

FROM TENNIS COURT TO KARAOKE BAR

*Life Style and Modality Local Business People in
a Provincial Town of Pekalongan*

(CASE OF CONSTRUCTION SECTOR)

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Introduction

Pekalongan, the focus area of this study, is a provincial town in North Coast of Central Java. It locates in the western part of Semarang, the capital city of Central Java. It takes around 1.5 hours to travel Pekalongan-Semarang. From Jakarta, traveling with train will take times of five hours. Pekalongan is a small city. The total size is 45 km² or 9 Kilo Meters times 5 Kilo Meters.

Travelling with motor cycle, it takes me around 20 minutes to travel from southern to northern part of the city; and it is around 15 minutes from eastern to western part. Traffic lights only locate in the “centre” of the city, which cover the area of government office and business centers. Demographically speaking, the population is less than 300,000 and it spreads in four sub-districts or Kecamatan, since 1987.

Before 1987, Pekalongan administered only two sub-districts. Within this size of the city and the number of population, it seems to me that everyone knows everyone else.

For centuries, Pekalongan has been known as a trading city. The largest sector is indeed the textile industry, which includes batik production. Official data from Office of Industry, Trade and Cooperatives, there were 611 registered batik enterprises in Pekalongan in 2007. Unofficial and rough counts estimate

that there are more than 1,000 batik enterprises in Pekalongan. Majority of them are small scale enterprises.

Apart from private sectors, there is also public sector economy in Pekalongan, i.e. construction sector. Compare to batik, this sector is relatively new. Construction sector developed along with the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 and reached its peak during Soeharto era. During Dutch colonisation, the construction sector (i.e., building of infrastructure, such as roads, harbours, etc.) was in the hands of Dutch enterprises.

Liberalization in Construction Sector in Pekalongan in 1999

The construction sector is a protected economy sector since Indonesia declared independence in 1945 (Klinken and Aspinal, 2011). This continued until the era of Soeharto. In his early years in power, Soeharto needed a political legitimacy, which he fulfilled, one of them, by providing jobs in the construction sector. Soeharto protected this sector to secure the jobs and state's fund was the only source of capital of constructors at the national and local level.

In the late 1990s, the construction market was liberalized after Indonesian economy experienced an economic crisis, which led into political turbulence and eventually the fall of Indonesian president, General Soeharto, after more than thirty years in power. This research takes place after Soeharto's stepped down from power, and I label it as "post-Soeharto" era. State's protection for the construction industry was abolished, although not entirely. The construction industry is one of the main targets for deregulation because government funds for this sector have allegedly been used for kickbacks to administrators and politicians. Furthermore, the abolishment of protection has brought impact to economy in macro level, namely an increasing of competition.

There are total 95 construction enterprises in Pekalongan in 2009. Before political change in 1998, the numbers of construction enterprises were around half of it (42 units). Thus, there is an increase of 48.5% . In terms of grade, from 95 enterprises, 80% of them belong to grade 2; 17.9% are grade 3; and 1.1% belongs to grade 4 and 5 respectively. Majority of them are very small

companies. Their capital is few millions, they have no permanent office let alone permanent staff unless they are projects; they hire equipments whenever they need so they do not have their own.

The increased numbers of construction enterprises is not followed by an increasing amount of budget from Pekalongan local budget (APBD). Budget has been fluctuated as can be read in table below.

Table 1. Allocation of fund in for construction sector source from Local Budget (APBD) and DAK

Fiscal Year	APBD (in IDR)
2005	24,369,545,725.00
2006	57,223,430,894.00
2007	78,157,378,430.00
2008	105,242,257,612.00
2009	NA
2010	42.394.855.165,00.

Source: Pekalongan Local Budget (APBD) 2005-2010

The increased number of construction enterprises and a fluctuated amount of budget for the sector has created a tougher competition among constructor businesspeople in Pekalongan. Because of this, the construction, which is known to be close to politics, is getting closer. In Pekalongan, political reform became a momentum of grouping among constructors. Crudely, Pekalongan constructors consist of two groups: the ones who established their enterprises before the political reform in 1998, and the second ones are those who established the companies after the reform.

