The Symmetrical Problems of the Asymmetric Decentralization Policy in Indonesia

Krismiyati Tasrin
Center of Research and Education and Training Apparatus I
National Institute of Public Administration, Republic of Indonesia
Jl. Kiara Payung Km. 41/7, Sumedang,
West Jawa, Indonesia
Email: chrissie_tasin@yahoo.com

Muhammad Taufiq
Center of Research of Public Services Management
National Institute of Public Administration, Republic of Indonesia
Jl. Veteran No. 10, Jakarta, Indonesia
Email: puenak@gmail.com

Abstract

Asymmetric Decentralization, by which we mean unequal arrangements of relation between the central and lower-level governments, may attract much attention of practitioners and academics. The different treatments might include both administrative and fiscal aspects. Principally, as argued by many scholars, the concept of asymmetric decentralization is based on argument that a decentralized system of regional and local governments is better able to accommodate differences in tastes for public goods and services.

In the context of Indonesia, the room for an asymmetric decentralization has actually given in the fourth constitution ever used. And basically, decentralization policy in Indonesia, both in term of administrative and fiscal, have been accommodating the asymmetric concept. From administrative aspect, the asymmetry arrangement can be seen from the division of government affairs through optional affairs (urusan pilihan) which based on potency and characteristics of each region. Besides, there is also a different fiscal arrangement for every region comprising the country through the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and the Special Allocation Fund (DAK). However, in practice, decentralization in Indonesia still tend to emphasize the uniformity, which is, more or less be the obstacle in achieving the objective to increase the public welfare.

This paper describes various symmetrical problems in the context of asymmetric decentralization in Indonesia. It will also describe the consequences of these problems as the obstacles in achieving public welfare. In addition, this paper will discuss several policy recommendations in term of redesign the concept of asymmetric administrative and fiscal arrangement which hopefully may contribute in generating local economic growth in the regions.

Keywords: Symmetrical, Asymmetric, Decentralization
Background

Nowadays, the concept of asymmetric federalism or decentralization may attract many practitioners and academics. Tarlton (1965) introduced the concept of asymmetry which refers to the unequal treatment of states within a federal state due to its specific characteristics. Some countries implementing federal asymmetric are for example Malaysia, Spain, Canada, and Russia. Asymmetric models became popular not only in the context of federal state but also in the context of decentralization in a unitary state.

In Indonesia, the design of asymmetric decentralization already applied for a long time, that is since the days of Dutch Colonialism, Post-Independence Period, the Old-Order, the New-Order until the Reform Period (present) (Kurniadi, 2012). Given the very diverse characteristics of Indonesia as an archipelago country which consists of 13,466 islands, more than 400 tribes and more than 600 languages and dialects, clearly it is not easy to design the roles and relationship between the central and local governments provided an effective government management.

Several research studies found that the performance of decentralization in Indonesia is still not optimal in terms of achieving the primary goal of decentralization, that is to improve public welfare. In fact, after more than a decade of the implementation of the decentralization policy in Indonesia, there are many local governments –provinces, city and regency-, lack of fiscal capacity and have a very high dependency to the financial sources from central government. This indicates that the level of independence of local government to fund its local development is still very minimal. In the long run, it will certainly adversely impact on sustainability development. UGM (2012) found that one of the causes of non-optimal performance is due to the design of decentralization policy in Indonesia is a sole design that provides uniform treatment to any existing autonomous region.

In fact, decentralization in Indonesia is an asymmetric decentralization, which consists of regular autonomy and special autonomy as called as a combination model of asymmetric decentralization. In this case, the regular autonomy applies for all provinces based on Law No. 32 of 2004, while the special autonomy applies only for certain provinces such as Aceh, Great Jakarta, Jogjakarta and Papua. Lay., et al (1999) states this combination model of asymmetric decentralization was considered as the most appropriate model to be applied in Indonesia. However, by referring the existing conditions, the asymmetric decentralization policy in Indonesia is still loaded with a variety of issues, both in the context of regular and special autonomy. In the context of regular autonomy, there are symmetrical problems of the asymmetric decentralization in Indonesia which hamper the achievement of decentralization goals as stated by Rondinelly (1999).

This paper aims to describe various symmetrical problems in the context of asymmetric decentralization in Indonesia which will include administrative and fiscal aspect. It will also describe the consequences of these problems as the obstacles in achieving public welfare. In addition, this paper will discuss several policy recommendations in term of redesign the concept of asymmetric administrative and fiscal arrangement which hopefully may contribute in generating local economic growth in the regions.

Theoretical Framework of Asymmetric Decentralization

In general, the concept of asymmetric decentralization was first initiated by Charles D Tarlton in 1965. By considering the classical federation system as applied in the USA, Switzerland, and West Germany, Charles Tarlton found that when the formal legal aspects of the constitution was denied, then clearly the phenomenon of cultural, economic, social and political factors in each state will vary in regulating the mechanisms of power and influence on the different constituent units. These variations will further affect the degree of asymmetric and disharmony within the federal system. Tarlton later called it as asymmetric federation.

Before discussing more about the concept of asymmetric, some conceptual issues must be understood to obtain a clear picture of the subject. The first is the definition of symmetry and asymmetry in the federal system. The definition of “federal symmetry” refers to the uniformity