



Memory Network: Moving the Center/Revolutionizing Culture

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Abstract. This paper highlights the issues of memory network by looking into President Jokowi's recent proposal to build a new capital elsewhere. It considers a range of factors that could have led to such a decision, which include Jakarta's socio-political and environmental crises and Indonesia's historical memories of nation-building. It teases out memories of Javanese past 'turmoil in the realm' (daharuning praja) under colonial context, Sukarno's desire for a new capital city to mark decolonization and nation-building, and subsequent presidents to fulfill the wish to create a new 'exemplary center'. The idea of building a new capital, the paper argues, should be contextualized within the network of historical memory.

Keywords: Memory network · Jakarta · Historical memory · Jokowi · Urbanization

1 Introduction

My talk will consider "memory network" in terms of the topic proposed by the Scientific Committee: "Revolutionizing Culture in the Network Society." Like any network, memory network connects persons, places and events, but memory network is often expressed through a narrative that links the present to the past and the future. What follows is my narrative sustained by a mix of material evidence, subjective interpretation, and fantasies.

For the illustrative material, I choose President Jokowi's recent proposal to build a new capital elsewhere. Such a topic inevitably would lead us to the complex problems facing Jakarta today: flooding, subsidence, and climate change; urban sprawl and traffic; inequality, socio-political conflicts, and evictions, to name a few. But I will not be talking about the problems of Jakarta nor about the plus and minus of moving the capital city elsewhere.

I will discuss instead issues around history, memory and representations of power which will bring together a set of relations between culture, space, and revolution in a society structured by a network of historical memory.

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Let me begin by recalling that in the early 2014, when Jakarta was hit by a major flood, Jokowi, then a Governor of the city, said: “*Ini imbas dari yang dulu*” (this is an impact from the past).”[1].

The phrase “*ini imbas dari yang dulu*” is interesting (not so much on how Jokowi used the past to blame previous governors but) to think about the relationship between culture and memory, past and present; connection and disconnection. “*Ini imbas dari yang dulu*” (which connotes continuity) had become the basis for Jokowi’s first presidential campaign to launch his “*revolusi mental*.” “Mental revolution” (in contrast to “*imbas dari dulu*”) suggests discontinuity and transformation or an effort to break with the past.

“In order for a meaningful change to take into effect... a mental revolution is much required. The use of the term ‘revolution’ is not excessive... because there is still a large number of traditions (*tradisi*) and culture (*budaya*) that is growing rapidly creating repression as in the New Order... I have started this movement when leading Surakarta and since 2012 as the Governor of Jakarta... Insya Allah, this effort will develop to become a truly national movement as mandated by Bung Karno as the revolution itself has not ended. Indonesian Mental Revolution has just begun.”[2]

The “proclamation” above filled with a burden from the past as well as aspirations drawn from previous visions, as signified by terms such as traditions, culture, New Order, Surakarta, and Bung Karno, and revolution.

2 The Turmoil in the Realm (*Daharuning Praja*)

Moving the capital city elsewhere is not unprecedented in Javanese history. For instance, in 1745, a Javanese king called Pakubuwana II moved from his fallen palace of Kartasura to the village of Surakarta, 10 km away (if you travelled by foot, it is quite far) (See Fig. 1).

The old palace of Kartasura was then in shambles as a result of a complex mix of internal royal conflict, rebellion, war, and political intrigues involving Javanese and Chinese populations and the VOC- the East India Company. The *Babad Giyanti*, an 18th century Javanese chronicle, referred to this time of disaster with the term *daharuning praja*: “the turmoil in the realm.” The Chronicle described in detail the king’s procession to the new capital. The king brought with him not only his family, religious officials, and servants, but also (in a perfect order) the Dutch company commandant and troops on horseback, as well as his grand Garuda carriage, his collection of “powerful” heirlooms (*pusaka*), and the whole banyan tree to be transplanted in the new palace’s compound. Only then, the Susuhunan believed, could the authority of “the nail of the universe” (Pakubuwana’s title) be restored.

The American anthropologist, John Pemberton in his *On the Subject of Java* considers this ritualistically very elaborate relocation as a venue to erase the memory of displacement – an extraordinary effort to change the reality of defeat into an expression of progress [4]. But Pakubuwana’s move was not a move to construct a new society. Instead, it was a restoration of an old, declining power that was forced to accommodate