I call the first group as ‘senior’ one, while the second one is ‘junior’. If the first group is close the networks of Golkar party, including Pekalongan administrators in Soeharto era; the ‘junior’ group are majority established their enterprises through the connection with non-Golkar parties, e.g. PKB, PDI P, PPP. These two groups are always in fierce competition in accessing projects. The plurality of political actors at the local level brings about a differentiation of groups in the construction sector.

From Tennis Field and Karaoke Bar: The Shift of Hobbies Among Constructors.

Tennis is known as an elite sport in provincial during the New Order, perhaps similar with golf in metropolitan cities (Schiller, 1996). This is because high-ranking bureaucrats and or businesspeople play tennis Jepara. Achwan (2000) in his research of sarong industrialists in Pekajangan, Pekalongan, identified his informants playing tennis both as community activities among business actors, and as a strategy to be closed to politicians. One of his technique in his fieldwork is he joined playing tennis to understand more his research subjects in their social activities.

In the context of Pekalongan, tennis is also considered an elite game. A tennis club located in the complex of Pekalongan main square (alun alun), a central area of Pekalongan, charges a very high rental fees to rent. The chairwoman of PELTI (Persatuan Tennis Lapangan Seluruh Indonesia) or the Indonesian Tennis Association told me that she has never been confident enough to come to the tennis match in the alun-alun, which is usually attended by many rich Pekalongan business people. "They are out of my league," she said. This is to show how elite tennis match is in Pekalongan that even the head of PELTI always feels uncomfortable coming there, due to her different class background.

I had an appointment with two construction businesspeople in a tennis field located behind the office of Public Works Office in Pekalongan during my fieldwork in 2008. The two construction businesspeople I met were Surya (in his late fifties) and Jati (mid thirties). After we greeted each other and introduced ourselves, I sat down on a bench with Surya who just had a break from one match he just played. Jati went to fetch drinks for us. Surya's shirt is wet on the back and he had a small towel on his shoulder.

While waiting for Jati to return, I chatted with him while we watched a double match in the field. Surya told me who were playing in the field. The three players in the field were middle-rank echelons bureaucrats working at Pekalongan Public Works office and the other was low-level bureaucrat staff. Surya told me that he had played tennis for years to keep his body fit, and the group plays twice a week, mostly in the field behind the public works office.

Surya established his construction enterprise in 1987 after graduating from Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, majoring in civil engineering. Jati, started his business in 1994, also an engineering graduate from Semarang-based university. They both have professional and relevant technical background in the construction field. They are also members of Gapensi, the largest construction business association that has existed since Soeharto period, since 1980s for Surya and mid 1990s for Jati. I asked whether playing tennis is a good strategy to be close to Pekalongan's bureaucrats. Jati replied me, "Once you maintain a good relationship with someone, and that if you happen to compete with other businesspeople with no history of relations, you will be their first priority". He answered my question me indirectly.

Knowing that I am a researcher working on the construction sector in Pekalongan, both Surya and Jati took the opportunity to share the problems they face on how bleak their business situation over the past years. They said that it was due to tighter competition from 'newer' construction business, which emerged after the political shift in 1998. "In the past, if you are close to bureaucracy staffers, your chances to obtain projects are much better".

While telling me the stories of their business competitors, ever now and then, they commented on the match in the field, interrupted their stories to me. They joined shorts conversations with the bureaucrats on the match, who were having a break on the other side from where we sat. I sense that my informants and people who were there have known each other quite well, looking for the types of chat they made. Being in the tennis field myself allowed me to observe their interaction with the bureaucrats.

Things are different now, added Jati. It is not enough to just have good relationship with high-level bureaucrats in Pekalongan. They need to be close to local politicians too because now (since the fall of Soeharto), they involved in project allocations. "Many more people involve now, such as *dewan*, (member of regional parliament or DPRD, locally called as '*dewan*', a shortened version of DPRD). I asked them whether they tried to get closers to the members of parliament. Both Jati and Surya right away responded with a laugh, asking "Which politicians we should approach?"

There are thirty of them and it is difficult to keep up with all of them. Formerly, if you have one bureaucrat at the top level, you did not have to deal

with the others. One is enough, as long as your contacts are at the top. Now we have to deal with so many people and they (the political constellation) change a lot too every now and then. Today, one with one particular faction, tomorrow or next week, you never know,” Jati said. With an upset tone, Jati continued, “Also, who do they think they are (member of parliament)? They are new kids on the block who try to make money from us, the business actors.” Surya, who has been quiet, confirmed Jati’s sentiment. “I’d rather stay home and sleep than doing some other business with no clarity whether we will get benefit or not. We are businesspeople and of course we work for profit. I will do my job professionally, if you need me let’s make a fair deal and if not, then don’t”.

