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Recommended Citation
Lee, Brice Tseen Fu; Asihaer, Ayidana; and Sims, Juan Pablo (2024) "The Role of Mayors in Achieving Brunei Darussalam’s Wawasan 2035, Lessons from China,” Journal of Strategic and Global Studies: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 6.
DOI: 10.7454/jsgs.v7i1.1141
Available at: https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/jsgs/vol7/iss1/6

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The Role of Mayors in Achieving Brunei Darussalam’s Wawasan 2035, Lessons from China

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ABSTRACT

Brunei Darussalam's national vision, WAWASAN 2035, sets forth ambitious goals for the nation's development, emphasizing a centralized governance paradigm. However, the potential of decentralized governance, as exemplified by China's mayor-led districts, offers a compelling model for achieving national aspirations. This research explores the feasibility and potential benefits of introducing mayors in Brunei's districts, drawing insights from China's successful decentralized governance structure. By fostering inter-district competition and allowing for localized policy tailoring, Brunei can enhance its adaptability and responsiveness to local nuances. Drawing from China's experiences, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Brunei might optimize its governance structure to more effectively realize the goals enshrined in WAWASAN 2035.

Keywords: Brunei Darussalam; WAWASAN 2035; Decentralized governance; China; Mayor-led districts; Inter-district competition; Policy tailoring; Localized governance; National vision; Developmental aspirations

1. Introduction

In the realm of governance, the debate between centralized and decentralized models is a topic of significant academic and policy interest. Brunei Darussalam's national vision, WAWASAN 2035, serves as a prime example of a centralized governance approach. This vision, aiming to elevate Brunei to developed country status, is deeply rooted in a centralized framework that provides a unified direction for national development. While centralized governance offers consistency and a cohesive narrative, it often faces challenges in adaptability and responsiveness to specific local needs (Fitrani et al., 2005; Yapa, 2014).

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Contrastingly, the People's Republic of China offers an insightful case study in decentralized governance. Over recent decades, China has undergone a significant shift from a highly centralized system to empowering local leadership, particularly mayors, thereby fostering a competitive environment among its districts. This approach, characterized by localized decision-making and inter-district competition, has been pivotal in driving China’s economic growth, fostering innovation, and enhancing grassroots governance (Wu, 2016; Liu & Xu, 2018). The success of China's model, with its increased political competition, public accountability, and reduced political instability, demonstrates the potential benefits of decentralization in fostering broader developmental transitions (Faguet, 2014).

Currently, Brunei does not have a system of mayors governing its districts, presenting an opportunity to explore how the introduction of such roles could benefit the country. This research aims to explore the potential advantages of introducing a decentralized governance structure in Brunei, specifically by instituting mayors in its districts. By drawing insights from China's successful decentralized governance model, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Brunei might optimize its governance structure to more effectively realize the goals of WAWASAN 2035. The choice of China as a model is particularly relevant given its transition from a centralized to a decentralized system, offering valuable lessons for Brunei as it considers similar reforms to achieve its national aspirations.

WAWASAN 2035, or Vision 2035, is Brunei Darussalam's ambitious roadmap that seeks to transform the nation into a developed country recognized for the accomplishments of its well-educated and highly skilled people, the quality of life, and a dynamic and sustainable economy (Wawasan 2035, n.d.). This vision is anchored in three primary goals:

1) Educated, Highly Skilled, and Accomplished People: WAWASAN 2035 emphasizes the importance of human capital development. The vision aspires for Brunei to have a first-class education system, ensuring that its citizens are equipped with 21st-century skills and knowledge.

2) High Quality of Life: Beyond economic metrics, WAWASAN 2035 aspires for its citizens to enjoy a high standard of living. This encompasses a healthy nation, access to high-quality public utilities and infrastructure, and a clean and green environment.

3) A Dynamic and Sustainable Economy: Recognizing the challenges of over-reliance on oil and gas, WAWASAN 2035 aims to diversify Brunei's economy. The vision
seeks to achieve high sustainable growth, diversify its sectors and revenue base, and ensure macroeconomic stability.

