which they had previously looked up to].' This reference to Arab culture indicates his concern about more radical puritanical Islamic movements, which have taken root in parts of Indonesia in recent decades, as opposed to the more liberal Sufi-oriented Islamic tradition historically associated with Indonesia (Feillard and Madinier 2006). Thus, the emphasis placed by local political elites on moral education is a response to the collective pressure felt by local communities and generated by the perceived erosion of local tradition and culture; it is not reflective of an effort to improve learning outcomes – although it has to be noted that in the public perception a strong moral character is believed to contribute indirectly to learning, as it is perceived to make children more conscientious in pursuing their studies.

That it is the desire to curb the spread of perceived social evils resulting from external influence — be it the socially liberal attitudes towards gender mixing credited to Western values on the one hand, or signs of religious radicalisation credited to Arab groups on the other — rather than an emphasis on improving learning outcomes that is driving the education-policy agenda is also visible in the way other measures are being put in place to support moral reform in society. Prioritising investment in moral education is actually an aspect of the broader policy promoted by the *bupati* in order to check perceived social vices. Such policy measures include prohibition of dating after 9 pm, and the installation of video surveillance and a surveillance task force in each village to monitor this (Priatmojo 2015; Pratama 2015). A couple's violation of this policy would result in expulsion from the village, or other forms of customary punishment, which may include forcing the couple into marriage. The rationale provided is to

'maintain the morals of teenagers away from negative things, starting from delinquency and immoral acts' (Priatmojo 2015).

In addition to moral education, the other education priority of political elites in Purwakarta is developing entrepreneurship skills among the young. Since, unlike Karawang, Purwakarta does not have a sizeable formal employment sector, such an investment is again arguably a good response to the local needs – but not necessarily a good investment if the priority is to improve learning outcomes. As a teacher noted:

In the last two years, the *bupati* has rewarded students' achievements by providing funding for academic and non-academic competitions. The Special Purwakarta programme emphasises students' hard work and creativity. Instead of relying on available employment opportunities and working at factories, it encourages students' *entrepreneurship*. So, it develops their skills in planting and raising livestock. The government donated goats to be raised by elementary-school children. Programmes are developed to cultivate life skills. Women join knitting training.

Thus, just as in the case of Karawang, engaging with education policies and debates is clearly important for the district-level political elites; political elites do seem to appreciate that engaging with education is important for securing popular legitimacy. However, the policies promoted also show that the policies prioritised are those that are immediately visible and win popular legitimacy, instead of those that are focused on promoting learning outcomes in state schools.

Section 4. An Avenue for Consolidating the Bupati's Authority

Fieldwork across the two districts also suggests that education is an important avenue for consolidating the *bupati's* authority. This issue is particularly visible in the case of Purwakarta, the rural district. Such a finding is not surprising, as rural districts, which are still often more bound by traditional structures, are likely to have more authority centered in the office of the *bupati*, which is a modern political office but with a strong historical legacy. To understand this difference, it is important to consider the governance framework in Indonesia and situate the role of the *bupati* within that.

As in the case of all modern democracies, at the national level the governance structure in Indonesia consists of three branches: executive, legislative, and judiciary (Indonesia-Investments n.d.). The executive branch, elected by the people, consists of the President, the Vice-President, and the cabinet. The People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), which is a bi-cameral parliament consisting of the People's Representative Council (DPR) and Regional Representative Council (DPD), constitutes the legislative branch. At the provincial level, the executive role of the government is conducted by a governor, while each district is headed by the *bupati*. *Bupati*, a Javanese title, translated in English as Regent, has a long history and was used to denote the highest-ranking staff in old Javanese kingdoms (KBBI). The Javanese language is derived from Sanskrit, and the word '*bupati*' translates as 'landlord'; and, despite its Javanese and Sanskrit origin, the title is applied across the archipelago (Setiawan 2018). While the title was used in the pre-colonial era, it continued to be used during the Dutch colonial empire, when *bupati* served as an extension of the Dutch Governor General. Today, the word is still used to denote the executive leader of a district with status equal to mayor; but, given the historical legacy of this post, in the more rural and traditional districts the office of the *bupati* can command a great deal of informal authority.

