

FEUDAL HERITAGE: SOURCE OF CORRUPTION, COLLUSION, AND NEPOTISM

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The political development in Indonesia at the present time has been marked by a terminology of change, namely "reformation" which includes three main causes of the failure of the New Order led by President Soeharto. This phenomenon signifies that the New Order has been involved in practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (CCN). These practices have brought about instability in all sectors, and the most important is a sharp decrease in public welfare. During the New Order nobody would express their opinions frankly on Soeharto's involvement in CCN. He held the office of president for 32 years with an oppressive bureaucracy that tended to perpetuate a system created by an absolute ruler. Student activists in several universities in Indonesia demanded reduction of soaring prices and asked Soeharto to step down. Their incessant demands for political economic reforms, were endorsed by university students of most universities in Indonesia. This was followed by mass demonstrations until the downfall of Soeharto in May 21, 1998.

This paper will not discuss the present political development, but it will analyze the historical development of the practices of CCN. The development of CCN, actually, has been inherited up to the present time. The failure of the New Order is attributable to the legacy of a feudal system, in which there are many subsystems that tolerate the old traditions.

We would regard the practices of CCN as the old product of the feudal system which was once maintained by Indonesian kingdoms, not only agrarian but also maritime kingdoms. Generally, these practices had taken root since the first arrival of Hindu influence in Indonesia, and automatically all the bureaucratic elite were involved in the system so they would not complain of the system, so long as they benefited from each other. However, there were many people's movements towards doing away with the system. The king ruled with the injustice but nobody had the courage not to be loyal to the king.

The basic argument to be exposed in this paper is that culturally the present government inherits the old system. The feudal heritage and the feudal system are still alive, and the head of the government is actually a king. If the heritage and system could be assumed as a legal way of life, the present feudal system can be said to have been well maintained. But the process of changing the old system is still in motion among the Indonesian people.

The Mataram kingdom was in a high feudal system in the seventeenth century. It was then succeeded by the kingdoms of Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Soemarsaid Moertono, 1968). The two kingdoms culturally inherited Mataram's feudal system which had been implanted in the whole society. We do not doubt that the present Javanese elites are more or less indebted to Javanese culture. We must realize that the process of javanization had happened a few centuries ago. In addition, the colonial government historically centered in Java. The problem now is how to reform all the actual practices under the age-old system. Will it be possible to carry out that reach the cultural element which has fossilized and been inherent in Indonesian society?

Feudal Heritage

The feudal system was based on a king's landed property. It was believed that things below the sky and on the land belonged to the king. This belief was based on Manu scripture, a Hindu lesson on the absolute right of a king which was applied in the old Javanese era. It seems that this lesson was followed by Islamic kingdoms in Java. The concept of *kagungan dalem* was an absolute right of the king and it was transformed into power of bureaucracy. It can be said that "the king can do no wrong", because he has an authority of *murbawisesa saisining praja* (Suhartono, 1991).

The property of the kingdom was only land, which could either be a *sawah* (wet rice-field) or a *tegalan* (dry rice-field). In the agrarian kingdom this land was distributed to the upper and the lower bureaucrats of the kingdom. This land was an appanage or a grant (salary)

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to the king's relatives and the bureaucrats because of their participation in the government. The appanage system is still alive up to the present time, particularly in the *desa* (Coulborn, 1956). So we know that the land is the most decisive mechanism for all the status and role of the people in an agrarian society. Obviously, the land plays a major role in the emergence of more complex social interactions.

In the feudal system the upper group belonged to the *bangsawan* and *priyayi* who held the appanage and enjoyed the land products. On the other side the *kawula* or peasants were the only manpower that worked for the appanage in return for only a part of the land products. The effect was quite different; the upper class became richer, whereas the peasants remained in the condition of subsistence level. To organize the land the appanage holder had to appoint *bekel* or village head as an organizer, a mediator and also as a tax collector. Undoubtedly the power of the *bekel* became stronger; he was not only collecting taxes but he was also a power holder. The peasants were directly dependent on the village head. And the autonomy of the village head as protector of the peasants had been changed to the power of pressure. In short, he was a handlanger (tool) of the supra village power of central government (Suhartono, 1991).

