

‘Indonesia: State and Society in Transition’ By Jemma Purdey, Antje Missbach and Dave McRae

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INDONESIA

State & Society in Transition



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The Introduction to this new publication poses the question whether Indonesia can be considered 'underrated'. Accepting this proposition for the moment, then there is no doubt that any comprehensive and high-quality publication is a welcome addition. This volume is certainly both those things. The topics covered are wide-ranging in time and subject, but this is appropriate given the importance of Indonesia to the region and global affairs. The authors are authoritative and their contributions up-to-date and nuanced.

All nations are of course always in some state of transition; the only question is from where and where to! Indonesia is most definitely a 'democracy in transition' and also a transition economy. Most importantly, the way the topics are presented in this book seem to also try to show that in every "transition" we need to think of how changes affect the population and their cultural tradition, lives and practices across the archipelago. Transition from pre-independence to colonial administration and to the revolutionary period, from old order to new order and then to democracy. This all has, of course, led not only to the way government and institutions work now, but also how people perceive their citizenship. It is striking in retrospect how many big elements of transformation, including violence, have been part of the various transitions that have been underway.

Nonetheless we need to remember that the critical reform moment - the collapse of the government led by Suharto - is already more than 20 years ago. So, while 'transition' probably applies in a technical sense, let's not lose sight of the substantial achievement of making that transition, first, and consolidating successfully the mechanics of democratic process, second.

Much recent commentary has focused on the question of whether democratic reform is in regression. This analysis rests in large part on the successful reversal of the 'neo-authoritarian' tag. It was originally applied to the Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto in domestic political commentary, but has come full circle to become a label for the reformist Joko Widodo, twice elected in relatively close national elections. There is no doubt that the national political debate is often

heavily influenced by certain trends, whether they be ‘old order’ mindsets, conservative religious values, or simply the (worldwide) shift to populism. However, a close reading of this volume shows that there is much to be considered when seeking to make a judgment about Indonesia today.

The chapter on the Old Order and New Order regimes (terms coined by Suharto to describe his regime in contrast with that of his predecessor Sukarno) demonstrates not only the struggle required to build a new model of governance including a party-political system, but also how Indonesia emerged onto the international scene. During the 1950s, the new country was already aspiring to play a leading role among those countries becoming free of colonial power. The struggle among political parties during this period demonstrates perhaps that contemporary political manouvering is not a recent phenomenon. We also see here too the role of military and of ethnic Chinese business interests in Indonesia’s economy, again a reminder how issues of current social, economic and political concern have been present for some time. It was during the New Order that the deepening authoritarianism and repressive militaristic style of governance took place.

Indonesia’s more contemporary transitions were initiated by President B.J Habibie in 1998 who laid the foundation for political and economic reform introducing a democratic party system, decentralisation, and a shift in civil-military relations. The discussion of reform era in this book covers a wide range of issues from a robust civil society movement (including women’s rights and religious based movements), economic reform, and educational reform. It also included new freedoms that allowed citizens to openly demand the government address past human rights violation: Papua, Aceh, Tanjung Priok, the case of Munir, as well as violence against women, the rights of LGBTIQ communities, people with disabilities and those belonging to minority religious groups.

The book considers aspects of domestic politics as they interact with Indonesia’s place in the world, including its standing in ASEAN, and relations with major world powers and the Muslim world. In term of its relationship with the Muslim world, the

book suggests Indonesia's interest in Islam internationally fluctuates in line with the influence of Islamic politics at home. This may explain why many commentators are reluctant to openly critique the conservative turn in Indonesian politics, because its stance internationally as a Muslim global citizen generally appears relatively benign - this is probably a mistake. It is said, correctly, that relations with Australia are subject to the tyranny of proximity.

This edited volume does not contain a concluding chapter, but in the Introduction the authors appear to arrive at a position that supports the observation, originally from Singaporean academic and former diplomat Kishore Mhabubami, that Indonesia is underrated. This is because the data, summarised in the Introduction, seems to inevitably tend toward the conclusion that Indonesia has much to offer the region and wider world. Its sheer size alone dictates this finding, but it remains qualified with the finding, probably also inevitable, that much of its impact remains purely 'potential'.

The absence of a clear conclusion only reflects the reality that Indonesia needs to be seen as the sum of a number of dynamics, both internal and external. It is the product of these, and the adoption of simple catchphrases is not an appropriate response when trying to come to grips with the multiple factors at work.

Importantly this volume also reminds us of the humanity at the heart of the Indonesian experience. There are many labels (many 'isms') that can be applied across Indonesia's short modern history, but underneath all is a nation working out its identity and, inevitably, determining its particular destiny.