In essence, WAWASAN 2035 is not just a vision but a commitment to ensuring a prosperous and sustainable future for Brunei. It encapsulates the nation's aspirations and provides a clear direction for its developmental journey. However, the realization of this vision requires an optimal governance structure that can effectively navigate the challenges and harness the opportunities of the 21st century (Wawasan 2035, n.d.).

2. Literature Review

Brunei Darussalam's national vision, WAWASAN 2035, is a testament to the nation's centralized governance approach. This vision, which outlines the country's aspirations to achieve developed nation status, is rooted in a centralized framework, ensuring a unified developmental trajectory for the nation (Yapa, 2014). Such a centralized governance model, while providing policy coherence and a singular developmental narrative, can also face challenges in terms of adaptability and responsiveness to local nuances (Fitrani, Hofman, & Kaiser, 2005).

The centralized nature of governance, as exemplified by WAWASAN 2035, has implications for the nation's developmental trajectory. While centralized governance can provide policy coherence and ensure alignment with national objectives, it may also face challenges in terms of adaptability to local contexts and responsiveness to grassroots needs (Yapa, 2014). Additionally, centralized models, while beneficial in terms of policy coherence, may also limit the scope for adopting strategic policies tailored to specific regional or local needs (Tisdell, 1998). On the other hand, centralized governance can be beneficial in terms of effectiveness and credibility, as seen in other contexts such as the governance system in Malaysia (Hamza, 2013).

The emergence of city-region governance in China is a response to economic decentralization, inter-city competition, and uncoordinated development, driven by the state to foster regional competitiveness (Wu, 2016). Furthermore, the relationship between urbanization and economic growth varies across different regions in China, with urbanization causing economic growth in most regions (Liu et al., 2015). Wilson (2015) suggests that improvements in formal governance have not been a key factor driving China’s rapid growth; instead, the observed positive association between governance and growth reflects the ability
of provincial governments to harness the potential created by economic growth to implement subsequent governance improvements.

Jalil, Feridun, and Sawhney (2014) indicate a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between fiscal decentralization and economic growth in most provinces in China. Ding (2007) also found that fiscal decentralization significantly contributes to economic growth in China. Moreover, the relationship between urbanization and economic growth varies across different regions in China, with fiscal decentralization playing a significant role (Yang, 2016).

Extreme heterogeneity in endowments, factor immobility, and the endogenous deterioration of local governance institutions can each undermine the supposed development-enhancing promises of decentralized government in emerging economies (Pepinsky & Wihardja, 2011). Furthermore, the politics of redevelopment in China's fast urbanizing cities are not solely defined by local entrepreneurial governance, but also by changing national political mandates, reflecting a governance mode of "state entrepreneurialism" to achieve extra-economic objectives through market instruments (Zhang et al., 2023).

Decentralization can enhance governance by fostering political competition, bolstering public accountability, motivation and reducing political instability. These factors can catalyze the broad historical transitions that epitomize development (Faguet, 2014; Lee & Sims 2023). Furthermore, decentralization, when combined with pro-poor national policies, can pave the way for local governments to innovate and more effectively address the needs of the underprivileged (Ghosh & Kamath, 2012). Such a perspective underscores the potential of local leadership in expediting the realization of national visions like WAWASAN 2035.

The dynamics of decentralization have shown that while it can empower local governments to establish effective, efficient, and accountable structures, it can also reinforce traditional power structures and even lead to the emergence of new ones (Porio, 2012). This dual-edged nature of decentralization highlights the importance of policy competition between regions or districts in achieving overarching national objectives. The importance of decentralization in governance, as discussed in various academic studies, offers valuable insights for Brunei as it seeks to achieve the goals of WAWASAN 2035. The research by Capano (2020) underscores the significance of political capacity in decision-making and policy implementation, suggesting that a decentralized form of government can enhance state capacity. This is
particularly relevant for Brunei, where increased state capacity could facilitate more effective realization of its national vision.

