



The political economy of teacher management reform in Indonesia

Andrew Rosser^{a,*}, Mohamad Fahmi^b

^a University of Melbourne, Australia

^b Padjadjaran University, Indonesia



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ABSTRACT

Indonesia faces serious problems in the number, cost, quality and distribution of teachers. In recent years, its central government has introduced a range of reforms to address these problems but they have produced modest results. This paper suggests that this outcome reflects the way in which predatory political and bureaucratic elites have used the school system for decades to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support, and exercise political control rather than promote improved learning outcomes. Efforts to reduce teacher numbers, enhance teacher quality, and improve teacher distribution have accordingly constituted an assault on the interests of these elites, provoking powerful, if often subterranean, resistance. Broadly, reform has only occurred where the central government has employed policy instruments that have disciplined local governments and maintained a commitment to these instruments in the face of resistance. The paper concludes by assessing the implications for Indonesian education.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has plenty of teachers, around 3 million by one estimate (The Economist, 2014). Indeed, with an overall supply of one teacher per 16 students at primary school level and 15 students at junior-secondary school level, it has one of the most generous student-teacher ratios in the world (Heyward et al., 2017: 245). But the quality of Indonesia's teachers is poor—many lack basic competencies, particularly with regards to subject knowledge and pedagogical skills¹—and a substantial proportion fail to turn up to work on any given day² (Jalal et al., 2009; Pisani, 2013; Chang et al., 2014; McKenzie et al., 2014). At the same time, Indonesia's teachers are unevenly distributed between districts and between schools in urban areas and ones in rural and remote areas within districts (USAID Prioritas, 2015; Heyward et al., 2017). Finally, rising teacher salary costs, driven by growing teacher numbers and pay rises, have impaired the government's ability to invest in other areas needed to improve education quality (Chang et al., 2014).

Together, these problems have contributed to poor learning outcomes for Indonesian students. Indonesia regularly ranks in the bottom few countries in international standardized tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) below neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore; and its performance has improved little since the early 2000s. To address these problems, the

Indonesian central government has introduced a range of teacher management reforms over the past decade but these initiatives have produced few results. Indonesian teachers remain poor quality, often absent, inequitably distributed, and costly.

This paper examines the reasons for this. Much analysis of teacher management reform in developing countries and Indonesia specifically has focused on defining and describing Indonesia's teacher management problems, prescribing policy solutions to these problems, and assessing the effectiveness of implemented solutions through impact evaluations. This paper, by contrast, endeavours to bring the political and social dimensions of teacher management to the fore. It argues that the failure of teacher management reform in Indonesia so far has reflected the way in which predatory political and bureaucratic elites have for decades used the school system—and teacher management in particular—to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support, and exercise political control rather than to maximize educational performance and equity. In this context, central government attempts to reduce teacher numbers, improve teacher quality, and promote better teacher distribution have represented a direct assault on elite interests—and, in particular, given the central role of local governments in managing the teacher workforce, the interests of local political and bureaucratic elites. Reform initiatives have consequently encountered considerable—if often subterranean—resistance. In broad terms, reform initiatives have only been successful where the central

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: andrew.rosser@unimelb.edu.au (A. Rosser).

¹ This is indicated, for instance, by the results of standardised assessments of teacher competency. See Section 5.1 for further detail.

² McKenzie et al. (2014: xiii) estimate that around one in ten teachers is absent when they are scheduled to be teaching.