According to Act No. 23/2014 (President of the Republic of Indonesia 2014a), the *bupati* has several responsibilities, including:

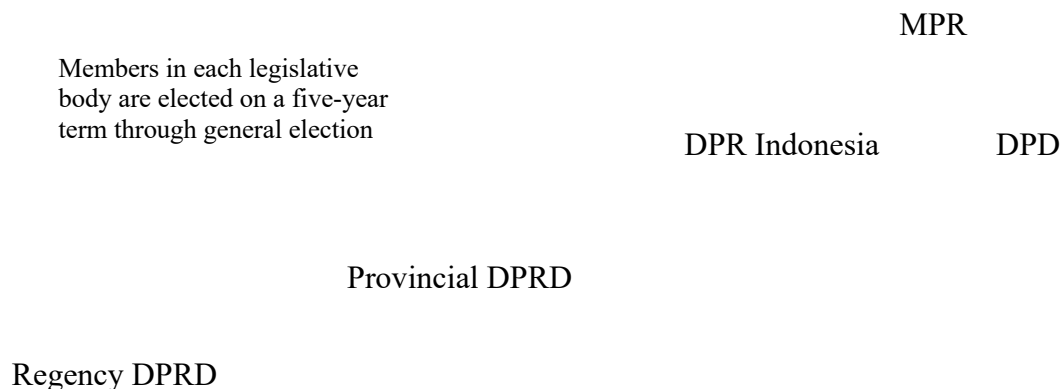
- a) Leading the implementation of government affairs as the regional authority, based on the provisions of laws and regulations and policies stipulated jointly with the DPRD.
- b) Maintaining public order and peace.
- c) Compiling and submitting draft regional regulation (*perda*) on Regional Long Term Development Plan (RPJPD) to be discussed with DPRD.
- d) Formulating and determining the Local Government Work Plans (RKPD).
- e) Compiling and submitting a draft Perda on APBD, draft regional regulations on APBD amendments, and draft regional regulations on accountability for APBD implementation, to be discussed together with DPRD.

Departments are also a part of the executive branch: thus, the district education authorities (Disdik or Disdikpora), responsible for overseeing district education machinery, also function under the *bupati*. The *bupati*, therefore, influences debates about education among the political elites, as well as ensuring the implementation of those policies by the education bureaucracy. Thus, depending on the extent to which the *bupati* wants to become engaged, his or her influence on district-level education reforms can be quite pronounced, even though the formal responsibility for education-policy planning rests with the district-level legislative body, the Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD), which exists at both the provincial and the district levels. The DPRD’s are directly accountable to the population in their provinces or districts. According to Act No. 17/2014, DPRD has three main functions: legislating, budgeting, and monitoring (President of the Republic of Indonesia 2014b). More specifically, it engages in several tasks, such as the following:

- a) Establishing regional regulations (*perda*) together with the governor and *bupati*.
- b) Discussing and approving *perda* regarding regional revenue and the expenditure budget (APBD) of provinces and regencies/cities, as proposed by the governor and *bupati*.
- c) Monitoring the implementation of APBD in provinces and regencies/cities.

In summary, the legislative bodies in the Indonesian political system can be portrayed as in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Indonesia’s Legislative Branch



The evidence from the two districts suggests that the office of the *bupati* does seem to use education as a means to advance personal authority. This seems particularly true in the rural and more traditional district: the *bupati*'s active promotion of moral education, while being consistent with the social and moral framework of the local community, also helped consolidate the traditional authority associated with the office of the *bupati*. During the interviews, it was very clear that the focus on moral education in Purwakarta can be attributed to the *bupati*, Dedi Mulyadi, a politician with the Party of Functional Groups (Golkar), who served as the vice-*bupati* from 2003 to 2008 and as the *bupati* from 2008 to 2018 (Merdeka n.d.). Anne Ratna Mustika, Dedi's wife, succeeded her husband in 2018 and has continued to serve as the current *bupati*. Her policies remain the same as those introduced by her husband (Ardiansyah 2018a).

A popular figure due to his political and religious affiliations, Dedi was head of the Golkar Regional Leadership Council (DPD) in West Java (Pratama 2017). He is also an alumnus of the Islamic Student Association (HMI), one of the major Muslim student organisations in Indonesia, and a member of the Alumni Corps of the Islamic Student Association (Kahmi). Dedi's generally successful efforts to balance culture with religion were recognised by the current Indonesian Vice-President himself, Ma'ruf Amin, when he was still serving as the head of Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) (Nugraha 2017).

The influence of the *bupati* in shaping education policies in Purwakarta was noted by one DPRD member from Commission IV in these words:

There are Perda and Perbup on the implementation of education system. The *bupati* directly holds innovation responsibility, through working with other related Regional Apparatus Organisations (OPDs). The synergy with DPRD was only through the drafting of Perda No.2/2007 on the Administration of Education System in Purwakarta. This later became the foundation of Perbup No.69/2005 on Character Education. Commission IV's contribution to education policy is merely normative, and political parties contribute through political means within DPRD rather than through direct visits to schools. For example, the support for character education came from political parties' contribution.