Betts et al. (2020) emphasize the crucial role of mayors in implementing national policies and adopting supplementary policies at the municipal level. This highlights the potential benefits of introducing mayoral roles in Brunei’s districts, allowing for more localized and responsive policy implementation that aligns with the overarching goals of WAWASAN 2035. Myeong & Jung (2019) and Fatoni (2020) point to the advantages of administrative and fiscal decentralization in reducing corruption and enhancing transparency and accountability in government financial management. For Brunei, adopting such measures could lead to more efficient and transparent governance, contributing to the nation's economic sustainability and public trust.

Singla & Stone (2018) and Elliott (2023) further reinforce the benefits of decentralized governance, including improved financial conditions of state governments, increased citizen involvement, and reduced operational costs. These aspects are crucial for Brunei in fostering a more participatory governance model and ensuring efficient use of resources. Puig et al. (2020) discuss the demand for equity and efficiency in local public services and the role of decentralized governance in enhancing information and incentives provided by central governments. For Brunei, this implies that decentralization could lead to more equitable and efficient public services, tailored to the specific needs of different districts, thereby enhancing overall national development.

Decentralized governance has been linked to economic growth in various contexts. For instance, China's decentralized governance approach, which represents a new structure within its traditionally centralized system, has been posited as a potential model for governance innovation (Tan & Zhou, 2015). Moreover, the relationship between decentralization and well-being is nuanced, with the benefits of political decentralization being significantly influenced by the quality of national governance (Rodríguez-Pose & Tselios, 2019). These insights provide a foundation for understanding the correlation between decentralized governance, economic growth, and innovation in the context of WAWASAN 2035's goals.

In summary, the body of research on decentralized governance presents a compelling case for Brunei to consider such a model as part of its strategy to achieve the objectives of WAWASAN 2035. By adopting a decentralized approach, Brunei could enhance state
capacity, improve financial management, increase transparency and accountability, and ensure more equitable and efficient public services, all of which are integral to realizing its national vision.

The Chinese model of decentralized governance is particularly important and relevant for Brunei. China's experience demonstrates how decentralization, coupled with policy experimentation and implementation at the local level, can drive significant economic growth. This approach has allowed China to tailor policies to the unique needs of its diverse regions, fostering innovation and responsiveness that have been key to its development success.

For Brunei, which currently does not have a system of mayors, the Chinese model offers valuable lessons. The introduction of mayors and the adoption of a more decentralized governance structure could enable Brunei to manage its districts more effectively, taking into account their distinct resources and challenges. This would not only align with the principles of good governance but also provide a framework for localized policy experimentation and implementation. Such a system would allow for the testing of innovative approaches to development, economic diversification, and public service delivery, tailored to the specific contexts of Brunei's districts.

By learning from China's experience, Brunei can harness the potential of decentralized governance to achieve the goals set out in WAWASAN 2035. This includes fostering economic growth, enhancing the quality of education and public services, and ensuring sustainable development. The adoption of this model could be a pivotal step in Brunei's journey towards becoming a developed nation, as envisioned in its national strategy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The methodology for this study is rooted in a qualitative research paradigm, with a primary focus on a systematic and exhaustive review of extant literature. The intention is to delve deep into the nuances of the subject matter, drawing from a rich tapestry of scholarly works, policy documents, and empirical studies.
3.2. Sampling Strategy

The literature selection process will be both purposive and criterion based. This ensures that the materials chosen for review are not only of high academic rigor but are also directly pertinent to the research objectives. A multi-step approach will be employed:

1) Initial Screening: Preliminary screening of databases and repositories to identify potential literature sources based on keywords and abstracts.
2) In-depth Review: A closer examination of shortlisted materials to assess their relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to the field.
3) Final Selection: Prioritizing peer-reviewed articles, seminal works, and authoritative policy documents that offer the most comprehensive insights into the topics of interest.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The chosen literature will be subjected to a multi-layered analytical process:

1) Descriptive Synthesis: This initial phase involves mapping out the overarching themes, patterns, and narratives present in the literature. It provides a holistic view of the prevailing discourse and sets the stage for deeper analysis.
2) Comparative Analysis: Here, the focus will be on juxtaposing the governance models of Brunei and China, identifying parallels, contrasts, and potential lessons.
3) Policy Implication Analysis: This critical phase will delve into the potential policy ramifications of introducing decentralized governance structures in Brunei, drawing heavily from China's experiences and the broader theoretical underpinnings of decentralization.

