

Indonesia: State & Society in Transition. By Jemma Purdey, Antje Missbach and Dave McRae. Boulder and London: Lynne Reinner, 2020. Softcover: 261pp.

This book promises to track the transition of the Indonesian state and society over the past twenty years. Given the complexities of this modern nation-state, with its diverse and dispersed population, it is an ambitious task, but one that the authors undertake in an engaging and frank manner.

The book opens with the somewhat provocative question of whether Indonesia is in fact an “underrated” country which, in spite of its size, history and economic clout, has a “modest international profile” (p. 1). The introductory narrative leaves the reader with no doubt that the authors believe this to be the case, hence providing an underlying justification for the book itself. Indonesia, as they understand it, has the potential to be a thriving economic and democratic powerhouse. However, the nature of its democratic transition in the post-Suharto era has fostered particular circumstances that threaten to undermine this potential. The introductory chapter also advances the difficult questions of whether domestic issues will continue to prevent Indonesia from assuming a more commanding role on the global stage and whether the country has the capacity to resolve existing tensions within state and society. According to the authors, this book seeks “to equip readers to respond to these questions” (p. 1).

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapters two to five offer some background to the current circumstances, while chapters six through nine explore specific facets of contemporary issues in Indonesia. Starting with an overview of the country before independence, the book traces the development of the modern Indonesian state through the late colonial period to President Suharto’s resignation in 1998. The historical chapters skilfully weave information from a wide range of sources and seminal authors, presenting a summary of the early democratic era and the subsequent actions and events which saw Indonesia “slide into authoritarianism” (pp. 37–60). While the accounts offered are not unique, the summary is important for establishing the significant influence that the past continues to exert in today’s Indonesia.

The second half of the book explores the transitional issues which faced the country in the early *Reformasi* era, arguing that many of the current challenges have their roots in the “democratic

deficits” that were established during this period (p. 83). In describing the changes and continuities in political power, and the ability of elites to consolidate their positions while sidelining many of the concerns championed by the protestors in 1998, Chapter Five argues that the political reforms—particularly in the electoral sphere—were insufficient to curb patronage, corruption and money politics. From here, the book turns to the closely related and deep-seated issues of inequalities in health, education and work. Arguing that inequality is on the rise, the authors present examples of how the democratic transition has exacerbated socio-economic gaps, with young people and those in the outer islands bearing the brunt. Inequality remains pervasive, and the Indonesian state appears ill-equipped to deal with this problem in the immediate future. While the last twenty years have offered economic advancement for some, others have found themselves marginalized.

Chapter Six addresses the contentious issue of human rights, looking first at the concerns of specific regions—Aceh, Papua and Timor Leste—and the ongoing reluctance to confront human rights abuses, before turning to the challenges confronting specific marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTQI community, religious minorities and people with disabilities. The coverage of these issues present a disheartening assessment about the treatment of minorities in Indonesia, with the authors arguing that good governance remains problematic and piecemeal. Chapter Seven departs from this theme to focus on the current state of the media and pop culture in Indonesia. Here, the picture is more positive: in a significant departure from the censorship and manipulation that occurred under Suharto, media freedoms have flourished in the post-New Order era. But, again, the situation could be better. While print and television media have extraordinary reach, oligarchs continue to promote their interests through media ownership. The influence of social media is also discussed, with the authors positing that while “netizens” play an important role in expanding democratic discourse, online platforms also allow for the circulation of “more tendentious, manipulated, and sensationalist views” (p. 191).

The book concludes with a snapshot of Indonesia’s current international relations, outlining its complex relationships with the major powers, its neighbours, regional associations and “the Muslim world”. The chapter reveals that in spite of its domestic struggles, Indonesia remains actively engaged with the international community. However, the authors feel that the country has yet to

play an international role “commensurate with its vast territory, strategic position, and large population” (p. 222).

With chapters spanning the gamut of historical and contemporary issues, the thread of the book is somewhat lost in the latter chapters. While the authors present comprehensive summaries of the country’s current democratic failings, they could have drawn a more direct causal link to the post-Suharto transitional processes that were so well-articulated in the earlier chapters. The authors establish early on that many of the political problems faced by Indonesia today have their roots in the incomplete transition to democracy, and explore the consequences of this in the second part of the book. However, the book could have also offered some insights into how history will continue to influence Indonesia’s trajectory into the future. This would assist in answering their overarching question of whether Indonesia can eventually resolve these tensions and achieve its potential as a thriving economy and democracy. To this end, a summary chapter, which explicitly outlines the interconnections between the political history, current challenges and future prospects for overcoming them, would have been a welcome addition to the text.

Taking the reader through decades of Indonesian political history, this book is an excellent primer for observers of Indonesian politics and society. The expert authors have succinctly synthesized key research on Indonesia conducted over the past two decades to provide an eminently readable account of modern Indonesian state and society.

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