Schiller (1996) in his study on Jeparu, Central Java identified tennis match as an activity in which top-level officials spent their leisure time, along with dining out and go to beauty salon. Schiller also showed that tennis field was not only an arena both for sports and lobby, because it is where business actors could mingle with high-echelon bureaucrats in a relaxed way and discuss various things including projects (1996). He also suggests that tennis field is not just a sport field but also political field, which mean political activities (i.e. lobbying politicians to influence policy makers) take place along with sport activities.

In another study, Achwan (2000) selected tennis field as one of his field studies to delve into the life of businesspeople in Pekalongan. Achwan reasoned that tennis field was an important site where businesspeople and policymakers (i.e. bureaucrats) gather. Both Schiller and Achwan argued tennis field is typical provincial towns (districts/cities) arena. In post-Soeharto era, things seem to shift, as I elaborate below in a study case of constructor who loves to sing at karaoke bar, not only for fun but also as activities to access business.

During my fieldwork in 2008, there were only three karaoke bars, including a café with a karaoke facility in Pekalongan. They are Merdeka Karaoke, DUPAN Karaoke, and a café with karaoke bar in the western part of Pekalongan. In 2010 when I visited Pekalongan, it has become five bars, with two new ones. When I suggested an appointment with my interviewees, another group of construction businessman, he is the one who suggested to

meet in either the karaoke bar or cafe. I did not aware why didn't he suggested to meet in tennis field as my other interviewees.

After my meetings with the weeks later after my visit to tennis field, I set up an appointment with another construction businessman, Rahman. He suggested me to meet up in a café with a karaoke bar. Among Pekalongan people, café culture at night means two things: alcohol and women rather than drinking coffee like cafes in Jakarta. If in tennis field I heard gloomy stories on business prospect, in a karaoke bar, between people belting out songs, I heard the opposite.

When we entered the café, a lady in black tight outfit greeted him and asked him where he had been because she had not seen him for sometime. Rahman visited the place quite frequently that explains how they seem to be familiar to each other. Inside the café, we accidentally met a group of member of Pekalongan regional parliament, who were there with his friends. I thought they are having an appointment but apparently not. We joined them for a while before we left to talk in private. The cafe had a mini karaoke facility and I noticed the politician kept holding the microphone and he was singing all the time. He sang with all of his heart, very loud, until I think I could see his veins showing in his neck. I hardly had any chance to ask him question even a simple one. I decided not to push my luck given the situation.

Rahman used to be a PDI-P, Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle, politician, a nationalist party and even when the party was still called PDI in the New Order era. This is different from Jati and Surya who had no politician background. Rahman was active in then PDI since 1982, and he was a deputy chief of PDI-P Pekalongan city (DPC) in 2003. In 2008, he ran for the DPC chief, but he lost. He did not tell me the cause of his lost, but I was told that his rival, an owner of local transportation company, had stronger financial back up. Ever since his lost, he withdrew from politics formally and concentrated more on his business. Rahman told me he cannot play tennis and he prefers café and karaoke bar.

Rahman established his enterprise in year 2000. For his standard, Rahman told me that he did well, or “lumayan” (not so bad). I asked him what he thinks was the key to his success. He said that he is good with people, and he can easily adjust to people he just meet. He can follow any kind of

conversations with people from various backgrounds. Compared to other construction businesspeople, Rahman is open to me. “You know I have to spent three hours listening to one of Pekalongan high-level official (pejabat) talking about his new fish. Rahman developed his social skill during his former experience as an activist at PDI-P, and I can see myself how strong his social skill is if I compare to other construction business people who tend to avoid me, a new person they just meet.

The second chance I met Rahman, he also suggested us to meet in a karaoke bar. He thinks that I like to be in Karaoke Bar. It was at DUPAN Karaoke, the first and the largest karaoke bar in Pekalongan. It is also a notorious place where alcohol was sold, an accusation Pekalongan people launched, which is quite true as I saw varieties of alcohol appetizer in the drink list. He was with his friend that day, so there were the three of us in a small cube that can fit four to six persons.