The head of Commission IV corroborated this claim: 'As far as I know, character education was an initiative of the leader. We saw social innovation in Tegal, so we immediately invited their education department for consultation. Based on visits to other regencies, we established character education.'

The fact that in prioritising moral education the *bupati* was not only expressing his religious devotion but also strategically prioritising areas of investment that he feels will win him popularity among the public is suggested by the following response from one DPRD member:

Initially, several CSOs criticised the *7 Poe Atikan* (7 Days of Moral Education) programme. But, people resisted such critiques. They argue that children can no longer recite the Quran in the morning. Every year there is increasing awareness this moral education programme is very suitable and needed by the people of Purwakarta to regulate life in general, not just education. Waking up before dawn is good because parents are also getting more diligent. Bringing home-cooked meals becomes increasingly important during this pandemic. Now, CSOs are no longer excessively critical...For me personally, I would like to add a religious outlook to education

because it is good for moral development...The appropriate way to respond to the society is through socialisation.

The relationship between the *bupati* and the local community thus seems to be regulated by mutual respect for tradition and a sense of loyalty to the leader. Thus, though led by the *bupati*, the emphasis on moral education is very consistent with the values of the community. In other words, policies do reflect preferences deeply embedded in society. As a DPRD member elaborated:

In Purwakarta, the figure or the person is dominant. This is a part of the social culture of the community. In fact, the Perbup aims to make the public respect good, human morals. In turn, the public chose a candidate with good moral values. To put it simply, as long as he diligently performs *salat* (prayer). Maybe there are only around 15–20 per cent of the population choose their leaders based on their policies or programmes.

In the 2018 election leading to the election of the current *bupati*, the Golkar's coalition defeated an opposition coalition supporting candidates who promised to develop manufacturing industry and Islamic centres (Ardiansyah 2018b). This implies that the *bupati*'s emphasis on preserving Javanese/Sundanese culture and also his personal charisma are important for the public, and not just his investment in religion or industrial development.

Thus, as documented below, whereas there was more evidence of community members lobbying the DPRD members to influence education policy in Karawang, in the case of Purwakarta there appeared to be more willingness within the community as well as among the DPRD members to respect the priorities outlined by the *bupati*. As one DPRD member explained:

Policy decision comes from the executive. In education policy, our mandate is restricted to *supporting* the executive's programme. We rarely coordinate with the *bupati*, although quite often with his staff. There are things that we suggested but these have not been put into policy. For example, we supported a budget to support 500 honorarium teachers for 2021. This policy was initiated by the *bupati*. We want to support more, about 3,000 people. We provide inputs to the *bupati* via the Education Department (Disdik). The number is already there. We just have to *guard* the policy.

Similarly, while emphasising that Purwakarta is a very small regency, a teacher explained: 'The plain language is that everyone is loyal to the leader. Disdik is very obedient to the *bupati*'s command. So, they cannot possibly "twist" the focus of education policies.' It is worth noting here that during President Suharto years (1967-1998), the *bupatis* were appointed and were often high ranking military officials; the respect for this office was heightened during this period reducing the pressure to engage with DPRD members on more equal terms.

While the ability of the *bupati* to assert his vision, compared with that of the DPRD, was most visible in Purwakarta, the rural district, the focus of education policies in Karawang on establishing links between school degrees and employment was also consistent with the profile of the *bupati* in Karawang. As the first female *bupati* in Karawang, Dr Cellica Nurrachadiana had been engaged in the private sector, acting as a director for several companies (Afifiyah 2020). Along with the district's industrial status, the *bupati*'s profile also could have played a role in her approaching education purely from an employment perspective. Her influence, however, was less absolute than in the case of Purwakarta. First, her previous professional

background was in the health sector rather than in education (Karawang Government n.d.). Interview evidence suggests that many of the key education policies introduced in Karawang were initiated by the DPRD, in response to inputs by the community members, rather than emerging from the *bupati*'s office and being endorsed by the DPRD members.

The Commission IV also seemed to feel more accountable to the public than its counterpart in Purwakarta. The head of Commission IV explained the importance of transparency and political accountability:

We also have Development Planning Deliberations (Musrembang), involving the district, sub-districts, and villages. We have a recess period, where we would pay direct visits to media agencies and communities. The results we put into policy. We do not have dualism, as we always do intensive communication, from the top and bottom. Due to the pandemic, recess has been postponed to the end of this year and, even so, we still hold audience meetings¹ to hear complaints.

