

***Electrifying Indonesia: Technology and Social Justice in National Development.* By Anto Mohsin. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. Hardcover: 247pp.**

Instead of exploring energy production through the prism of innovation, *Electrifying Indonesia* uses theories of “sociotechnical systems” and “patrimonial technopolitics” to examine how increasing society’s access to electricity is fundamentally political. Indeed, developing a country’s electricity sector is closely related to social justice, national development and nation-building.

Anto Mohsin begins with a sweep of Indonesian history, starting with the colonial period. For the Dutch colonialists, expanding Indonesia’s access to electricity was fundamentally for the benefit of Dutch-owned companies, not the indigenous Indonesians. When Japanese troops marched into the country in early 1942, much of its electricity infrastructure was destroyed. It was an uphill battle to get it up and running again after the Indonesian National Revolution (1945–49). The newly independent government’s paltry funds and internal disagreements meant it had to make tough choices over nationalizing the Dutch-owned electricity firms. However, thanks to support from the US International Cooperation Administration, the Czechoslovak government and diesel power-generating technology provided by Germany, President Sukarno’s post-colonial government was able to expand the electricity supply to rural villages across the archipelago.

Electricity became much more political under President Suharto’s New Order regime (1966–98). According to Mohsin, Suharto initiated a vast rural electricity expansion programme in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the Indonesian people. Electrification was designed to show that Indonesia was a rapidly developing country under his leadership. At the same time (as discussed in Chapter Three), it was also big business for New Order-linked firms, especially the state-run State Electricity Company (PLN), which had a monopoly on power electricity production. Particularly interesting is Mohsin’s description of the relationship between PLN and the Directorate General of Electrical Power, the industry regulator. Both became a little too close, weakening corporate governance.

In Chapter Four, Mohsin focuses on electricity expansion in Java—the most populous of Indonesia’s islands—and how it

compares with what took place elsewhere. Nationwide, access to electricity was carried out using two systems: either electricity was distributed through an interconnected grid (as was the case in Java) or through isolated networks of (mostly diesel-fuelled) small power plants in villages or towns (as was done in most other parts of the country). According to Mohsin, this illustrates “patrimonial technopolitics” (p. 91); the New Order authorities prioritized a far better-integrated electricity system for Java (as well as for Bali and Madura) because it was home to the largest number of voters. As such, electricity was a source of political legitimacy.

From Chapter Five onwards, *Electrifying Indonesia* explores the importance of understanding the social life of village communities when assessing their energy needs. For instance, the author demonstrates the inability of rural electricity cooperatives—set up in the late 1970s with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—to provide services that increased sustainable access to electricity. Mohsin provides an empirical analysis of the “failure” (pp. 139–51) of these rural schemes, noting the lack of cooperation between them and the PLN. As this book makes clear, electricity policy cannot be separated from the broader context of energy policy, such as political choices between meeting domestic demand for energy and seeking increased revenue from energy exports. Moreover, it also shows that diversification and efficiency of energy sources became the subject of policy discussions in the 1980s as the New Order regime sought to reduce its dependence on imported oil.

This book focuses primarily on events up until the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. There is little mention of how Suharto’s family and his cronies, who were closely associated with the energy sector, were affected by the New Order’s downfall or of the rapid development of the electricity sector under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14).

One takeaway from *Electrifying Indonesia* is that while every era has different energy challenges, governmental and state actors are central to operationalizing the ideologies (nation-building and equity) behind energy development. That is not easy, as there are conflicting goals. There were failures in Indonesia’s case. Indeed, this book conveys how village-scale electricity production, while reflecting the strength of civil society’s social capital, became trapped in a cycle of poor governance. This book concludes with

the message that while state and local actors face suboptimal conditions, both must work together, be fully attentive to good governance and involve civil society. It is an important message to remember since the private sector plays an even greater role in electricity generation in Indonesia today.

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