The moment of selecting songs, a pause from singing, was the only chance I could ask him questions about his business in construction industry. I have never been to any karaoke bars myself in my life, so I needed a kind of adjustment with things there, including singing songs, with my terrible voice. Not only that, like majority of Indonesians, I used to think that karaoke bars relate to two things: alcohol and women. They are usually located in the night entertainment area, something some of us associate with forbidden things to do according to Islamic teaching.

Therefore, it is kind of improper thing to do. Not anymore though, since there are many karaoke bars for family, which lessened the negative side of the bar. Rahman and his friends were so relaxed and they seem to be used to doing it. Rahman sang well. He told me that this is because he used to read Koran with a loud voice, which trained your vocal chord. Also he joined a terbangan club, a traditional Pekalongan performance, involving singing and playing rebana, an instrument coming from the Middle East. This made him sing beautifully, especially the dangdut songs, a typical Indonesian song with a melody of mixture between India and Middle Eastern melody, which is usually accompanied by erotic dancing.

Like the ones in café, I noticed how familiar Rahman with the karaoke surroundings. He chatted with a guy who helped us setting the karaoke

instrument and asked him who had been there for the last three days. I asked Rahman how often he came to karaoke bar and he told me it depended on the needs, sometimes four days in a week or sometimes just once a month. “I usually go here with my friends in dewan (Pekalongan regional council), I come here just to treat them. I know what they like to do, so I adjust my approach to them based on what they like,” he said. I asked him how can he talked about business in amidst the high volume of music and the voice of people singing. “The real business talk took place after the Karaoke, when I took them to their cars. That’s the real essence of the meeting”.

In general, spending leisure time in cafés or karaoke bars does not connote well among Pekalongan people, which are known to be religious. It connotes to two things: alcohol and women. This is because one of the bigger locations of karaoke bar in Dupan square is also known as a place where alcohol is sold, something Pekalongan society is very allergic about. Dupan square belong to a Chinese Pekalongan, and it has been accused as a place of “maksiat”. Radical Islam group every now and then did ‘sweeping’ to Dupan Square, an activities to ban alcohol or other activities that are considered against Islamic law, usually with violence, to make sure that there is no alcohol there. As a matter of fact, alcohol is sold there.

It is maybe the only place that I know selling alcohol in Pekalongan. Politicians coming from nationalist party such as PDI P, or Golkar, who are known in general to be a nominal Muslim, do visits karaoke bar. But Rahman told me that distinction between politicians coming from nationalist parties or non-nationalist parties is hard to maintain. “I treat politicians from Muslim traditionalist parties quite often”.

Politics in New Order Indonesia including in Pekalongan was dominated by Golkar party (the ruling party), and the military and the bureaucracy. This is why business actors in a provincial should be close to the bureaucracy to access projects. These dominant political actors dominated policymaking process, and they, especially bureaucracy, played tennis match. Businesspeople who wanted to get close to policymakers would approach them in tennis field.

When political power shifted to the legislative branch of the government in 1998, politicians in the regional parliament assumed power and at the same time marginalized bureaucracy power. Politicians now play dominant political

roles in policy-making process, including in projects allocations. Along with that, the role of bureaucracy has been contested ever. Power at the local level is now shared among executive wing of government and legislative one (members of parliament). I suggest that the power shift in the landscape of local politics has further consequence namely a shift of social activities.

Politicians have a different social background with local administrators (bureaucracy). Indonesia bureaucracy has an image or associated to be a noble group in a society, due to its historical fact during the Dutch Colonial (Sutherland, 1987). Playing tennis seems to be regarded as a domain of the elites. Later on, the constructors, the 'senior' one, associated themselves with the local administrators, especially after the 'junior' constructor emerged as a new group of businesspeople after the reform. On the other hand, new local political actors namely politicians are another group, who have more power politically, but they are coming from different social class. 'Junior' constructors then associate themselves with the politicians, along with their own 'low' culture'.

Beyond Hobbies: Leisure Time Activities in a Changing of Political Context in Provincial Town

My exploration above shows on the works of at least three factors in the way people at provincial town doing their leisure time, which I suggest, relates with the changing of political landscape. First, there is a factor of 'generation' that play along here. It refers to age, not of the entrepreneurs, but of the enterprises, whether it was established before or after political shift in 1998.