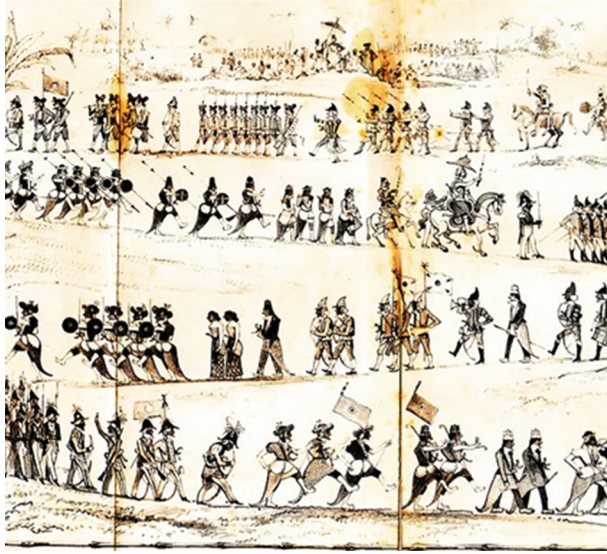


Fig. 1. Illustration of the Islamic Mataram kingdom's capital being moved. [3]

the rising power of Dutch colonialism. In Indonesian studies, Pakubuwana's procession is known as a performance of (what Clifford Geertz called) "exemplary center," a spectacle designed to confirm or to believe in the continuation of power.

This legendary move is considered today as the key to the establishment of Surakarta (which happens to be Jokowi's birthplace and the city where he once served as a mayor before moving up to Jakarta). I am suggesting here a memory network in action, perhaps a historical memory that links the two different eras, a memory network that connects traditional polity with modern politics. But this is just an interpretation. Be that as it may, I think we can suggest a question: why have the four most noted Javanese presidents—Sukarno, Suharto, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and now Jokowi all considered the idea of moving the capital from Jakarta? (See Fig. 2).

How might their concerns over "development and progress," intertwine with the turmoil in their realm and the need for a new "exemplary center" to restore political legitimacy? Did they network with each other in preserving the desire for a new capital city? Is this the work of cultural memory but casted in the language of "revolution"? In any case, we can say that the idea of building a new capital city has long been an important part of Indonesian political culture.

3 Sukarno's Dream

In the 1950-60s, Sukarno had a dream to decolonize Jakarta through architecture and urban design. The dream was an expression of a desire for a different future, but it was also a response to the socio-political turmoil of the early Independence. The capital city then had become an open arena of conflicts between different groups searching for power and influence (which ranged from the military, the communists, and the Islamic groups



Fig. 2. Illustration of the 4 presidents that have been considering on moving Indonesia's capital. [5]

in the context of emerging Cold War). Sukarno's Jakarta stemmed from a response to a *daharuning praja* (turmoil in the realm) in the context of decolonization. But unlike the 18th century restoration of the Javanese throne, the refashioning of Jakarta was meant to be revolutionary. The city was conceived as the site for both the symbolic construction of the nation and the liberation of Asia and Africa from imperialism. Forces of liberation of the Third World constituted Sukarno's network. Imagining, that Indonesia could lead an international revolution (following the memorable 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung), Sukarno proclaimed: "build up Jakarta as beautifully as possible, build it as spectacularly as possible, so that this city, which has become the center of struggle of the Indonesian people, will be an inspiration and beacon to the whole of struggling mankind and to all the emerging forces." [6].

Yet while building up parts of Jakarta with modernist architecture and urban form to overcome colonial structure he was already working on something more radical, which is about moving the capital city elsewhere. In one of his speeches, he indicated Brasilia: "I referred to Brasilia, Brazil's capital city ... which used to be Rio de Janeiro, but decision was made to relocate the capital city to the middle of the country... where the land was empty. There were only trees, but it now has a grand city called Brasilia designed by famous architect: Lee Meyer (read: Niemeyer)." [7].

In 1957, Sukarno already formed *Panitia Agung* (the Grand Committee) to conceive Palangkaraya on the island of Kalimantan as a future capital city. Palangkaraya then was still a village called Pahandut populated by about 900 Dayak people in the middle of a wilderness. Sukarno launched the construction of Palangkaraya through an inauguration of a monument to mark the city's status as the provincial capital of Central Kalimantan (Fig. 3). The new name was derived from a combination of the Dayak's "palangka," meaning a "sacred place" but in Sundanese understanding, it was actually a "throne," while the Sanskrit "raya" means great." [9].

Sukarno then proclaimed: "Let the city of Palangkaraya be the model (for Indonesian cities)" [10]. The drawing of the new capital city however was never found, and the political history of this city-building effort has yet to be written, but the idea of moving the capital city to Palangkaraya stemmed from Sukarno's chief advisor, Semaun, the first chairman of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) who suggested to the President



Fig. 3. Jokowi visited Tugu Sukarno in Palangkaraya, May 2019. [8]

that Jakarta was ‘genetically defective’ for it was built by the Dutch in the interest of colonial power. Sukarno favored Palangkaraya for it is geographically located right in the center of the Indonesian archipelago, symbolically fit as a site for a new exemplary center of power. One would assume that Palangkaraya would become a “socialist city” given the involvement of Soviet’s architects and engineers¹ [9].