As mentioned above the appanage holders were very rich with an extravagant life-style, not to mention the use of symbols for their glamour, grandeur and conspicuous consumption. The behavior and life-style of the *priyayi* were the ideal pattern of feudal life at that time. Moreover, they were the owner and inheritor of a sublime great culture whereas the lower group who lived far away from the *kraton* only possessed a modest culture typifying honesty, roughness, and innocence (Umar Kayam, 1989). Nevertheless, they maintained their own culture coping with the environment and cultural condition particularly in the *desa*.

Appanage and bureaucracy

The appanage system places land in the position which determined social status and role in social interactions. The higher the position a person holds, the wealthier the person is, besides the incurring of the taxes. The appanage holder collects several kinds of taxes, both formal and informal. The informal taxes are demanded by the patron, but very often the appanage holder collects additional taxes from the clients. The patron-client relationship has been strengthened by informal taxes. The bigger the amount of the taxes the closer the relationship with each other (Suhartono, 1996).

We would say that the formal bureaucracy is closely bound informal taxes. As long as the client knows the needs of the patron, the bureaucratic relation will be sustained. Besides, the client must be cunning in translating the "Javanese wishes" of the patron. In awarding a high position to a certain bureaucrat, the king always looks for a person who is closely related genealogically with him.

In order to make the upper bureaucrats happy, whenever they visited some distant places, they always enjoyed *segahan*, though in the reign of Raffles (1811-1816) this was regarded as sexual harassment. This practice has survived up to the modern time. During a tour of inspection, called *majang-masisiran*, the bureaucrats were presented with a special gift. The term *pajendralan* came into use when the Dutch colonial bureaucrats made tours to the remote places. This custom was actually enjoyable and memorable (Suhartono, 1996).

The pattern of recruitment of bureaucrats could be seen in the Javanese concept. It is actually simple but it makes the civilians realize that the recruitment based on certain relationships, especially the genealogical relation with the ancestors, or it creates a new relationship by political marriage, which makes up a bureaucratic elite. This is one of the models of controlling other social groups.

Reciprocal needs

The appanage system created the group of land's beneficiary on the one side and the group of peasant power on the other side. Structurally the appanage holder stood higher than the peasant and they kept a key position in the distribution of land. Though the land products were divided equally and they both seemed to stand on the same level and perform reciprocally, in reality the peasant's status was subordinate to the appanage holder. Moreover, the peasant had to be responsible for several burdens. The appanage holder was land proprietor and the peasant only had manpower. The reciprocity went normal between proprietary right and power right. Therefore, the result was different, i.e. an accumulation of taxes on the one side and subsistent life of the peasant on the other (Ekeh, 1975).

Up to the present time the status of land proprietor is always higher than the peasant. It could be said that the peasant has always been exploited by the appanage holder under the feudal system.

To maintain good relationships, a person of lower status has to send homage to a person of higher status as proof of loyalty. The peasant has to pay taxes and send gifts to the patron. As evidence of loyalty, the client very often sends extraordinary gifts. The *upeti* or tribute

makes the patron feel happy and the patron even demands more gifts. The Javanese kings and the nobles demand European products at high prices and prestigious gifts such as Australian horses, European carriages, and still many others.

The aim of giving tribute seems to be a means of obtaining autonomy for the peasants in general and lower bureaucratic heads in particular. With this autonomy the bureaucrats would do as they like, certainly for getting personal benefits by exploiting the peasants through the feudal system. The lower bureaucrats must be able to understand the disguised demands from the patron. If they do well in compliance to the demands a personal relationship with the upper bureaucrats has been established.

Legal corruption

We are going to note that the corruption which happened in the time of feudal kingdoms was basically interrelated with the strong feudal system. The involved person would not admit that they corrupted but all the bureaucrats did the same thing. It can be added that the corruption in the feudal system could be designated as unintended corruption. If all the bureaucrats felt that there was no complaint from the people and the government had no hinderance, the government felt at peace.

As far as corruption was concerned, the traditional society regarded corruption positively without doubting the existing system. They thought that everything was in order (Soemarsaid Moertono, 1968). But if we understand the problem in the system itself in which the feudal society gave great autonomy to each head, either at the lower or higher level, so we could say that no person was morally bad. This autonomy was interpreted by a person who had it as a power to appoint only those who were within his own circle. This autonomy hierarchically occurred from the higher to the lower level. If this autonomy is regarded as a mistake, it means that the autonomy has violated over the human rights of the people.