Construction businesspeople that play tennis belong to 'senior' generation, whose enterprises were established and existed during Soeharto era. Tennis is a sport of top-level bureaucrats, who used to hold control on politics in regions during Soeharto era. They play tennis to approach the bureaucrats. The second one is 'junior' enterprises, which are established after 1998. These enterprises are established part of the political euphoria, in which any citizens can participate in anything they want due to the political shift, such as becoming a construction businessman. They are, since the beginning, gaining projects from their patron politicians in Pekalongan regional parliament. Therefore, these two 'generations' perceive politics differently.

In contrast, 'Junior' constructors realize without politics they will never gain any business opportunities. They are always being close to politicians. In contrast, the 'senior' construction businesspeople have been in their comfort zone, with their contacts with bureaucrats in the past, and have always been dealing with them for years. They seem unable to adapt to the political shift that requires them to approach politicians. As Surya and Jati described, they feel they would lower themselves if they have to approach politicians, whom they think as "people with obscure background". As their old patrons have no substantive political power now, and they are unable to adapt to the shift, all they can do is complaining.

Having said so, it does not mean that junior construction businessmen never approach the bureaucracy, neither that senior ones are only close to bureaucrats. I understand that both are trying to get close to both the bureaucrats and the politicians. However, the social origins of these two groups are different: 'senior' construction business developed during Soeharto era with all of order and being close to bureaucrats; and 'junior' enterprises in came to exist post 1998, and that they have been close to politics ever since they exist; each of them has their own way on dealing with politics.

Second, the factor of expertise in the field of construction, which differentiates between 'senior' and 'junior' group of constructor. Surya and Jati, the constructor I met in tennis field considered themselves as a 'professional'. It means they have formal education background related to the physical construction. In contrast, Rahman, my informant I met in karaoke bar, is an autodidact: he has no formal education background and learns things by doing them. Types of stories that they told me were also different.

In the whole conversation I had with Surya and Jati, most of the time, they complain about how gloomy the industry is now. This is due to competitions by new comers in the industry, which majority of the new players or politicians who are "tidak jelas dari mana", or "it is obscure where they come from". It means, according to them, these new group of constructors had no track record as business players in construction industry. Despite this accusation, new politicians at the local level play substantial roles in politics. 'Junior' constructors follow the later and they are doing well too compare to the 'senior' one.

Beyond Consumption and Cultural Framework: Hobbies within a Framework of Politics

The study on karaoke seems to be dominated with studies with key words of “cultural studies”, “consumption” or “leisure studies”. This paper argues that pattern of consumption, activities in leisure time and having fun are not just about those activities per se, including in the case of tennis match and karaoke I have shown in this paper. Fung (2010) is among the few who studied karaoke as function of karaoke in China: political, personal, community and class. “Political function” in his argument refers to how karaoke bar has opened up “neutral” space; in the karaoke room, every individual has its own right to say their opinion; in the karaoke room all kind of dissatisfaction towards politics and government can be expressed through songs without having a fear to be caught by the authorities.

In short, he suggests, “it is a space that is partly sealed off from the social pressures and political forces of control in China” (Fung, 2010: 45). Lun (1998) studied Karaoke among Chinese who were born in American). Literatures of Japanese studies suggest this (source). Still, there have been limited literatures, which regard these activities has something to with the shift of political setting.

In the context of Indonesia, studies on hobbies such as spending time in tennis court and karaoke is regarded as part of lobby activities (Achwan, 1997). Schiller (1996) suggests that top-level bureaucrats in Jepara, Indonesia spend their leisure time in tennis field. Since his research takes place in the Soeharto Indonesia, he did not observe how this has shifted after the reform.

Conclusion

From the exploration above I have at least three main conclusions. First, social activities or leisure activities are not just about an expression of social and cultural activities. Their emergences have something to do with the economic and political context. Or in other word, as shown in the case of Pekalongan, types of activities in leisure time are part of social and political change in this provincial town. Second, in choosing the types of social activities, businesspeople follow the resources or policy makers.

In the case of construction sector, constructors seem to follow the types of social activities that policy makers do. Indonesia's political shift more than a decade ago gives more power to politicians, stripping it off from the erstwhile dominant bureaucrats. During Soeharto era, business actors flocked the tennis clubs where bureaucrats were members, now politicians play greater roles, they tend to follow them: they flocked in karaoke bar, not to just having fun, but to play politics.

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