

***The Idea of Indonesia: A History.* By R.E. Elson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Hardcover: 365pp.**

This book, as the author explains at the outset, is not about Indonesian nationalism per se or the “ever present problem of national integration”: “It is, rather, a book that sets out to explain the origins, development, triumph, tragedy and, more recently, persistence and reframing of Indonesia as both state and nation” (p. xxiii).

Naturally the book begins with the pre-revolutionary period, and some important themes emerge. The idea of “Indonesian pauperisation” (p. 56) seemed to enjoy great popularity among nationalists as a common bond, leading to President Sukarno’s anti-colonial and subsequent anti-neo-colonial approaches. Sukarno’s belief in modernization led him to reject a role for Islam in politics, although he often stated in public that Indonesia as a nation was “ordained by God Almighty”. As Elson states, Sukarno, despite his modernization tendencies, never turned against Indonesia’s own indigenous royalty because it had no active power. (Elson does not cover Sukarno’s use of his own high-ranking *priyayi* [aristocratic] lineage to shore up his popularity — something that Soeharto could not match.) Elson also shows that federalism was never seriously contemplated by the early nationalist movement which sought to create “solid unity” from a diverse archipelago (p. 68) — opposition to federalism in Indonesia would later come to be seen as a reaction to Dutch attempts to “split” the country in the 1940s, but Elson shows its rejection had older roots. The author also provides plenty of evidence of Chinese-Indonesians, those of mixed Indonesian-Dutch ancestry, and Arabs, being either excluded by the early nationalist movement or, at best, forced to play auxiliary roles.

Elson’s volume then tracks “the idea of Indonesia” through well known phases of history: the Japanese invasion; the revolutionary struggle; the 1950s rebellions of Islamic, separatist and secessionist character; the emergence of the army with “its romanticised sense of the national soul” (p. 171); multi-party democracy and Sukarno’s decision to shift to (the oxymoronic) “guided democracy”; interventionist economic policies designed to end Indonesia’s apparent status as a neo-colony which bankrupted the country; Soeharto’s emergence from the shadows to crush the Indonesian communist movement and other opponents to achieve his unifying (possibly assimilationist) vision; Soeharto’s heavy hand against secessionist movements in East Timor, Aceh and Papua and the discrimination

against autochthonous peoples and ethnic Chinese; and, finally, Indonesia's transition to democratic governance.

Elson does not give any space to ultra-nationalist visions of "recovering" the Malay world that were aired particularly in the final years of Sukarno's rule when he set out to "crush Malaysia". This grandiose irredentism was an idea of Indonesia for a period of time. Elson writes too soon about the "disappearance" of Megawati from national politics (p. 282), as she looks set to contest the 2009 presidential election. But Megawati's enduring appeal to a certain sector of the voting population, based, it seems, almost entirely on her status as the daughter of the founding president, does raise the interesting issue of whether or not the "elected kings/queens" phenomenon of South Asia is also evident in Indonesia. (Former President Abdurrahman Wahid's brief ascendancy may be another example of this, albeit within his particular "cultural stream" of Nahdlatul Ulama and its hereditary tradition.) Another issue to be further explored as it unfolds is the issue of Islam in the public sphere. Attempts to have the Jakarta Charter (or the mention of Sharia) in the Constitution have been unsuccessful, but that does not mean "the Islamist drive failed" (p. 298). Elson is certainly correct in presenting Indonesian Islam as "no significant impediment to the democratic surge" (p. 301) but some distinctly anti-liberal trends have made their way into the body politic. Some of the wording of the anti-pornography legislation which may (*inter alia*) extend to public dances, restrictions on the "deviationist" sect Ahmaddiyah, as well as the incorporation of elements of Sharia law in particular districts make the issue a live one and raise the spectre of Islamism by stealth. Much of this, however, would have become more evident only in very recent times and the volume should in no way be judged entirely against it.

Unfortunately readers unfamiliar with Indonesia will be lost in the cast of characters. Some of the best material presented in this volume is derived from personal communications, but those interviewed are very often not introduced to the reader. To give some examples, interviewee Ryaas Rasyid (a key figure in drawing up election and decentralization provisions for the Habibie administration) is at least introduced in the short biographies at the beginning of the book, but another interviewee, Dewi Fortuna Anwar (Habibie's high-profile foreign policy advisor) is not. Incredibly Ali Alatas, Indonesia's former foreign minister of many years standing, does not make the cut for the biographical section either, nor is he, as far as I could ascertain, identified as such in the text — which will make

it hard for generalists to put context around the statements attributed to him. And so on it goes. All of this is a pity because what it means is that some ostensibly superficial omissions will make the text heavy going for many potential non-specialist readers in what is an otherwise error free, extremely well written and accessible text. The publisher needs to take much of the blame here for not pointing this out to the specialist author.

Otherwise, this book is brilliant in detail and analysis. The author has mined a vast array of important available material from across language sources (principally Indonesian, Dutch and English) to underpin the scope of his project. As a means to understand the key themes of Indonesia from the beginning of the twentieth century, this is one of the best volumes available.