An organiser of a literacy programme in Karawang also confirmed periodical visits by local politicians:

Through Sub-District Integrated Administration Services (PATEN), Perda officials visited sub-districts to accommodate inputs from communities in areas such as health and education. There are also school visits. When there were damaged schools, the *bupati*, Disdikpora, and companies (CSR) visited schools. Sometimes schools invite Disdikpora when there are development plans, school events, or cases. For example, if parents or schools report complaints, Disdikpora officials will directly visit the schools to verify. They respond very well.

Sometimes the Education Board visits schools to engage in socialisation (i.e. community outreach) or monitoring of PPDB (the process of registration of new students), although not all schools have been equally visited by local politicians, according to a principal of a local elementary school. The *bupati*, vice-*bupati*, and DPRD members also visit schools during election years, or when conflicts are reported. In addition, DPRD released a Perda on public information disclosure: 'All information has been written on our website, including budget transparency. Information is also provided in the public space, through banners in front of village offices.' Another representative added, 'When I was still in Commission I, I made commitments with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) to publish information for whoever needs it.'

This is true, although the DPRD admitted that the process of sharing this information may not have been optimal: 'We have drafted a lot of regulations, but people sometimes do not understand. So far meetings with sub-district and village government officials (*Minggong*) have not been mandatory. In the future, we hope that Karawang Cerdas students, for example, would visit villages and explain the policy to communities, contributing back to Karawang through socialisation.' In regard to the information-disclosure Perda, he added, 'Indeed, people in more remote villages may not have access to information on the Internet, and banners are not evenly distributed.'

¹ Public hearings.

DPRD's apparent responsiveness to the community and enhanced political accountability can be explained by the fact that Karawang has a strong civil society. DPRD often drafts regulations based on the inputs of powerful labour and education forums or organisations. The Head of Commission IV noted that the 'communities often submit their complaints'; another DPRD member elaborated on the steps in drafting regulations, using the Labour perda as an example:

The Labour Perda came through teachers' recommendation. It was then proposed by a special committee, which consists of DPRD representatives from several factions, to become a legal product. Legal products cannot contradict higher regulations but can be filled with local content. The Labour Perda actually *violates* the Constitutional Court's (MK) provision. However, it eventually won because it sought to *protect our communities*.

Labour organisations have become increasingly strong in Karawang (Istiqomah 2020; Rochadi, Pramanti, and Sulaiman 2019; Nashrullah and Kuswara 2014). This is supported by observations during fieldwork, including an audience meeting between the DPRD and labour representatives, as well as labour protests in front of the DPRD/*bupati* office. These protests were taking place even before the introduction of the controversial national labour law. This stands in contrast to the situation in Purwakarta and other districts across the country, where labour protests took place only in early October, following the introduction of the controversial law and not before that (IIK 2020).

School staff and education providers also appear to exercise some influence within Karawang, although not all individuals and organisations are equally represented. Official forums such as the Indonesian Teachers' Union (PGRI), the School Principals Working Group (K3S), and the Teacher Working Group (KKG) do have access to the DPRD. As one DPRD member explained: 'Teachers report something to the Indonesian Teacher's Union (PGRI), School Principals Working Group (K3S), or (Teachers Working Group) KKG. The report will be discussed in a meeting. Then the forum's management will announce learning issues to school supervisors at Disdikpora or Education Board.'

A school principal explained the relationship between his school and DPRD as follows:

We visit DPRD's Education Commission without any issue. It used to be headed by a Democrat person with no background in education but still cared about education. Now it is headed by a Golkar person with a background in education, so it is even better. When communities propose something, they are always involved. Before the publication of PPDB's (Registration of New Students) technical guidance, we were consulted by DPRD members. There are education talkshows, encouragement, and monitoring. Government officials will intervene based on our inputs. We never get judged whenever DPRD members visit our school. We have dialogues. In fact, they defend us if people complain.

The transparency of policy implementation is further explained by the school principal: 'There has never been any "bribe" (*titipan*)² for registering a new student. There are many rumours about this, but in reality it is not true. DPRD members never influence the process of

² This is the term used when, through developing a personal approach with relevant authorities (e.g. via bribes, votes, promised loyalty to certain political parties or candidates), parents send their children to attend certain schools, in contravention of the zoning policy within PPDB, which determines students' schools based on location. The same term also applies when politicians ask for money or votes in return for their assistance to community members.

registration of new student. At times they may say, “Sir, there is an underprivileged child who has no data. Please assist him”.’

