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Rémi Desmoulière, Fariz Panghegar

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Minibus and Transjakarta: Transport wars?

Written by Rémi Desmoulière & Fariz Panghegar |

•  Print



Rémi Desmoulière and Fariz Panghegar

Francky drives minivans from Pulo Gadung, East Jakarta, to the residential area of Harapan Indah in Bekasi. Unlike the majority of Jakartans, he is upset with the development of the Transjakarta Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network. Since the ‘busway’ arrived in Harapan Indah, the minivan route, from which he earns a living, has been downgraded to a complementary service. His daily income has dropped from Rp.100.000 to Rp.30.000 (approximately from A\$9 to A\$3), far below the needs of his four-person family. His complaints to the cooperative that manages the minivan route, Koperasi Wahana Kalpika, have gone unheard in spite of drivers on other routes succeeding in drawing attention to their plights.

Francky’s concerns are echoed throughout the minibus network (of which minivans form one branch) as the Jakarta government attempts to address growing traffic concerns amongst residents. Hellish macet (traffic jams)

experienced by commuters have prompted numerous changes over the past 10 years. Of these, the most visible in recent years has been the development of the BRT, which includes the Transjakarta network and the intra-city feeder bus systems. However, since 2014, Jakarta and surrounding regions have seen increased conflicts in relation to the BRT delivery. Concerned by loss of work and income, drivers who work for small entrepreneurs have held strikes and demonstrations to protest the Transjakarta routes that crisscross with theirs.

Transport wars

Understanding Jakarta's current transport 'wars' requires some knowledge of the history and dynamics of public transport in Jakarta. Minibus routes have been crafted since the 1960s by transport entrepreneurs following what they call their *naluri bisnis* (business instinct). They have strived to create complementary routes that avoid harsh competition amongst the various minibus cooperatives. Routes are built to secure the most crucial asset in the minibus business: passengers, together with daily mobility patterns. On a lucrative route, transport entrepreneurs can earn profit by renting their minibuses to drivers. For the drivers, only the most patronised routes guarantee a decent profit so it is no wonder that they perceive as a threat the arrival of a bigger and state-backed competitor. They stand to lose the steady stream of passengers on which they rely for their income.

The conflict between private and public transport interests periodically flares up when the business interests of private minibus drivers are undercut by new public routes, sometimes even resulting in violence. For example, on 5 February 2014, Governor Joko Widodo launched the Intra-city Integrated Busway (BKTB) fleet to serve as Transjakarta feeder buses. The buses operated just like minivans, carrying and dropping passengers anywhere along routes, which undermined the van drivers' competitive advantage with customers. The drivers became worried that their income would drop significantly due to the new competition. So six days later, drivers from three minivan routes held a strike to protest the existence of the BKTB. In North Jakarta's Penjaringan, three buses were destroyed, as the minivan drivers intercepted the vehicles and hurled rocks.

In response, the Jakarta government decided to halt the BKTB service and held a meeting with the relevant minibus cooperative, *Koperasi Wahana Kalpika*, to strike an agreement. A deal was reached when the government

affirmed that the BKTB buses would only carry and drop passengers to and from regular bus shelters. The compromise brought an uneasy truce, but conflicts continue to flare up periodically.

In 2016 another conflict erupted, when the Jakarta and national governments extended the BRT network to cover Jabodetabek (Jakarta-Bogor-Depok-Tangerang-Bekasi). A Transjabodetabek line was opened to connect Cawang, in south-east Jakarta, to Depok, on the southern fringes of the city. The route also served the strategic location of Cibubur Junction, which services many passengers commuting to Jakarta for work. Minibus routes were adversely affected by this BRT extension, and drivers were concerned about the visible decrease in passengers.

No violence occurred this time, but the drivers urged the government to prevent Transjabodetabek from stopping at Cibubur on its way to Depok. At the end of 2016, the Jakarta government had no choice but to declare a moratorium on BRT operation in order to ease the tension. The Transjabodetabek service eventually resumed in late January 2017, following an agreement to reduce the BRT fleet. At the same time, the minibus route became a feeder route for the Transjabodetabek, avoiding crossover with the BRT line. However, it is unclear whether this will provide a lasting solution to these tensions.

