

***Contesting Indonesia: Islamist, Separatist, and Communal Violence since 1945.* By Kirsten Schulze. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2024. Soft cover: 301pp.**

The tension between national and regional identities has been a persistent theme in Indonesian political discourse since the country's independence in 1945. Following the fall of long-time dictator Suharto in 1998, Indonesia experienced a wave of secessionist rebellions (in Aceh, East Timor and Papua), insurgencies (in Ambon, Molucca Islands and Central Sulawesi) and a resurgence of Islamist terrorism, most notably the activities of Jemaah Islamiyah, a group founded by the radical cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. While these conflicts have been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, no one, until now, has sought to examine them collectively through a common analytical framework.

Kirsten Schulze's *Contesting Indonesia* is the first of its kind. The existing literature, she notes, has treated Islamist violence, insurgencies and communal conflicts as distinct phenomena, each examined by different scholarly communities with their own subfields. For instance, works on Islamic violence are often subdivided into studies on the Darul Islam rebellion, Jamaah Islamiyah and other *jihad* groups. Moreover, Schulze states that few studies have investigated the underlying causes of post-1998 violence, although she also attempts to remedy this by convincingly arguing that they are the result of clashing national and regional "imaginaries", which she defines as "how the nation (or the region) is conceived — culturally, religiously, politically, geographically — and constructed by a state, government, or political movement as a conscious, deliberate exercise in which tradition, rituals, and symbols are selected, shaped, and projected" (p. 6).

Schulze's analytical framework is built on two primary arguments. First, violence and conflict have occurred in "regions of Indonesia that were on the periphery of the national imaginary — geographically, ideologically, ethnically, religiously, and developmentally" (p. 5). This pattern is particularly evident in East Timor, Ambon and Poso, which have significant Christian populations and historically feared marginalization by the Javanese and Muslim-dominated central government (pp. 5–6). Second, Schulze argues that violent conflict is more protracted and intense when the affected regions have an alternative national imaginary rooted in distinct historical narratives (p. 6).

Schulze's book offers a detailed examination of these dynamics through a series of case studies, especially of two radical Islamist groups—the Darul Islam movement (Chapter One) and Jemaah Islamiyah (Chapter Two)—which, through their insurgencies, created significant challenges towards Indonesia's national imaginary. The subsequent chapters turn to regional conflicts, focusing on East Timor (Chapter Three), Aceh (Chapter Four), Poso (Chapter Five) and Ambon (Chapter Six). Her study is based on historical and archival research, as well as interviews with 474 sources over two decades. This makes *Contesting Indonesia* one of the most comprehensive studies in the field, providing a wealth of empirical data for students and scholars across disciplines.

The book's main strength lies in Schulze's ability to reconstruct complex historical narratives from diverse empirical sources, weaving together the perspectives of state elites, religious leaders and local communities. She argues, for instance, that the marginalization of Islamist and regional imaginaries during much of Indonesia's post-colonial period, outer regions' fear of "Islamization" and the repressive strategies of the Indonesian Armed Forces to suppress insurgencies and regional conflicts contributed to the escalation of violence.

However, the book's focus on the origins and dynamics of conflict means that it pays relatively little attention to how these conflicts ended. For example, it offers only a brief mention of the 2005 Helsinki Peace Accord, which brought the Aceh conflict to a close, and provides little analysis of the political settlements that resolved tensions in Poso and Ambon. Given that most of the conflicts explored in the book ended more than two decades ago, a more comprehensive discussion of their resolution and the subsequent reintegration of these regions into the Indonesian state would have been a valuable addition. Indeed, it would have been interesting to explore why, except for East Timor, the restive regions agreed to remain part of Indonesia. Moreover, it would have been useful to consider why some regions that are also on the "periphery" and which share similar conditions with the restive regions—marginalization of local identities and the widespread fear of domination by Javanese and Islamic identities—remained peaceful or resolved their tensions through political negotiations, not violence. Such regions include North Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara.

Nonetheless, Schulze's book is an excellent, comprehensive study of conflict in Indonesia, and one that takes a *longue durée* approach to the problem. By integrating insights from political science, history and conflict studies, it offers a nuanced account of the long-term structural drivers of violence in Indonesia's periphery. It is a valuable resource for scholars interested in the intersections of nationalism, regionalism and political violence in Southeast Asia, providing both a detailed empirical foundation and a compelling analytical framework for understanding the enduring tensions between Indonesia's centre and periphery.

---

ALEXANDER ARIFianto is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Postal address: 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798; email: isalex@ntu.edu.sg.