Similarly, DPRD’s accountability and responsiveness was also reflected in relation to education providers. As one provider explained:

The Karawang Reading and Writing (Kaca Geulis) literacy programme is our own initiative. Alhamdulillah, it has been recognised by the government. We applied through the head of Disdikpora and met with the DPRD and the *bupati*. This was done through audience meetings and community outreach. The government had been familiar with our previous West Java Leader's Reading Challenge (WJLRC), in which Karawang also won. So, our proposal was immediately approved. They are very responsive to our activities. Sometimes, the DPRD even invites us to monitor the programme’s progress. For this year, the government has shifted its attention to the Teachers Working Group (KKG), which will promote teacher activities on improving learning, such as through designing Lesson Plans.

The public in Karawang seems to have monitored government’s programmes and implementation more closely than in Purwakarta. A school principal in Karawang remarked about the tendency of the public to complain, which is especially prevalent in more urban parts of the regency: ‘The negative implication is that people become spoiled. These days, people are easy to complain. They threaten to complain to the *bupati*, even if it is just about a small matter.’

Another school principal, who is also an Indonesian Teachers’ Union (PGRI) organiser, explained how the political culture in Karawang has shaped the attitude of school principals and other education staff at school level:

The previous school principal collected 200,000 IDR from students. I faced protests from the community as a result of this when I first came to fill this position. I tried to restore people’s confidence. There was an increase in their trust. The number of students rose from 700 to 800. Now we are almost overloaded. We still lack basic infrastructure. Some legislative officials told me to ask the DPRD to renovate the restroom. I did not like this because there was an element of politics. I am reluctant to go to DPRD if I must 'bring a party’s flag'. I was appointed by a political party to be an Early Childhood Education (PAUD) organiser, but in the field, you know, there were unscrupulous individuals who asked for certain percentage...There are people who want to donate with certain conditions. We do not want this political influence in schools. So, we take school rehabilitation initiatives only from the central government, Department of Public Works and Public Housing (PUPR), and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Like Karawang’s DPRD, Purwakarta’s DPRD also holds audience meetings with community members. As explained by a DPRD member in Purwakarta:

In general, Commission IV accommodates public hearings the most. Education is one of the things most frequently conveyed by the community and covers the rights of teachers, parents, etc. Most recently, we held an audience meeting with Indonesian Teachers’ Union (PGRI) concerning the rights of teachers who are already civil servants but still facing issues. During the pandemic, not all students have gadgets for

online learning or mobile network. So, our solution is not just online learning. We are looking for a way for Disdik to make teachers visit students' houses and implement study groups. Another topic concerns infrastructure and learning support tools, such as shortage of books, physical facilities, and land disputes related to school establishment. Commission IV is responsible for community rights, so there are many requests for public hearings. In fact, there are many requests that have not been granted.

However, it appears that the Commission more often defends and adjusts its existing policies, rather than introducing new policies, based on inputs from community members.

In addition, while there is no hard evidence of patronage distribution or corruption based on the interviews, there is a suggestion that the more personalised approach adopted in Purwakarta may perpetuate such practices. A parent explained that such practices may be tolerated in village communities:

Indeed, there are accountability mechanisms. When a school asked the community to contribute funds towards covering teachings costs of ninth grade, parents voiced their objections to the DPRD, so the proposal was aborted. When there is a fraud regarding admission of new students, DPRD members visit schools to check. However, in village communities, sometimes those with personal connection with DPRD members have more voice. I have witnessed how students, who were creating problems, invited a DPRD member whom they have personal connection with. So that is the negative side. Sometimes, during application process, DPRD members requested something in return for their assistance (*titipan*), in the form of money or just a vote. The positive side is that less advantaged communities can let their voices be heard by DPRD members... Sometimes there can be differences between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, people have their own assessment of potential leaders and are less affected by campaigns or promises, while those in villages are more influenced by political figures, rumours, and campaigns.

Overall, there seems to be a clear difference in the way the *bupati* and the DPRD engage with education policies in the two districts. In the rural district, the *bupati* seems to exercise greater authority over setting the education priorities and using them to consolidate his authority. In the urban district, the Commission VI within the DPRD, responsible for dealing with district-level education policies, seemed to be shaping the education policies and was faced with more active lobbying efforts by the community. It could be that this difference in the role played by the *bupatis* across the two districts is linked to individual personality and not necessarily a product of the rural nature of Purwakarta. Even so, the results show how district-level education planning in Indonesia provides an important opportunity for the *bupatis* to consolidate their authority if they choose to do so. Further, in both districts, the policies prioritised were those that had immediate pay-offs for the political elites in terms of winning popular legitimacy; ensuring improvement in learning outcomes was not even an active subject of debate within the offices of the *bupati* or the DPRD Commissions in either district.

