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After Jokowi's First Term

Moving the Nation's "Keraton": A Javanese Perspective

By Sigit S. Nugroho

SYNOPSIS

President Joko Widodo has just announced his plan to move the capital Jakarta to East Kalimantan. The Javanese cultural lens might provide the key to understand his motivation for such a move.

COMMENTARY

ON 26 August 2019 President Joko Widodo announced his plan to move the capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan province. Though his administration had revealed this intention since 2015, this is the first occasion that the president, also known as Jokowi, officially revealed the general plan and the designated area for the future administrative centre as well as the target date for the move by 2024.

The decision would prove to be challenging. The government would need to place this new project among other priorities in the next five years. Moving the capital away from Java by 2024 would take place in the same timeframe as the political commitment made in the previous presidential campaign to [develop Indonesian human resources](#) to face the global Industrial Revolution 4.0. Why would President Jokowi press for the move of the capital now and what possible explanation could justify the trade-off with other political commitment?

Jokowi's Javanese Worldview

A possible explanation for President Jokowi's decision is through the Javanese cultural lens. From this perspective it is possible to find the meaning of his motivation

and identifying the underlying values that would serve as his “logic for decision-making”. President Jokowi has a penchant for citing [Javanese proverbs](#). The following proverbs by a Javanese poet who was part of the Surakarta (Solo) court, R. Ng. Ranggawarsita III, contain maxims on how to live in harmony:

“Lamun sira sekti, ojo mateni. Lamun sira banter, ojo ndhisiki. Lamun sira pinter, ojo minteri.” This translates to mean: “Though you are strong do not strike down others. Though you are fast do not outrun them. Even though you are smart do not feel you are the smartest.” Loosely interpreted these lines suggest that one need not show off one’s advantage among one’s peers to prove that one is a credible person.

President Jokowi quoted these lines in [an interview](#) shortly after the Election Commission announced the final official results of the presidential election. Boasting or exploiting another’s disadvantage shows signs of deviance from the [Javanese concept of “Rukun”](#) – a set of ethical values which prioritises society’s wellbeing and harmony rather than self-interest.

President Jokowi’s eloquence with classical Javanese scriptures might have come from spending his formative years and major part of his lifetime in Surakarta. Though defunct as a political centre, Surakarta still holds the status as one of the Javanese cultural centres beside Yogyakarta. Having been raised in this cultural city and eventually led the local government in Surakarta, President Jokowi might have further internalised traditional Javanese values and virtues.

Moving to the Right Place

To delve deeper into the Javanese world view, Indonesian philosopher Franz Magnis-Suseno describes what constitutes a right decision according to the decision maker’s inner (psychological) state. Magnis-Suseno also adds that location is a key determinant in Javanese world view.

Unrest, disorder, and conflict among people suggest that a certain location is a [socially ‘wrong place’](#), while personal shocks, emotional tensions represent a person being unfit to a certain location.

Simply put, if there were any probable motives behind President Jokowi’s decision to move the capital, the Javanese belief in the concept of the ‘right place’ might have been one of his philosophical basis.

During his first term, and even long before, Jakarta was the site of [major civilian unrest](#), such as the 1998 mass riots and the more recent 22 May protest. To keep a distance from the ‘wrong place’, President Joko Widodo prefers to reside and conduct his official business from the Bogor Palace. In this sense, moving the capital away from Jakarta would then have a deeper meaning for President Jokowi.

Ensuring the “*Slamet*” of Society

Being an internalised Javanese does not necessarily mean that President Jokowi might have conceived the decision irrationally or adopting an Javanese-centric frame

of mind. President Jokowi is putting his mind on the safety, security and prosperity of the society – summed in the Javanese conception of “*slamet*”.

On this issue, President Jokowi firmly set his agenda while at the same time presenting his rationale through several narratives. President Jokowi embraced his [predecessor's thought](#) that Jakarta was a colonial inheritance constructed by the Dutch. Moving the capital away from Jakarta – even from the island of Java – will relieve some [developmental burden](#).

President Jokowi pointed out that Java holds 58 percent of the total national income. This would mean the wealth is not distributed normally across the archipelago.

Following a speech by the president, the Minister for National Development Planning, Bambang Brodjonegoro, announced that the estimate cost of [the new capital project would be 466 trillion rupiah](#) (US\$ 32.7 billion). Minister Brodjonegoro mentioned that the government will carry out the plan soon, starting with academic studies, creating a regulatory framework, and followed by infrastructure development as planned in late 2020.

Cultural Diversity

The government intends to cover 19 percent of the total cost, with the remaining through public-private partnerships (PPP) and direct investment from state enterprises and private sectors.

Minister Brodjonegoro, who held several key positions during the administration's first term, reassured that the project will be in line with the previous term's infrastructure initiatives, notably in enhancing maritime connectivity. According to Minister Brodjonegoro, these will also be complemented by 10 metropolitan enhancement projects in the next five years.

Together, these projects will promote prosperity and equality across the Indonesian archipelago. In this sense, a new capital in the centre of the sprawling archipelago, along with the 10 metropolis and infrastructure initiatives, would be very appealing from the “*slamet*” perspective.

All in all, the cultural perspective in interpreting President Jokowi's decision does not only tell one of his probable world view. To quote recent discussion on a [similar topic](#), culturally-informed analysis should be taken into account. At the same time, we can argue that such a perspective might also invite us to seek explanations from within Indonesia's cultural diversity.

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