The culmination of these analytical steps will provide a robust and comprehensive understanding of the research subject, ensuring that the findings are both academically rigorous and policy-relevant.
4. Results

4.1. China’s Success with Decentralization and Relevance to WAWASAN 2035

4.1.1. Economic Growth and WAWASAN 2035

China's fiscal decentralization has been identified as a significant contributor to its economic growth. Fiscal decentralization in China has been found to significantly contribute to economic growth, aligning with the theoretical prediction that it can increase economic efficiency (Ding, 2007). This growth trajectory is further supported by studies such as that by Lin and Liu (2000), which highlighted that fiscal decentralization in China has increased the growth rate of per capita GDP at the province level.

Moreover, an inverted U-shaped relationship between the degree of decentralization and the growth of the secondary sector has been observed, suggesting that fast-growing provinces benefit from appropriate decentralization but may experience negative effects when the degree of decentralization becomes excessively high which is why a controlled decentralization process is needed as too much decentralization would lead to a loss of power or control from the centralized government which means that controlled decentralization in itself has many benefits. (Yang, 2016).

Considering Brunei’s WAWASAN 2035 goals, particularly the objective of achieving a dynamic and sustainable economy, insights from China's experience with fiscal decentralization as well as in terms of policy experimentation from individual districts and province can offer valuable lessons as policies or strategies between each district or region could be analyzed on an annual or biannual basis in order to implement best practices. The positive correlation between decentralization and economic growth in China suggests potential avenues for Brunei to explore in its pursuit of WAWASAN 2035's economic aspirations.

4.2. China’s Success with Decentralization and Relevance to WAWASAN 2035

4.2.1. Economic Growth and WAWASAN 2035

China's mounting innovation efforts have, at times, materialized in cutting-edge innovations, suggesting a potential for rapid buildup of innovation capabilities (Altenburg, Schnitz, & Stamm, 2008). This aligns with the aspirations of WAWASAN 2035, which emphasizes the importance of innovation and development. The transition of China from factor-driven to innovation-driven development has been marked by challenges, but the emphasis on
innovation has been vital for its growth model (Wu, 2011). Such insights can provide implications for Brunei’s WAWASAN 2035 goals, especially in the context of achieving sustainable economic growth.

4.2.2. Innovation, Development, and WAWASAN 2035

The trajectory of China’s innovation policies has had a significant impact on its global patenting activities, reflecting an innovation reality closer to the most developed areas of the world (Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie, 2016). Moreover, China’s emphasis on innovative human capital suggests that its economic development will eventually support environmental sustainability (Lin et al., 2021). These innovative activities and their alignment with sustainable development goals offer insights into how Brunei can align its innovation strategies with the aspirations of WAWASAN 2035.

4.2.3. Governance Improvements and WAWASAN 2035

China’s trajectory of development has been characterized by a unique blend of rapid economic and societal opening juxtaposed against a more gradual political opening. This has resulted in a pro-growth authoritarian governance model that, while fostering economic growth, has sometimes been at odds with the protection of individual rights and the mitigation of social grievances (Lai, 2010). Despite these challenges, there is evidence to suggest that improvements in formal governance in China have not been primarily driven by a desire for growth. Instead, the positive association between governance and growth in China reflects the ability of provincial governments to harness the potential created by economic growth to implement subsequent governance improvements (Wilson, 2015).

