

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy (Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia)*, by Jamie Davidson.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 78.

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For observers of Southeast Asia’s politics, there is little doubt that Indonesia’s electoral democracy has shown resilience at a time when democracy is retreating elsewhere in region. The country successfully conducted one of the world’s largest free and fair elections in 2019 and President Joko Widodo, who ran on a more pluralist platform—at least compared to his rival—won. Yet, democracy is not only about elections, and the new government’s policies have shown traces of an “authoritarian” legacy. How can we make sense of the complexity of Indonesia’s democracy?

Jamie Davidson’s *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy* offers a comprehensive analysis and useful periodization of the country’s democratic trajectory over the past two decades. Indonesia, considered by observers as one of the most democratically “consolidated” nations in the region—although Davidson himself is averse to using the term (p. 4)—has certainly made some gains since the fall of the authoritarian regime in 1998; for example, by the introduction of regional autonomy and direct elections. However, the relatively young democracy continues to face challenges, some of which pertain to the endurance of elements of authoritarianism, as well as systemic corruption. This book does a good job elucidating these key developments.

The author begins with three core arguments. First, he states that Indonesia’s democracy looks strong in comparison to other countries’, yet much weaker when viewed up close (p. 2). Persistent corruption, collective violence, and growing sectarianism and military influence in the government illustrate some of the shortfalls. Second, in spite of such deficits, democracy should still be the yardstick to gauge the country’s performance. Davidson points out that the term “means different things to different people” and consequently draws a rather cautious conclusion that Indonesia’s democracy is “an unfinished process replete with conflicts over power, resources, ideas and institutions” (p. 4). Third, Indonesia’s current situation should not be evaluated using the framework of “change and continuities” vis-à-vis the New Order, because the past two decades were distinct enough to merit their own examination. Here, Davidson divides the post-Soeharto democratization into three periods: innovation; stagnation; and the current era of polarization.

The innovation period (1998–2004) was characterized by political reforms. Once the bedrock of the New Order regime, the army went back to the barracks, thereby relinquishing their notorious dual-function doctrine (*dwifungsi*), the Constitutional Court was established, and a big-bang decentralization was introduced to bolster good governance and relieve the government of financial burden (p. 10). Not emphasized in the book, however, is the fact that the latter’s hasty implementation was also precipitated by the fear of secessionism, especially as the state dealt with conflicts in Maluku, Aceh and West Papua—the conflicts mentioned in the “contra innovation” section. On the economy, the country was forced to agree to the International Monetary Fund’s conditionality measures (p. 14), such as efforts towards privatizing

state assets and protecting the markets from monopolies and predatory elites—some more successfully than others. Meanwhile, the society experienced its own dynamics with the rise of conservative Islam, primarily made possible by Soeharto's attempt at building a new support base in the early 1990s. When Islamist parties did not do well in the 1999 elections, Islamic conservatism expressed itself through militia activism and radicalism. Despite this, the Gus Dur administration made great strides by lifting the New Order ban on public displays of Chinese writings and recognizing Confucianism as an official religion (p. 22). Marginalized groups on the Outer Islands also experienced an "*adat* revival", stimulated by historical—at times, pre-Islamic—legacies and traditions.

In contrast, "fatigue and frustration" marked the stagnation period under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14), whose two terms greatly benefited from the commodity boom, but also witnessed political parties colluding "among themselves to write the rules of the game in their favour and to guard their access to lucrative state-controlled rents" (p. 25). The president was cautious and avoided making difficult decisions, prioritizing the status quo. As a result, political reforms stagnated and corruption worsened. Even Yudhoyono's own Democrat party became embroiled in a corruption scandal, which accounted for the president's ambivalence towards the Corruption Eradication Commission. Meanwhile, his macroeconomic performance indicated "missed opportunities" (p. 31) marked by the lack of incentive to introduce reforms to improve growth despite favourable economic attributes. Economic governance weakened as predatory interests impeded the efforts to restructure corrupt state companies. In general society, Islamic populism was on the rise, leading to physical attacks against religious minorities. Christian churches and Islamic groups such as the Ahmadiyah and the Shia suffered bouts of violence. LGBT communities were also targeted. The situation was worsened by Yudhoyono's inaction (p. 36). Meanwhile, the administrative proliferation, made possible by decentralization, fuelled the domination of some ethno-religious groups in specific territories and subsequently led to the politicization of ethnicity and religion in local elections.