The payment of tribute was regarded as license to reach the goal not only for a particular purpose but also all aspects of life. This kind of gift was looked upon as a legitimate reason that one could do everything. Therefore, payment to the patron was a must and failure to do this was a mistake and an impolite behavior. The consequence of failing to conform to this practice was that the person

concerned would be rejected from the bureaucracy. This also applied to the common people, who would receive a penalty of being expelled from the desa. They lived out of the desa and became kecu and rebels.

The feudal system pressurized people to act against their will and moral sense because the socio-political condition made them link up with the bureaucratic games. One of the bankruptcies of the VOC was the spread out of the insider trading done by the members of that company. When The Cultivation System began in 1830, an incentive cash was introduced, namely *plantloon* and *cultuurpocenten* (Suhartono, 1996). This money attracted the village heads and mandors (foremen) to bribe. It seems that the bribery was acceptable practice among all heads and they became richer. Up to the present time anyone who occupies a certain position in the bureaucracy enjoys a financially secure life.

Collusion

Collusion is a secret agreement or illegal cooperation for a wrong purpose. This is a form of alliance that must be realized through which a symbiotic benefit will be reached. In feudal system, the alliance was imposed on individual or intergroup relations. The group spirit encouraged the development of an expectation for material and spiritual benefits.

Collusion is nowadays viewed negatively if the alliance is harmful to public interests. The socio-political interest becomes broader between both sides and is unbridgeable so that it causes socio-political tensions in rural and urban populations. Moreover, we can not imagine if there is no collusion we will not know how far the progress of a society is. The only warning is that collusion must be limited and avoided.

Collusion was very common in the traditional society because the life of the traditional kingdoms was always based on cooperation either horizontally or vertically. The horizontal cooperation should be solid. The king worked together with the upper bureaucratic elite for the purpose of establishing a solid government besides gaining economic benefit. Even the lower bureaucratic elite established a relationship among them, i.e. between the mandor and the village head. Actually, they were a pressure group that maintained the existing ruling group. This group repressed the vertical mobility of the peasants. In other words, the lower people were strictly selected.

After the coming of the Dutch government, collusion with local kingdoms was a *conditio sine qua non*. The Dutch would not change the old feudal system, which

had been going on well. If the local kingdoms had been exploited through taxes and other compulsory needs, the Dutch added the people's burdens to the greatest possible amount.

When plantations spread in the middle of nineteenth century, the Javanese kings gave a license to the planters to operate and to manage the peasants' land and labor. In return, the king received several kinds of gifts (Ekeh, 1975). The kings and the nobles were tied in a close friendship with *bekel putih*, i.e. Dutch or Chinese land renters. The Dutch and the Chinese also had a close association as reflected in a Javanese saying *Ana Landa ana Cina*. Their kinship was established through intermarriage as seen in the families of *Dezentje* in Surakarta residency (Suhartono, 1991).

At the lower level the village head created a peerage with the *mandor*, field controller, maintaining their social position. This connection was also strengthened by political marriage. Only their descendents could be appointed as village heads. This system was backed up by the Dutch government. In short, collusion always caused disadvantages to the peasants. As a result, the nickname *kecu* or robber was used to refer to the village head, *mandor*, and white renter. In a large scale, rejection of collusion resulted in the emergence of peasant unrest, rebellion, and banditry (Suhartono, 1995).

Although the Dutch government did not intend to create a *beambtenstaat*, the setting up of the various schools automatically created an inner-group, exclusively the *priyayi* group. This group tried to maintain their socio-political status which had been established for centuries and had been given benefit to the ruling elite.

Nepotism

Nepotism is based on genealogical relations which tend to show special favour to relatives. Generally, a person who is appointed to a high position will give employment to his relatives. Socially, paying attention to one's relatives is a primary need and they are regarded as belonging to an inner-group. Moreover, a nuclear family forms a strong group against various outer powers, so it must survive within the group. Later on, the extended family is also the aim of nepotism. Examples in the *babad* and *hikayat* show that nearly all relatives hold positions in the bureaucracy.

Undoubtedly nepotism was an old system which was maintained by an established group for certain purposes. We often hear a certain group attempting to defend their power as a ruling group. Being related to the existing

power, they always maintained their wealth. The next generation made a genealogical line to the former power holder. All this was concerned with the purity of their family by restriction with regard to ethnicity and regionality. Their special interest had to be safeguarded through protection of their possessions and an exclusive group of ruling elite had to be maintained.