In the context of Brunei’s WAWASAN 2035, these findings from China offer valuable insights. The emphasis on economic diversification and sustainable growth in WAWASAN 2035 aligns with the lessons from China’s experience. The potential for governance improvements, as seen in China, could significantly inform Brunei’s approach to achieving its vision. By drawing parallels between China’s governance improvements and the objectives of WAWASAN 2035, Brunei can identify potential strategies and pitfalls to avoid in its journey towards realizing its national vision.
4.3. Potential Model for Brunei and WAWASAN 2035

The aspiration of Brunei to achieve the goals outlined in WAWASAN 2035 necessitates a thorough examination of successful governance models that can be adapted to its unique context. China's economic and governance trajectory offers a compelling case study in this regard. Over the past few decades, China has embarked on a transformative journey, leveraging decentralized governance to spur economic growth and development (Yu et al., 2018). This decentralized approach, characterized by the empowerment of local governments and fostering competition among districts, has been instrumental in driving innovation, improving governance, and achieving sustainable economic outcomes (Tan et al., 2020).

The argument for benchmarking the WAWASAN 2035 outlook with China's economic growth due to decentralization is rooted in the significant impact that China's governance model has had on its economic development. The introduction of a more decentralized form of government in China, which allowed mayors to experiment with policies, implement innovative strategies, and promote best practices, has been a key factor in its remarkable economic growth. This model of governance has enabled local leaders to tailor their approaches to the unique needs and opportunities of their regions, leading to more effective and efficient governance.

If Brunei can adopt a similar approach by introducing mayoral roles and fostering a competitive yet collaborative environment among its districts, it might be able to replicate some of China's successes. By allowing for policy experimentation and the implementation of best practices at the local level, Brunei could potentially accelerate its progress towards achieving the ambitious goals set out in WAWASAN 2035. This would involve a strategic shift towards more localized governance, enabling Brunei to harness the unique strengths and resources of each district, thereby contributing to the nation's overall development and prosperity.

For Brunei, adapting elements of China's governance model could provide a strategic roadmap to realize the objectives of WAWASAN 2035. The alignment of China's economic growth due to decentralization with WAWASAN 2035's economic aspirations suggests potential avenues for Brunei to harness similar strategies (Yu et al., 2018). Moreover, the role of mayors and district-level competition in China's governance model underscores the significance of local leadership and policy competition in achieving national visions (Tan et
al., 2020). By drawing insights from China's experience, Brunei could craft a tailored approach to decentralization, fostering inter-district competition and empowering local leaders to drive the nation towards the goals of WAWASAN 2035.

4.3.1. Introducing Mayors in Brunei's Districts

In the current state of Brunei Darussalam, it is worth mentioning again that there are no Mayors in Brunei Darussalam as most policies as well as the implementation of it is done by the central government through a centralized government model. The concept of introducing mayors in local governance structures is not novel and has been implemented in various contexts globally. In many instances, mayors play a pivotal role in mediating the implementation of national policies and sometimes adopt supplementary policies at the municipal level, which can be more or less proactive or restrictive than central-government policy (Betts et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2023). Such local leadership can significantly influence the trajectory of regional development and the realization of national visions.

In the context of Brunei's WAWASAN 2035, the introduction of mayors in each of its four districts could potentially serve as a catalyst for more localized and tailored approaches to achieving the vision's goals. Drawing from the experience of other nations, mayors can increase governance capacity through informal means, and if they do, they often also enhance strategic capacity (Gissendanner, 2004). Such an enhancement in governance capacity could be instrumental in Brunei's pursuit of the WAWASAN 2035 objectives.

Moreover, the potential for policy competition between districts, each led by a mayor, could foster an environment of innovation and best practice sharing. As observed in China, districts with longer exposure to certain governance styles, such as those led by mayors from old regimes, can experience varied governance outcomes, influencing political competition and elite persistence (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2017). By introducing mayors in Brunei's districts, the nation could harness the benefits of localized leadership while ensuring alignment with the overarching goals of WAWASAN 2035.

4.3.2. Inter-District Competition and WAWASAN 2035

The concept of inter-district competition has been explored in various contexts, shedding light on its potential implications for national visions like WAWASAN 2035. In the realm of urban governance, Basolo (2000) found that inter-city competition influences cities' strategic
decisions, suggesting that competition at the district level could similarly impact policy choices and strategies in Brunei. Moreover, Bessho and Terai (2011) highlighted that the value of industrial parks in a district is influenced by neighboring districts' activities, indicating the presence of inter-regional competition. This finding underscores the potential for Brunei's districts to influence one another in their pursuit of WAWASAN 2035's goals.

