

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy.* By Jamie S. Davidson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Softcover: 77pp.**

Indonesia is a relatively modern nation, established by proclamation in August 1945. What is easily forgotten is that the 1945 Constitution established the country as “a state based on the rule of law” to be governed by a president and vice president “elected as a pair by the people directly”. Article 7 states that they can serve a five-year term and be re-elected for another five-year term only.

For the first 20 years of its existence, Indonesia was mostly governed this way— although the country’s first president, Sukarno, progressively clipped the wings of the country’s democracy, styling it as a “guided democracy” and allowing gradual military interference. The last truly democratic elections were held in 1955. The slide towards authoritarian, undemocratic rule proceeded apace in 1965 after a thinly-veiled army-led putsch that left a little-known army general by the name of Suharto in charge. Thirty-two years later, Suharto was toppled after a messy mixture of riots and protests, which then gave way to another 20 years of democracy, which is the subject of Jamie Davidson’s compact, readable monograph.

The study of the last 20 years of Indonesia’s democracy, often neglects to reflect on the first 20 years from 1945–65: elected governments came and went; parliament was fractious and clashing ideological beliefs seeped into the mass of society, often generating violent conflict. The core of Davidson’s argument—a process of reform, that leads first to innovation, then stagnation, followed by polarization—could be seen as something of a mirror image, though the circumstances are much changed.

Davidson’s categorization of the modern period is useful, and stands up to scrutiny. There has been much academic hand-

wringing about democratic transition in Southeast Asia that pulls on conceptual frameworks and comparative contexts. The organization of this brief monograph along a temporal trajectory helps the reader understand the dynamics of transition more clearly.

At the outset, a period of innovation accompanied the unlikely succession of Suharto's technology minister, the German-trained B.J. Habibie, as the country's first reform era president. Davidson points to the remarkable decentralization initiated by Habibie, which although initially destabilizing and stoking fears of state-disintegration, eventually created a broader, more stable political and economic base.

In some ways, the contra-innovation that also characterized this period—essentially the resistance to reform put up by entrenched political and economic interests—can be seen as applying brakes to change. But it also helped the political elite from the preceding authoritarian period adapt and eventually embrace institutional reform. Indonesia's reform was not driven by revolutionary forces completely overturning the old order. Co-option rather than elimination was the means used to forge receptivity to change and a workable consensus.

The next phase of what Davidson terms "stagnation" spans the period from Indonesia's first direct presidential election of the reform era in 2004 until 2014. Davidson attributes this mainly to political forces that "colluded among themselves to write rules of the game in their favour and to guard their access to lucrative state-controlled rents" (p. 25). But at the same time, direct elections and an emboldened electorate were forging something of a new political landscape; one where "personalities and mass media were eroding the effectiveness of *aliran* attachments (traditional alignments of socio-religious identity)" (p. 27).

Essentially, these new forces of patronage politics, and the proliferation of differing interests at all levels of the country, made the task of pursuing reform more challenging for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He was fortunate, Davidson concludes, that his two terms in office (2004–14) coincided with a commodity boom that spurred the economy, and that as a former military officer, he had the confidence of the army, which had begun to overstep bounds into civilian affairs.

This period of stagnation stored up problems for the next period under the current President Joko Widodo, who was elected in 2014. In particular, Davidson focuses on Yudhoyono's failure to stem the rise of conservative Islamic religiosity. He briefly touches on the reinforcement of piety that allowed local governments the freedom

to pass shariah law ordinances, and which competitive elections contributed to. By the end of Yudhoyono's second term "it was clear that Indonesia's famed reputation for tolerance and respect for religious pluralism was being gravely tested" (p. 37).

This sets the stage for the final section of the monograph that presciently discusses the rise of identity politics and polarization in the last five years of the modern democratic era. Polarization, Davidson argues, is currently Indonesia's defining political feature and more concerningly "pitched contestation of identity politics in the electoral sphere is the new normal" (p. 52). The results of the April 2019 election bear this out. Although incumbent Joko Widodo won convincingly, his opponent, Prabowo Subianto, won big in the very areas of the country that supported Islamic statehood in the 1950s and 1960s.

The author concludes this monograph by stating that there are plenty of reasons why Indonesia should not be a democracy. His central argument is that stagnation of reform efforts and resulting political polarization pose a threat to the post-authoritarian democratic order. The author's prudent organization of his analysis along a timeline offers an accessible and not overly theoretical interpretation of events and guide to the future.

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