

Power Plays and Hidden Agendas: A Deep Dive into the Battle for Control at Indonesian Traditional Market

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of interest and power struggles in Indonesia's Lemabang Market, exploring how various stakeholders—vendors, local authorities, and community leaders—compete for control and influence. By analyzing the intricate relationships between these groups, the research sheds light on the socio-political and economic factors that shape market governance. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing library research and personal observation to uncover the underlying tensions and power plays. The findings reveal a complex web of alliances and conflicts, driven by economic interests and socio-political agendas, that ultimately affect the market's operation and the livelihoods of its participants. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how local markets in Indonesia function as microcosms of broader socio-political struggles.

Keywords: Power Struggle, Traditional Market, Lemabang Market, Indonesia

1. Introduction:

The idea of markets as battlegrounds for political power is increasingly taking center stage in global discussions, highlighting how different players maneuver to gain control over resources, influence, and authority across various regions. Political scientists are delving deeper into not only the inner workings of modern markets but also the intricate dynamics of urban and traditional marketplaces. Calvano and Polo (2021) observe that today's markets, dominated by titans like Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft, operate under a distinct paradigm—characterized by collaboration and transparency, all shaped by the expansive reach of the digital age (Deller et al., 2021; Calvano & Polo, 2021).

In stark contrast, traditional markets are far more than mere hubs of trade; they are microcosms

reflecting the larger power struggles within society. Often underestimated as purely economic venues, these markets reveal themselves to be vibrant arenas of social and political action (Jabareen & Eizenberg, 2021). The phrase 'struggle for power' aptly describes the ongoing clashes within these spaces, where diverse actors fiercely contest for control over resources, sway, and authority (Sikor & Lund, 2009; Pansardi & Bindi, 2021).

This study focuses on Lemabang market, one of the traditional prominent market in Palembang, to explore the intricate power struggles that unfold within its confines. By examining the interactions between market vendors, government officials, and strong local leaders, this research uncovers the complex micro-politics that govern market operations. These power struggles are woven into

the very fabric of the city's socio-political landscape, shaped by the intricate interplay of local government policies, economic pressures, and the ever-evolving dynamics within the community (Moss & Resnick, 2011). Not only that, all these interest groups have different motives, both legal and illegal. One of them is a group that will never be separated from local strongmen in the management of the Lemabang Market area.

Among the most influential groups are the so-called 'outsiders' or, more commonly, thugs and local champions. These figures, often seen as enforcers, carve out a living by extracting small fees from traders setting up stalls along the roadside. This phenomenon of local strongmen aligns with Joel Migdal's analysis, where he posits that such figures emerge from systemic weaknesses that allow them to exert control over economic resources within their domains (Migdal, Kohli, & Shue, Eds., 1994). In essence, these strongmen symbolize power rooted in their ability to access and dominate local economic and social resources. Migdal, in his influential work, 'Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in The Third World' (1988), revealed that every social group has its leader, who operates with a degree of autonomy from the state. These leaders are not mere extensions of state power but are often the authentic faces of authority in their communities. Mosca, in 'The Ruling Class' (2020), furthers this by stating that society naturally divides into two classes: the rulers and the ruled. In this light, local strongmen stand as the embodiment of grassroots authority, shaping the rules without state intervention.

In the study of social and political science, the struggle for a region or area is indicated by the interests in the market as a research locus. This research will fill this void. Why is the market an important study in the discourse of social science and political science, especially the study of political economy? Basically, the study of the market is one of the places where the struggle for resources and economic benefits, especially between the government and local strongmen in various aspects. Lemabang market was originally

an activity of exchanging goods and services, connecting sellers and buyers, but it has transformed into a power struggle between the state and thugs. The struggle of interests between groups in the market area has become more crucial, especially since the 1980s, because it did not receive attention from the Palembang city government, making its physical condition inadequate. Therefore, the poor physical condition of Lemabang market in Palembang city is no longer the domain and power of the state. Consequently, this domain is contested by not only the government who is authorized to give access to dredge, but also the thugs who take advantage of the bad condition. In addition, it is in poor physical condition, when faced with resistance from local strongmen groups in the Lemabang Market area. Although since 2016, the Palembang city government intends to revitalize and manage the Lemabang market. In this case, the Palembang city government, with all the resources available, but the inconsistency of the government's attention which is always changing, so that the condition of Lemabang market has increasingly experienced a very complex chaos, and has even turned into an important territorial area that is contested by various groups in gaining valuable economic interests.