Section 5. Aligning Education Policies with Party-Political Interests

Lastly, party politics, as well as differing party ideologies concerning the extent of the role that Islam should have in shaping policies, do seem to have a bearing on education-policy prioritisation in the two districts. Karawang is ruled by a coalition of parties with a more liberal orientation, which prioritised two policies which run counter to the guidelines of the central

government: spending on scholarships for secondary-school students when the district-government mandate is restricted to primary and junior-secondary schools; and giving teachers more freedom in dealing with students compared to the national guidelines which aim to curtail teachers' authority to punish students. At the same time, the political elites in Karawang did not prioritise moral education, which is being prioritised by the ruling party in central government. On the other hand, in Purwakarta, where the ruling coalition is in support of the national ruling parties, prioritisation of moral education promoted by the central government, in addition to being consistent with the community's preferences, also provides opportunities to extend support to the policies of the central government. Similarly, in line with the policies of the central government, Purwakarta, unlike Karawang, strictly observed Act No. 23/2014, which requires district government to focus mainly on primary and junior-secondary education. Thus, in Purwakarta, the loyalty of government agencies to the *bupati* parallels the *bupati*'s loyalty to the national government.

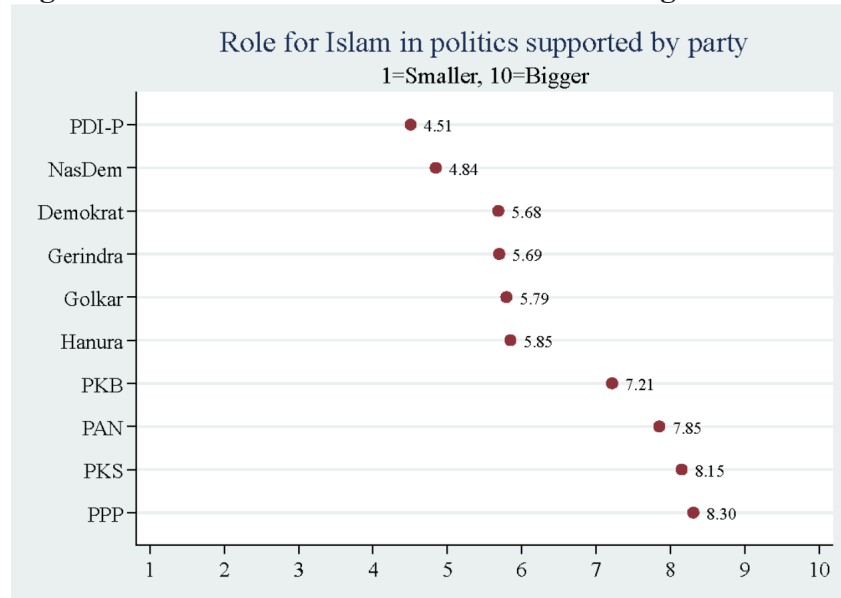
It would be useful to explain here that the political spectrum in Indonesia is not heavily polarised. Due to absence of far left and strong regional parties, Indonesian political parties do not differ heavily on issues of policy and ideology; further, none is entirely opposed to publicly associating with Islam, they mainly differ on the 'the degree to which they believe Islam should play a role in public affairs' (Aspinall et al. 2018). This means that coalitions between Islamic and non-Islamic parties are possible. Overall, the political system in Indonesia is characterised by party cartelisation and presidential power-sharing with the result that political opposition can dissolve quickly through offers of power-sharing (Slater 2018). The 'political culture of deal-making and compromise' is thus extensive (Aspinall 2010). This makes some scholars describe the coexistence of 'antagonistic discourses about alternative policies' and coalescence around a 'minimal consensus' as core features of Indonesian democracy (Duile and Bens 2017). Similarly, Kuskridho Ambardi points that, once elections are over, party competition may disappear and parties may enter into 'a new arena of interaction'. Consequently, ideologically heterogeneous 'rainbow coalitions', which comprise both Islamic and non-Islamic (i.e. nationalist) parties, routinely appear in Indonesia (Aspinall et al. 2018).