A committed research is still needed to account for the complexity of Sukarno’s city-building, his simultaneous (or contradictory) interests in building both Jakarta and Palangkaraya as the capital city of Indonesia. There are nevertheless at least three things we learn about Sukarno’s nation-city building, that: 1). He believed that architecture/urban design is capable of revolutionizing culture; 2). The state sought to dominate/communicate power by a spectacle of an “exemplary center.”; 3). The urgency for such a spectacle stemmed from a socio-political “turmoil in the realm” (*daharuning praja*).

4 Marketing Fantasies

Let me move forward by skipping over other Presidents who showed their interests in moving the capital city elsewhere. One was Suharto who, through the network of his family and cronies, acquired an area of some 30,000 hectares of land in Jonggol for a potential new capital city. The other was Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) who

¹ According to Pramoedya Ananta Toer in his *Maaf Atas Nama Pengalaman*, the term “genetically defective” was used by Semaun, then an advisor of Sukarno, to convey the colonial history of Jakarta.



Fig. 4. Pluit City: Escape from Jakarta. [11]

formed a whole team (called Vision Indonesia 2033) to consider moving the capital city elsewhere. I would just briefly point out that towards the end of 1990s, Jakarta was already showing serious signs of urban environmental deterioration. The city was already given a nickname “the project city” – a city driven by profit-making calculation. Class disparity, devastating floods and paralyzing daily traffic jams were dominant parts of the cityscape.

And yet there was no easy fix for Jakarta. It was probably too late to fix anything. But for most real estate developers, it was not too late to squeeze every remaining opportunity, as benefits could still be extracted from disasters. One way to look for indication of this kind of “disaster capitalism” is to look at how the real estate industries promote the sale of new towns or superblocs (Fig. 4). Since the 2000s, memories of disaster have become a brand for marketing properties. Jakarta is deteriorating so people are reminded, and the only recourse is to “escape” from the city to the enclaves of privately run “garden” estates at the outskirts of the city. Developers promise self-contained new towns or “superblocks” that are built on an elevated ground or away from the city to give an illusion of distance from environmental disaster.

In the new city one won’t immediately feel that the city is sinking. The extreme case of this “anti-Jakarta” campaign takes the form of land reclamation away from the coast or moving the capital city elsewhere.

5 Yearning for Utopia

Let me end by moving forward to our Jokowi’s time to think about “memory network.” If we have time for social media, we will see all kinds of attempt to pair Jokowi up with Sukarno. Sukarno and Jokowi indeed mobilized the notion of “revolution.” They both built Jakarta. We can think about the challenges they both faced in different contexts. We can think about their mutual consideration of moving the capital city to Kalimantan. I don’t wish to pair them up (to make fun of our Presidents), but a caricature in Fig. 5 indicates something that is relevant to our topic, the relation between the city and the nation. In the image, Sukarno was upset and said to Jokowi: “Wanna be a President? You can’t even govern Jakarta” (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Jokowi-Soekarno's caricature. [12]



Fig. 6. News Headline [13].

Devastated Jokowi would have been for sure if he received such a message from Bung Karno, but what would Jokowi's reply? "Easier to deal with traffic jam and flooding if I became President" (Fig. 6).

Moving forward, we have heard headlines from Bambang Brojonegoro from BAPPE-NAS that 'Java is overburdened, Jakarta is exhausted, and it was built by the Dutch colonial state' [14]. What followed was a list of disasters, as listed by Dono Prasetyo (from Pimpinan Kolektif DPN Seknas Jokowi): "We can write many pages about Jakarta's problems, from traffic jam, flooding, clean water, overpopulated, socio-economic gap and so on... Furthermore, the city has grown into the site for the staging of identity politics" [15]. And as Johannes Nugroho, a political analyst, indicates, such staging of identity politics has led to demonstrations and protests against the government [16].

The multiple social, environmental political crises and the desire for a political symbolism that exemplifies a centre might thus have led to a decision to move the capital city elsewhere, in a place that is "benar-benar baru" (truly new) where there is no existing social-political forces nor any memory to trouble the new exemplary centre [17]. (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. For new capital city locations. [18].

In such a safe distance, so BAPPENAS declares, a new city would implement the idea of “smart, green and beautiful city so that it can become the most liveable place in Indonesia.... (and) an example for urban development in Indonesia.” Be that as it may, this yearning for a new exemplary center powered by Revolution 4.0 recalls a different network one that is informed (or haunted) by past memories of power and representation, space and revolution, as well as the reality of contemporary “turmoil in the realm” (*daharuning praja*). The Revolution 4.0 in Indonesia would need to be understood not only in terms of the globalized digital network, but also a memory network that is specific to the country’s political cultures.

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