Furthermore, the role of competition in shaping electoral outcomes and voter turnout has been emphasized by Hogan (2003) and Blais and Lago (2009). While their focus is on electoral dynamics, the broader implication is that competition at the district level can drive engagement and mobilization, which could be harnessed to achieve national objectives. In the context of Brunei, fostering competition between its districts could serve as a catalyst for innovation, development, and the realization of WAWASAN 2035's goals. Drawing parallels from China's experience, where decentralized governance and district competition have spurred economic growth and governance improvements (Liu, 2017), Brunei could potentially benefit from a similar competitive framework.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that inter-district competition can play a pivotal role in driving development, innovation, and the realization of national visions. For Brunei, fostering such competition could be instrumental in achieving the aspirations outlined in WAWASAN 2035.

5. Discussion

In the realm of governance, the implications of decentralization have been a subject of extensive scholarly debate. The potential benefits of decentralization, particularly in the context of achieving national visions like WAWASAN 2035, are manifold. One of the primary advantages is the enhancement of governance by increasing political competition, public accountability, and reducing political instability, which can significantly aid in the broad historical transitions that define development (Faguet, 2014). However, the dividends of decentralization in terms of 'good governance' have been observed to be limited in certain contexts, which allows the formation of respective leaders to potentially deviate from the intended goals. This is why strict control from the centralized government is still needed in order to monitor progress and prevent corruption and power taking. Such oversight ensures that the decentralization process aligns with national objectives and ethical standards, while also safeguarding against the misuse of authority at the local level. This balanced approach
can help maintain the integrity of the governance system while allowing for the benefits of localized leadership and decision-making (Makara, 2018).

The Chinese governance system offers a unique blend of political centralization and decentralization of economic power. This system has been characterized by career incentives promoting growth at the local level and the ability to make long-term decisions swiftly and was also able to function independently with various policy implementation even during the pandemic (Bardhan, 2020; Demeure & Lee, 2023). However, the success of such a model is contingent on various factors, including the quality of national governance. For instance, the benefits of political decentralization are highly mediated by the quality of national governance which could lead to various innovation in various districts or cities (Rodríguez-Pose & Tselios, 2019; Ouyang et al., 2023).

In the context of Brunei and its WAWASAN 2035, the findings suggest that while there are potential benefits to be reaped from a decentralized governance model, careful consideration of the socio-political context is crucial. The governance reforms in Brunei, as observed in the past, have been influenced by various actors, with the royal family playing a dominant role (Yapa, 2014). Thus, any move towards decentralization would require a nuanced approach that takes into account the unique political and cultural landscape of the country as Brunei Darussalam is an absolute monarchy. However, it is worth noting that Brunei Darussalam has currently implemented a larger version of localized governance through its ministers who are in charge of various areas. While Brunei Darussalam is an absolute monarchy, the introduction of mayors does not detract from the monarchy's power. Instead, it allows for more effective management at the local level, as different districts have different resources and needs. This system would complement the existing governance structure by providing focused, district-level leadership that can respond more directly and efficiently to local challenges and opportunities.

The pursuit of national visions, such as Brunei's WAWASAN 2035, often requires a multifaceted approach to governance. The vision encapsulated in WAWASAN 2035 is ambitious, aiming for an educated and skilled population, a high quality of life, and a dynamic and sustainable economy. Achieving these goals necessitates a governance system that is responsive, adaptive, and innovative. Drawing from the Chinese model of decentralized governance, introducing mayors in Brunei's districts could offer several advantages that align with the aspirations of WAWASAN 2035. Firstly, local leadership, as
seen in China, can be more attuned to the specific needs and challenges of their respective districts. This localized understanding can lead to tailored strategies that address unique district-level issues, thereby contributing to the broader goal of an educated, skilled, and accomplished populace.