There are several political parties that can be categorised as nationalist parties. Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) is the current ruling political party, formed in the reformation era by Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of the founding father, President Soekarno. Golkar was the political party of the former authoritarian regime under President Suharto during the New Order (pre-reformation) era (1966–1998). The Democratic Party Demokrat, also formed during the reformation era, became the ruling party between 2004 and 2014 under President Yudhoyono (SBY), a retired army general. Similar to Demokrat, the People's Conscience Party (Hanura) was established in 2006 and was headed by former military commander Wiranto. The Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) was founded in 2008 under the leadership of former general Prabowo, who became the opposition candidate in the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections, while the National Democratic Party (Nasdem) was founded in 2011 by media baron Surya Paloh.

In contrast, the National Mandate Party (PAN), National Awakening Party (PKB), Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Crescent Star Party (PBB), and United Development Party (PPP) can all be broadly defined as *Islamic* parties. As noted in Figure 2, PAN and PKB strongly support the role of Islam in politics, more so than the so-called nationalist parties (Aspinall et al. 2018). However, they still lie somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum between Pancasila – the official state ideology that implies a pluralist position – and Islam. Meanwhile, PKS, PBB,

and PPP can be further regarded as *Islamist* parties: political parties that explicitly declare Islam to be their foundational principle (Okthariza 2020).

Figure 2. The Role of Islam in Politics According to Political Parties (Aspinall et al. 2018)



The formation of heterogeneous coalitions is evident at the national level. In the 2019 election, for instance, a coalition was formed between nationalist parties, namely PDIP, Golkar, Nasdem, Hanura, and PKPI (a split from Golkar Party), and three Islamic parties, namely PPP, PKB, and PBB (Rahadian 2018). The opposition, Gerindra, formed a coalition with Demokrat and two Islamic parties: PAN and PKS. Supported by the first coalition, President Joko Widodo and Vice-President Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Muslim cleric and former Head of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), won the election, reinforcing the impression that religion plays an important role in the state politics.

Heterogeneous coalitions are also evident in Karawang and Purwakarta. This suggests that the nature of politics at the district and central government levels is alike; political settlements upholding a low commitment to improving learning outcomes are thus also likely to be alike at the two levels. The coalitions in Karawang's government mirror the rainbow coalitions at the national level, as they reflect a mixture of nationalist and religiously oriented parties. However, the party composition is different from the one at the national level, indicating that decentralisation is at work. In Karawang, the *bupati* and the head of DPRD both represent the Demokrat party, while the head of DPRD Commission IV comes from Golkar. Demokrat and Golkar, along with Nasdem and PKS, forged a coalition for the upcoming regional election, competing against a coalition formed by PDIP, the national ruling party, and three Islamic parties (PAN, PPP, and PBB), as well as another coalition formed between PKB, Gerindra, and Hanura (Farhan 2020). The ruling party in Purwakarta is Golkar, the political party of the New Order (pre-reformation) government, which may explain how the *bupati* in Purwakarta acts as a dominant figure. It was joined in coalition by two Islamic parties: PKB and PAN (Ardiansyah 2018a).

Overall, it appears that the Indonesia political culture of forming alliances and deal making has not proved conducive to pro-poor reforms. Party cartelisation and the orientation towards pragmatic coalition often cause political elites to share the material rewards and benefits that they acquire in office, leading to corruption, clientelism, and money politics (Lee and Paath

2019). To understand this, we must look at the legacy of the New-Order regime under Suharto and his Golkar party, as well as Indonesia's democratic transition. Indonesia has dealt effectively with multiple challenges following its transition to democracy in 1998: the military has retreated, communal conflicts and separatist insurgencies have been resolved by peace deals, Islamist forces have been absorbed into the central political system, and civil liberties have expanded (Aspinall 2010). However, the forces that facilitated the transition to democracy also compromised its quality, leading some to claim that the country embodies a flawed democracy (Bisara 2020). Suharto's style of ruling combined authoritarianism with tolerance of socio-political forces and patronage distribution; this has led to what some call the syndrome of 'semi-opposition', whereby political actors challenge authoritarian controls yet also absorb the patterns of collusive, patrimonial, and patronage democracy, even long after the 1998 democratic transition (Aspinall 2010).

In particular, the policy of decentralisation has also allowed the central political structure to 'absorb, neutralize, and buy off potential democratic spoilers' (Aspinall 2010). In the process, it has fostered predatory behaviour: legislators collude with government officials and businesspeople to siphon money away from the state budget, and engage in 'money politics' such as vote-buying and bribery of electoral officials. The extent to which this is still true depends on the local context of each province and regency. The evidence from this paper would suggest that public scepticism in a more urbanised society might keep some check on this behaviour, while traditional values within rural contexts, such as loyalty to leaders, may perpetuate predatory practices.