In the traditional kingdom, generally the king protected the purity of kinship. A Javanese proverb "*ngumpulake balung pisah*" was an attempt to unite all the relatives. They did not want their wealth to be divided with lower people. This concept seems to have survived up to present day. The political marriage was mentioned above, besides serving as a means for strengthening power, also aimed at safe-guarding wealth, and at least purifying genealogical relations.

We know of the *triman* practice that implicated a king's control on socio-political development. By giving a woman to be married off to the bureaucratic elite, it would make a close relationship with the central bureaucracy, therefore it became a guarantee for keeping peace and order (Soemarsaid Moertono, 1968). Nowadays, this practice is found in intermarriage among the top bureaucrats, military elite and wealthy persons. The combination of these would bring an absolute and strong power. However, as seen in the Javanese history this powerful government, though backed up by strong government, suddenly failed and the kingdom was changed by a new leader. *Paku Buwono IX* (1893-1939) of Surakarta succeeded in controlling all the *bupatis* by adopting the feudal system.

Pepe

Basically, democratic involvement in the Javanese society still existed as long as the king gave attention to the principles of justice. When peasants lodged a protest by sitting quietly outdoors in the town square (a custom called *pepe*, literally meaning "exposing oneself to the sun") of the Yogyakarta Palace in 1905, *Sultan Ha-meng-ku Buwono VII* responded positively to the peasants' problem and sought a solution.

Obviously, *pepe* was a kind of demonstration against the injustice of the Dutch government which allied with the planters. The peasants' protest reflected a counter-institution against the planters who had taken over the peasants' properties. If the *pepe* did not work and bring about a positive result to peasantry, they gathered the masses for collective action. The dissatisfaction was manifested in the peasants' protest through traditional ways because the formal channel stagnated. The peasants chose the easy way by destroying (burning the

sugar-cane plantations, robbing and murdering the employees of the plantations). They would fight to get back everything that had been claimed by the planters.

According to the principles of modern organization, the peasants' unrest was weak and archaic. They had no a solid organization such as factors of leadership, ideology and mass followers. It could be said that the unrest always failed and was always abortive. But we know that the counter power recruited by the peasant themselves was the voice of the weak, the underprivileged, or wong cilik.

Wong cilik was not free from pressures of the ruling elite and malpractices of the bureaucrats. The peasants were always cheated by the government, and their voices were bought by the authorities. The exploitation of the wong cilik persisted but they did not give up. They were always waiting for the coming of the Ratu Adil (the Just King) who would drive away the darkness of the socio-political condition. They look forward to zaman kertayuga when things would return to normal (Sartono Kartodirdjo, 1987). That was the reason why the peasants strove for collective action and created solidarity to fight against a corrupt government. They wanted to eliminate various abuses of power in order that they could live peacefully and improve their welfare.

Concluding remarks

This paper has proposed the hypothesis that CCN is part of a feudal heritage, which developed under the feudal system that lasted a few centuries and was strengthened by the colonial government. The practices of CCN have happened without any significant hindrance, and are wide-spread in a society with permissive attitudes. It would appear that CCN must be linked with the cultural aspects of the nation, particularly with the feudal heritage.

We could say that CCN was the zeitgeist of the feudal system in the past, and as such it may not be justifiable to regard it as a mistake, but later on this system was no longer valid because of the socio-political changes after the Indonesian Independence. Although Indonesia has been an independent nation for more than fifty years, the feudal heritage still prevails.

In attempting to eliminate the practice of the CCN, we should remain ourselves of the cultural process which has been going on for centuries. In terms of a cultural remedy, it would require a gradual process for CCN to die out in the same way as the process of the development of the feudal system. But the process could be shortened

to at least two up to four generations if Indonesian leaders, both formal and informal, are committed to give good examples, to educate the people through religious lessons, to raise the standards of morality and ethics of the Indonesian nation. The leaders have to be consistent with what they say and what they do.

It is not easy to eradicate CCN in a short time. It takes a long time to establish a democratic society because the idea of democracy is actually the opposite of the feudal system. The feudal value system is suitable for the present situation when the people are devoting themselves to the adoption of democratic values.

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(Footnotes)

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