Regulating the unplanned

Transport planning in Jakarta has traditionally been very short sighted, leading to the rise of minibuses and the subsequent need to regulate them. Minibuses first became prominent in Jakarta in 1954, following the national government's decision to replace trams with buses after it nationalised the tram company, which then became the state-owned Jakarta Public Transport Corporation (Perusahaan Pengangkutan Djakarta, PPD). However, PPD was not able to meet Jakarta's mobility needs due to an inadequate number of buses. Economist and urban studies expert, Howard Dick noted in 1981 that this led to a boom in minibus services (opelet, bemo and omprengan), operated by small-scale entrepreneurs. In the 1970s, the Jakarta government supported the operation of medium-sized buses by creating two umbrella organizations, PT Metro Mini and Kopaja, to accommodate organisation amongst these entrepreneurs.

As the Jakarta population continued to grow, the transportation system became increasingly unwieldy. Authorities tried to rein in the industry with an attempt to integrate the different systems, as well as address safety and quality concerns. Starting from 1980, Governor Tjokropranolo ordered the opelet operators to replace their obsolete vehicles with minivans, known as 'mikrolet'. The modernisation not only introduced new vehicles but also the new names: opelet became mikrolet, omprengan became 'KWK minivans' and bemo became 'bemo-successor minibuses' (APB). Incorporation occurred in the 1990s, when the Jakarta government requested minibus operators, which previously ran their business independently, to form corporations to make it easier for government to oversee them.

These policies only partially succeeded in improving the transportation system due to half-hearted enforcement by the government. The incorporation policy also failed because even though minibus entrepreneurs joined the corporations, in reality they kept running their businesses as individuals. Joining the corporation was merely a legal requirement for obtaining an operating permit. Owners recruited drivers, maintained their vehicles and ran the businesses in their own way. Consequently, the government could not control the quality of services provided by thousands of small private operators.

Current integration endeavours

Transjakarta, launched in 2004, led to a dual public transport system. On one side was the minibus milieu, relying mostly on small-scale entrepreneurs and deeply embedded in the city through its complex system of routes. On the other side was the BRT, an integrated system that was tightly controlled by the local government through a set of public-private contracts. For about a decade, the two sides coexisted and competed, with increasing frictions due to gradual encroachments by the BRT on minibus routes.

In 2012, the idea of integrating the BRT and the minibuses within a single coherent network was put forward by experts from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP). The idea was to use minibuses as a complement to the BRT, to service peripheral areas or neighbourhoods that had not yet been equipped with BRT stations and dedicated lanes, or that could not accommodate such infrastructure due to their narrow streets. The Jakarta government saw this plan as a way of avoiding future conflicts with

minibus operators.

In 2016, the Kopaja medium-sized-bus fleet became part of the Transjakarta network. They provided feeder services that extended the range of the BRT and were entitled to use the Transjakarta dedicated lanes. Bus ownership remained individual, but both owners and drivers were paid by the BRT operator – PT Transjakarta – based on the distance the buses travelled rather than the amount of passengers they carried. Yet the main condition for joining Transjakarta was a refurbishment of the fleet, and many owners could not afford that, nor access loans to pay for it. Many remained stuck in the old system, and excluded from Transjakarta infrastructures.

Another case was the integration scheme proposed by the Koperasi Wahana Kalpika for some of its routes in early 2017. At first sight, their plan seemed more inclusive. Once they alighted at a peripheral terminal during peak hours, Transjakarta passengers were given unlimited access to KWK minivans, using a 'Friend of KWK' card that they could buy each month from Transjakarta counters. The revenue generated by the subscriptions was used by Transjakarta to pay KWK and its members and owners. In return, the minivans had to cut off the section of their former route that competed with the BRT.

The deal was intended to be fair to all the minibus owners who joined the system and ensure that their daily income met minimum thresholds. However, drivers themselves were not included in the deal and remained subject to the wages set by individual vehicle owners, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Many drivers experienced a significant decrease in earnings, especially on routes that had previously been very lucrative, but were now undermined by Transjakarta routes. The integration system seems to unfairly impact on drivers, who can keep their jobs but have to work under new conditions that are far less advantageous than in the past.

In the age of mass transport, minibus enterprises have been ignored; seen as the embodiment of an archaic city and a barrier to modernisation. Nevertheless, the recent policies seem to be more pragmatic, since the local government has accepted the reality of a hybrid transport system. However, should the government wish to consolidate into a single, centralised transportation structure, the future status of minibus owners and drivers would remain precarious and uncertain.

Rémi Desmoulière (remi.desmouliere@inalco.fr) is a PhD candidate at the Center for Social Studies on Africa, America and Asia (CESSMA) at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations (INALCO) in Paris.

Fariz Panghegar (farizpanghegar@gmail.com) is a researcher at Cakra Wikara Indonesia.

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