Furthermore, inter-district competition, spurred by decentralized governance, can catalyze innovation and efficiency in public service delivery. Such competition can drive districts to excel in areas like education, infrastructure, and healthcare, directly contributing to WAWASAN 2035’s goal of ensuring a high quality of life for its citizens. Economically, a decentralized system can foster an environment conducive to private sector growth and diversification. By allowing districts the autonomy to formulate and implement economic policies tailored to their strengths, Brunei can accelerate its journey towards a diversified and sustainable economy, a core tenet of WAWASAN 2035. The Chinese experience has shown that local leaders, when incentivized correctly, can be catalysts for economic innovation and growth.

However, while the potential benefits are significant, the transition to a decentralized governance model in Brunei would require careful planning and consideration. The cultural, historical, and political context of Brunei is distinct from that of China. Therefore, while lessons can be drawn, they must be adapted to fit Brunei’s unique context. Therefore, the introduction of mayors in Brunei’s districts, inspired by China’s decentralized governance model, could offer a strategic pathway to realizing the goals of WAWASAN 2035. By fostering local leadership and inter-district competition, Brunei can harness the benefits of tailored governance, innovation, and economic growth, all of which align with the nation’s vision for 2035.

The pursuit of national visions often requires a delicate balance between centralized planning and localized execution. While centralized visions provide a unified direction, the nuances of local contexts often necessitate tailored strategies for effective realization. Brunei Darussalam's WAWASAN 2035, a vision of holistic national development, presents an opportunity to explore the potential benefits of localized governance. Drawing lessons from China's decentralized governance model, this analysis delves into how introducing mayors in Brunei’s districts might offer a strategic advantage in achieving the goals of WAWASAN 2035.
5.1. Educated, Highly Skilled, and Accomplished People

Localized Education Initiatives: As observed in China's decentralized governance model, local leaders have the autonomy to tailor policies to their region's specific needs (Bardhan, 2020). By introducing mayors in Brunei's districts, there can be a more customized approach to education, addressing unique district-level challenges. This mirrors China's approach where local governance has been instrumental in educational reforms tailored to regional needs.

Promotion of Lifelong Learning: Drawing from the literature, decentralized governance structures, like those in China, have shown a propensity for more grassroots-level initiatives (Zhang, 2019). Mayors in Brunei can champion district-specific lifelong learning initiatives, ensuring educational opportunities extend beyond formal schooling.

Engagement with Educational Institutions: With closer ties to local communities, mayors can foster partnerships with educational institutions, aligning curricula with local industry needs and the broader objectives of WAWASAN 2035.

5.2. High Quality of Life

Infrastructure and Public Services: The literature suggests that local leaders in decentralized systems can prioritize infrastructure projects based on specific district needs (Li & Zhou, 2005). Mayors in Brunei can adopt a similar approach, ensuring that public services are tailored to their district's demographics and challenges.

Safety and Security: As observed in China, local governance structures can respond more agilely to safety and security concerns (Chen & Zhou, 2007). A mayor in Brunei can ensure a more localized approach to these issues, addressing district-specific challenges promptly.

Environmental Initiatives: Decentralized governance often allows for more tailored environmental initiatives (Rodríguez-Pose & Tselios, 2019). In Brunei, mayors can champion environmental projects specific to their district's unique environmental challenges and strengths.

5.3. A Dynamic and Sustainable Economy

Tailored Economic Strategies: Drawing from China's experience, local leaders in decentralized systems can craft economic policies that cater to their district's strengths
(Bardhan, 2020). Similarly, mayors in Brunei can focus on economic strategies that leverage their district's unique assets.

Promotion of Local Businesses: The literature underscores the role of local leaders in promoting businesses within their jurisdictions (Li & Zhou, 2005). Mayors in Brunei can provide the necessary support to local enterprises, fostering economic growth and diversification.

Engagement with External Investors: As observed in China, decentralized governance structures can actively engage with external investors, showcasing unique district-level opportunities (Zhang, 2019; Sims et al., 2023). Mayors in Brunei can adopt a similar approach, attracting investment that aligns with WAWASAN 2035.