This research focuses on the study of the struggle for territory and control over power between the government and local strongmen groups, in controlling economic interests in Lemabang Market, Palembang city, South Sumatra. In answering this, the researcher aims to answer the question of what is the condition of Lemabang Market, so that it becomes a place of struggle for control and power of various groups. In this case, the researcher used data from field observations. Second, the parties have interests and interest models in each group. In this case, the author will describe the interests behind the bad condition of the Lamabang market.

Through this research, it seeks to illuminate how power is contested, negotiated, and sometimes redistributed among the stakeholders in Lemabang market. It also examines the strategies employed by

market vendors to assert their interests and navigate the often-turbulent landscape of market governance. By situating these local power dynamics within the broader context of urban governance in Indonesian cities, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how traditional markets function as sites of power negotiation and conflict.

2. Methods:

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the research approach, the researcher employed a qualitative descriptive design, with a particular emphasis on the literature study method as the primary tool for data collection (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). This approach was carefully chosen to trace and gather a wide range of relevant sources that would inform the research topic. The literature study method was not merely a means of data collection but was also integral to building the theoretical framework underpinning the research (Creswell, 2020). By systematically organizing and categorizing the gathered data, the researcher was able to critically engage with existing literature, identifying gaps and areas where this study could make a meaningful contribution (Huberman & Miles, 2012).

In the subsequent data analysis phase, a qualitative approach was rigorously applied. This process included documenting observed phenomena, meticulously collecting data, and engaging in data selection, reduction, and synthesis, all guided by relevant theoretical perspectives. The data sources encompassed a diverse array of materials, including academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and publications from both mainstream and social media that were pertinent to the research topic (Sugiyono, 2021). Once the data was curated, it was integrated with the theoretical insights to construct a well-rounded conclusion, ensuring the validity and final configuration of the study

3. Result and Discussion:

3.1. History and Dynamics of Lemabang Market Transformed into a Line of Interests

Historically, Lemabang market is an area that holds many historical stories. From the days of the

Palembang Darusalam sultanate, this area has inherited many tombs of kings. The origin of the word Lemabang comes from a story. "Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin Jayo Wikramo wanted to build his own burial complex in 1728 in the weak luhur (high land) area which is now called Astana Gubah Kawah Tengkreup Lemabang 3 Ilir Palembang (Palembang.tribunnews.com, 2019).

As time goes by, this area is getting denser and more crowded in Palembang city, especially after this area, transformed into one of the central businesses of the surrounding community. In addition, Lemabang Market is one of the busy and popular trading centres in Palembang city. The life of the market activities, the traders, and the buyers who visit the market not only come from the people in Ilir Timur II sub-district, but also people from various regions in Palembang city, even from other neighbouring districts.

In this context, the author identifies two main problems that become the battleground for various interests in Lemabang market. *First*, the problem of congestion. Congestion in this area is not only due to the large number of vehicles, but is also exacerbated by public transportation that often picks up and drops off passengers haphazardly and parks around intersections (Bauza, & Gozálvéz, 2013). In addition, roadblocks force vehicles to make U-turns, creating long queues and slowing traffic flow from Jalan Ratu Sianum to General Bambang Utoyo street or RE Martadinata street (Rahman, 2016). This congestion is not only caused by the large number of residents, but also because it is the main route to Boom Baru port and the PT Pusri factory, further complicating traffic conditions (Palembang.tribunnews.com, 2023).