What is clear is that decentralisation has provided local elites with more autonomy and opportunities to establish local versions of alliances that mirror those of the central 'politico-bureaucratic' elite (Barker 2008). Regional policy is very much affected by the local context and influential alliances which often define themselves in ethnic, religious, or regional terms. Thus, political decentralisation has brought more power to the regional governments, yet it may have different implications in each province or regency. In some cases, such as Karawang, for instance, decentralisation and regional policy are more affected by demands made by influential labour groups. In other cases, such as Purwakarta, where many of the traditional Sundanese/Javanese values are still in place, regional decision making has become more affected by the regional moral sentiments, in addition to its religious context (Indonesia-Investments 2021). Thus, just as argued in the other RISE study of these two districts (Bano and Dyonisius, forthcoming), which looked at the approach of the district education bureaucrats and the communities towards setting the education agenda, the local socio-economic and cultural context has a strong bearing on the education policies and priorities in each district.

Section 6. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the extent and nature of engagement of political elites in setting the education-reform agenda in two districts in the state of West Java in Indonesia: Karawang (urban district) and Purwakarta (rural district). The findings from the paper show that for a country where the state schooling system faces a serious learning crisis, the district-level political elites do show considerable levels of engagement with educational issues: governments in both districts under study allocate higher percentages of the district-government budget to education than mandated by the national legislation. However, the attitude of the political elites towards meeting challenges to the provision of good-quality education appears to be opportunistic and tokenistic: policies prioritised are those that promise

immediate visibility and credit-taking, help to consolidate the authority of the *bupati* (the top political position in the district-government hierarchy), and align with the ruling party's political positioning or ideology. A desire to appease growing community demand for investment in education rather than a commitment to improving learning outcomes seems to guide the process. Faced with public pressure for increased access to formal employment opportunities, the political elites in the urban district have invested in providing scholarships for secondary-school students to ensure secondary-school completion, even though the district-government budget is meant for primary and junior secondary schools. The *bupati* in the rural district, has, on the other hand, prioritised investment in moral education; such prioritisation is in line with the community's preferences, but it is also opportunistic, as increased respect for tradition also preserves reverence for the post of the *bupati*— a position which was part of the traditional governance system before being absorbed into the modern democratic framework. The paper thus shows that decentralisation is enabling communities to make political elites recognise that they want the state to prioritise education, but that the response of the political elites remains piecemeal, with no evidence of a serious commitment to pursuing policies aimed at improving learning outcomes. Further, the paper shows that the political culture at the district level reproduces the problems associated with Indonesian democracy at the national level: the need for cross-party alliances to hold political office, and resulting pressure to share the spoils.

The political culture in Indonesia thus fits what Hickey and Hossain (2019:19) describe as a *competitive and clientelist settlement*, a settlement, where the ruling political elites are only weakly dominant, resulting in a greater need to distribute rents to win over opposition and to appease lower-level factions. Using the case of Bangladesh and Rwanda, the two countries which they profile as having clientelist settlements, they show that the political elite in such settlements are more prone to using important policy sectors, such as education, to distribute rents to gain popular legitimacy (Hickey and Hossain 2019: 178). Due to the shorter time-horizons of the elites in such settlements, they tend to incentivise reforms that offer immediate benefits or are very visible, such as investing in school infrastructure, while undermining efforts to implement the politically difficult reforms associated with improved learning outcomes. Further, they also note that the education domain is particularly vulnerable to exploitation as in developing countries, it remains an important source of rents, votes and legitimacy for the ruling elites. The findings from Indonesia are thus consistent with these arguments. As the paper has demonstrated, education is indeed an important area of policy making and gaining popular legitimacy for the district level political elites in Indonesia. It has also shown that there is a heavy focus on promoting education policies that show as opposed to those that address underlying challenges to improving learning outcomes. In line with Hickey and Hossain's (2019) analysis of competitive settlements, such prioritisation of education policies in the two study districts is understandable given the competitive and clientelist political culture in Indonesia whereby due to short-time horizons, political parties are routinely sharing rents to build coalitions at national as well as lower tiers of government. By demonstrating prevalence of this culture at the district government level within the education sector, the findings of this paper also show that it is difficult to change political culture bottom up. The clientelist political culture dominating national politics also is pervasive at the district government level—twenty years of efforts at decentralization of authority to district government level have thus arguably not led to more accountable governance at the district government level.

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