In essence, the introduction of mayors in Brunei's districts, inspired by China's decentralized governance model, can offer a multi-pronged approach to achieving the aspirations of WAWASAN 2035. By allowing for tailored strategies that address district-specific challenges and leverage local strengths, Brunei can ensure a more nuanced and effective path towards its national vision. As the nation progresses towards 2035, considering such localized governance structures might be pivotal in ensuring that the journey is not only visionary but also adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of each district.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary

The research embarked on an exploration of the potential benefits of introducing mayors in Brunei's districts, drawing inspiration from China's decentralized governance model. China's success in spurring economic growth, fostering innovation, and enhancing local governance through decentralized governance offers a compelling case for Brunei. The centralized nature of Brunei's WAWASAN 2035, while visionary, might benefit from a more localized approach to governance to address district-specific challenges and opportunities.

6.2. Policy Recommendations for Implementing Decentralized Governance in Brunei:

1) Legislative Support:

- Framework Development: Establish a comprehensive legislative framework that clearly delineates the roles, responsibilities, and powers of district mayors. This should
encompass their authority in decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation.

- **Resource Allocation:** Ensure that the legislative framework provides mayors with access to both financial and non-financial resources, enabling them to execute their roles effectively.

- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Integrate checks and balances within the framework to ensure that mayors remain accountable to both the central government and their local constituents.

2) **Capacity Building:**

- **Training Programs:** Develop and implement rigorous training programs tailored for potential mayors, focusing on leadership, strategic planning, and policy formulation in line with WAWASAN 2035's objectives.

- **Continuous Learning:** Establish ongoing learning and development initiatives, ensuring that mayors remain updated with global best practices and emerging trends in governance.

- **Mentorship and Peer Learning:** Facilitate mentorship programs where experienced leaders, both from within Brunei and internationally, can guide and advise new mayors.

3) **Inter-District Collaboration:**

- **Collaborative Platforms:** Create platforms, such as inter-district councils or forums, where mayors can collaborate, share insights, and jointly strategize on issues of mutual concern.

- **Best Practice Repository:** Develop a centralized repository where districts can document and share successful initiatives, allowing other districts to learn from and replicate these successes.

- **Joint Initiatives:** Encourage districts to undertake joint projects, especially for challenges that transcend district boundaries, ensuring a coordinated and unified approach.

4) **Feedback and Evaluation:**

- **Performance Metrics:** Establish clear performance metrics aligned with WAWASAN 2035's goals, allowing for the objective evaluation of each district's progress.

- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Create avenues for citizens to provide feedback on district-level initiatives, ensuring that policies remain responsive to local needs.

- **Annual Reviews:** Conduct annual reviews of each district's performance, using the insights to refine strategies and provide targeted support where needed.

5) **Incentivization and Recognition:**

• Reward Systems: Introduce reward systems that recognize and incentivize districts that showcase exemplary performance in aligning with WAWASAN 2035's goals.

• Public Recognition: Publicly acknowledge high-performing districts, fostering a sense of pride and encouraging other districts to emulate their success.

By adopting these policy recommendations, Brunei can create a robust decentralized governance structure, ensuring that the aspirations of WAWASAN 2035 are realized in a manner that is both effective and reflective of local nuances.

6.3. Concluding Remarks

Brunei Darussalam is at a transformative crossroads, with WAWASAN 2035 charting a visionary path towards holistic national development. As the nation seeks to translate this vision into tangible outcomes, there's much to glean from China's decentralized governance model. By introducing mayors in each of Brunei's districts, a unique governance structure can be established where centralized planning meets localized implementation. This approach allows for the central government to set overarching objectives while empowering district mayors to tailor strategies, fostering policy competition at the grassroots level. Such competition can lead to innovative solutions, with the most effective practices potentially being scaled up or adopted by the central government. Moreover, this structure can create a feedback loop where the central government can reward districts that excel, further incentivizing performance and innovation. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are paramount in this model, ensuring that district-level initiatives align with the broader goals of WAWASAN 2035. As Brunei embarks on this ambitious journey, it's essential to recognize that while visions are charted centrally, their realization often requires adaptive, localized strategies. With careful planning, robust stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to iterative learning, Brunei stands poised to not only achieve but potentially exceed the aspirations set forth in WAWASAN 2035.

7. References