Second, the problem of street vendors. The sidewalks and curbs around the intersection have become a favorite place for street vendors to trade, making the road narrower. Their activities, coupled with illegal parking utilizing the road shoulder, further exacerbate the situation. The already narrow road becomes even more difficult to navigate, especially with the high volume of vehicles and the presence of large cars that pass through this area.

This condition not only disrupts the smooth flow of traffic, but also damages the aesthetics of the area, making the layout look chaotic and disorganized. Vendors who choose to sell on the roadside, despite having stalls inside the market, do so for various reasons. Cheaper rent and easier access to buyers are strong reasons for them to stay outside. However, this decision has had a major impact, creating chaos that further adds to the complexity of the Lemabang market area. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that congestion has become an intractable problem in this area.

3.2. Lines of Interest and Areas of Power Struggle:

In this situation, a clear clash of interests arises between the Palembang City Government and local gangsters vying for control over the lucrative market revenues

3.2.1. Palembang city government:

The Palembang City Government has a numerous of strategic interests in Lemabang market, which plays an important role in the local economy and social life of the community. First, it increases local revenue. In this case, Lemabang market contributes to local revenue through the collection of retribution from traders and other market services. The government has an interest in optimizing this revenue as part of its efforts to increase the local budget, which in turn is used for infrastructure development and other public services. Second, social and Economic stability. In this case, the Palembang City Government seeks to maintain social and economic stability through the management of Lemabang Market. This market is not only an economic centre, but also an important place of social interaction for the community. The government tries to ensure that this market operates smoothly to avoid conflicts between traders and community dissatisfaction that could disrupt social stability. Third, infrastructure development. In this case, the Government has an interest in improving the infrastructure of Lemabang market to support local economic growth. This includes the improvement of market facilities, construction of supporting facilities such as parking lots and access

roads, as well as market modernization to make it more competitive and able to attract more buyers.

3.2.2. Gangsterism groups:

Gangsterism groups in Lemabang market have various interests that are often related to their efforts to control and utilize various economic and social aspects of the market. First, illegal fees and financial gain. One of the main interests of the gangsterism groups in Lemabang market is to gain financial benefits through illegal levies. They often force traders to pay “security money” or “service money” in exchange for protection from harassment or threats that they themselves often create. This is a significant source of income for gangsterism groups who do not have access to formal employment. Second, territorial control and power: Thug groups seek to control market areas as their power base. By controlling certain areas of the market, they can control trading activities and regulate who is allowed to sell in those areas. This control gives them social power and influence that can be used to influence local decisions, including relations with market authorities or even the authorities. Third, exploitation of vulnerable traders. In this case, groups often take advantage of vulnerable traders, such as small traders or those without large capital. They may force traders to take out loans at high interest rates, pressure them to give away a share of profits, or even take over stalls by force if traders cannot pay the required fees. This exploitation exacerbates social and economic injustices in the market.

4. Conclusion:

The struggle for power and control within Lemabang market highlights the intricate dynamics of local governance, economic interests, and social influence in Indonesian markets. Lemabang market serves as a microcosm of the broader power struggles that characterize many traditional markets in Indonesia, where economic and political forces intersect. The ongoing competition for dominance among various stakeholders—vendors, local leaders, and political figures—reflects the complex interplay between formal and informal systems of authority.

This power struggle not only impacts the economic well-being of those directly involved but also has broader implications for social cohesion and market stability. As different groups vie for control, the market's role as a communal hub is both challenged and reinforced, depending on the outcomes of these conflicts. The situation in Lemabang market underscores the need for more equitable governance structures that can mediate these tensions, ensuring that the market remains a space of economic opportunity and social harmony. Therefore, the struggle for power in Lemabang market is emblematic of the broader challenges facing traditional markets in Indonesia. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and a commitment to fostering inclusive governance that prioritizes the welfare of all stakeholders.

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