

***Politics in Contemporary Indonesia: Institutional Change, Policy Challenges and Democratic Decline.* By Ken M.P. Setiawan and Dirk Tomas. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022. Softcover: 224pp.**

In 1962, following President Soekarno's adoption of the "Guided Democracy" principle three years earlier, the noted Indonesianist Herbert Feith published a book titled *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*. In it, Feith asked the question "why has parliamentary democracy failed in Indonesia?". His fellow Indonesianist, Harry Benda, however, criticized Feith for asking the "wrong" question, as he felt a more appropriate question was "why should democracy have survived?" in Indonesia. In a 1964 review of Feith's book, Benda argued that democracy would never survive in Indonesia because Javanese feudalistic culture was still very much alive.

Ken Setiawan and Dirk Tomsa's book, *Politics in Contemporary Indonesia: Institutional Change, Policy Challenges and Democratic Decline*, addresses the perennial question about the fate and future of Indonesian democracy, particularly after *Reformasi* in 1998. In thirteen chapters, the authors provide readers with an encyclopedic overview of the many facets of contemporary Indonesian politics and society, including the electoral system, local government, the role of Islam, civil society and the media, public health, gender inequality, human rights, environmental politics and foreign policy.

The book echoes a worrying opinion common among many Indonesianists, that the country is experiencing a democratic regression characterized by increasingly "illiberal" trends. To support this observation, some scholars have cited the rise of conservative Islamic politics, the restrictions imposed on opposition groups and the reduced protections for minority groups. What Setiawan and Tomsa have done differently in their book is to examine Indonesia's democratic backsliding over a range of issues. The authors do so while standing firmly on their institutionalist perspective. Throughout the book, they illustrate how the institutional framework and design of Indonesia's electoral and governance systems have contributed to the decline of democratic values and practices.

In Chapter Three, on Indonesia's political institutions, for instance, the authors explore the decision to elevate the threshold for political parties to field presidential candidates. In 2004, parties were able to nominate presidential candidates if they had secured

at least five per cent of the vote. However, this threshold was increased to 25 per cent in 2009, and has led to the dominance of large parties which command a majority of parliamentary seats (p. 47). Another institutional factor the authors highlight was the shift from a closed-list proportional system to an open-list one, wherein the candidates with the most votes are elected Members of Parliament (MPs) (p. 47), a change which has resulted in massive vote-buying. In Chapter Eleven, on the environment, the authors show how deforestation has continued despite the rules and regulations introduced to govern the sector. Similarly, in Chapter Nine, on gender equality, the authors discuss how the provisions to ensure better gender representation in the legislature have primarily led to the election of women parliamentarians who primarily belong to political dynasties.

While the authors have convincingly argued that institutional factors have contributed to the decline of Indonesian democracy, they also note, in the final chapter, that democratic setbacks are a global trend. Indonesia, thus, is not unique in this matter. In their respective measures, Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit continue to regard Indonesian democracy—despite its weakened quality—as a “flawed democracy”, or a “minimal democracy”, as elections are regularly held without any bloodshed. This means that the global trend towards democratic decline—and not just Indonesia’s worsening institutional framework—is a factor that contributes to the contemporary state of the country’s democracy.

The authors’ institutionalist perspective, however, does have its shortcomings as it tends to downplay the various collective efforts and actions undertaken by citizens, thus ignoring their agency. The fact that Indonesia’s democratic institutions mainly benefit elites is obvious. Yet, over the past few decades, we have also witnessed how citizens have reacted to these flawed institutional set-ups in various ways, albeit on a small and admittedly somewhat unsustainable, scale. The recent formation of the political party Partai Buruh by a major labour union, supported by a loose alliance of marginal political groups, is an example of citizens’ agency. Likewise, independent media outlets in Indonesia have taken the initiative to fight the monopolization of the media industry, thereby providing critical citizens, especially young people, with important outlets and platforms. The successful passage of the Sexual Violence Act, which was the product of a collaboration between progressive MPs and activists from women and civil society groups, is another

example. These examples reflect the strong agency of Indonesia's civil society, which Setiawan and Tomsa themselves describe as a "resilient but vulnerable" actor in Indonesian politics (p. 3).

Another interesting aspect of this book is the way the authors tease the claim that Indonesia deserves to be labelled as a "model Muslim democracy" (p. 3). While a very stimulating idea, readers such as this reviewer would expect the authors to integrate this insight into their analysis. For instance, how should Indonesia, as a "model Muslim democracy" deal with environmental challenges? Furthermore, why are (conservative) Islamic values often invoked in debates over highly sensitive "secular" issues such as sexual politics, but barely mentioned in discussions about environmental conservation?

Overall, this is an important book, particularly for newcomers who want to understand contemporary Indonesia. The book provides clear insights into Indonesia's struggles to keep its democracy alive in spite of the ineffective institutional set-up. Implicitly, this book seems to be in line with Feith's belief that Indonesia does have the basic requirements for a democratic system, with the only drawback being that its institutions are ineffective.

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