The rise of Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, an outsider in Indonesia's politics, marked the beginning of the polarization period. This culminated in 2016–17, when Islamic conservative groups launched the largest sectarian rallies in Jakarta, openly challenging democratic pluralism and diversity. This was, however, preceded by the 2014 presidential election, in which Jokowi's rival Prabowo Subianto attacked democracy for being incompatible with Indonesian culture, opting for a martial and Islamic alternative. Jokowi's 2014 victory was thus seen as a milestone for Indonesia's democracy. According to Davidson, "he [Jokowi] was the first post-Soeharto president to be a political product entirely of the reform era" (p. 43). However, the Jakarta election showed the extent to which political Islam has informed mainstream politics. A video of the Chinese Christian Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) allegedly interpreting a Quranic verse went viral. The Islamists, including Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), backed by Prabowo, then organized a massive anti-Ahok campaign that successfully prevented his re-election and led to his imprisonment for blasphemy. Regrettably, however, Jokowi's backlash against these forces has relied on the promotion of the state ideology of *Pancasila*—reminiscent of the New Order punitive strategy. Jokowi's decisions to disband the HTI and apply treason charges against some of his opponents have shown that the president is not averse to authoritarian practices in order to "save democracy" (p. 54).

Davidson's categorization of the modern period is both spot on and useful. He has accurately portrayed Indonesia's political transition as being not just embellished by democratic inroads, but also marred by persistent problems. Noteworthy here is the weakness in the rule of law. While it is understandable that the author had to choose which key elements to represent the three periods, the analysis on democratic "stagnation" under Yudhoyono should have highlighted the attempts at a democratic roll-back, especially the crucial episode when Parliament passed a law eliminating direct election in the aftermath of Prabowo's electoral defeat in 2014, and Parliament's attempt at weakening the Corruption Eradication Commission by proposing a revision to the anti-graft laws—attempts that have endured (and now succeeded). In the

“polarization” period, while Jokowi won on a pluralist platform, there have been little efforts made to legally protect religious tolerance. The blasphemy laws that sent Ahok to jail were also used to sentence Meiliana, a Chinese-Buddhist woman, in 2018, and twenty-three others since 2014. Similarly, the plight of the Ahmadiyah and the Shia has not resolved since the “stagnation” period. Recent policies show that the binary “Islamist versus pluralist” approach might have ended and given way to the familiar polarization between (new) “authoritarianism”—ironically fronted by Jokowi’s government—and democratic ideals. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?*

This readable monograph is thus suitable for graduate-level students and those interested in the intricacies of the post-Soeharto era, as well as those seeking to understand the current “authoritarian” trend. While Indonesia’s democratic deficits might not be only remnants of the authoritarian era but stable features of the new system (Robison and Hadiz 2004), in the face of these challenges, scrutinizing the post-Soeharto era will help readers to still identify the prospects of Indonesia’s democracy.

#### REFERENCE

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***Authoritarian Capitalism: Sovereign Wealth Funds and State-Owned Enterprise in East Asia and Beyond*, by Richard W. Carney.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 316.

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It is widely recognized that state authority comprises various instruments of control. This is usually understood as its monopoly over violence, like the armed forces and the police. Richard Carney’s book examines one such understudied means of state control and privilege—sovereign wealth funds (SWFs). The lack of in-depth studies on this subject can be partly attributed to certain governments’ preference for operational opacity, especially when the regime is authoritarian in nature. Consequently, data pertaining to SWF are limited, if not minimal, and reveal little about the underlying financial activities. However, despite similar organizational structures across the various Asian SWFs, why are some SWFs more aggressive than others?

Carney outlines the theoretical framework in the first two chapters. According to him, the aggressiveness of SWF tactics depends not only on the organization of the fund, but also the regime type in which it lies (“capacity”), and the political competition that the regime potentially faces (“motivation”). Authoritarian regimes have a desire to cling to power for as long as possible; when faced with competition, they do all they can to prevent power sharing. Instead of playing up the authoritarian-democracy binary, Carney helpfully provides some nuances in understanding the regimes. He provides three subcategories that differentiate the types of authoritarian regimes that exist in East Asia, which are mainly dependent on their respective governance structures. Some come close to a democracy (dominant-party authoritarian regimes

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