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Book Reviews

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Rice Politics in Southeast Asia: Legacies of the Green Revolution. By Jamie S. Davidson. Cambridge University Press, 2026. xviii+309 pp.

Davidson points out on the first page of this book that the livelihoods of millions of people across Southeast Asia directly depend on the production and marketing of rice for their livelihoods. That is almost certainly correct, although the numbers have probably fallen in recent decades in absolute terms and also as a percentage of both the agricultural labour forces and of the total labour forces of the region. The focus of the book is not on rice production across the whole region, but mainly in the three countries that historically have been both producers of rice and at times importers, sometimes on a scale that has affected global markets and prices. The three are Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. These countries saw a substantial growth in rice production between 1961 and 1963 and 1984 and 1986; in Indonesia and the Philippines, production more than doubled (Table 1.1, p. 7). At the same time, figures from both national and international agencies showed a decline in the headcount measure of poverty between the early 1970s and 1987–94 (Table 1.2, p. 7). It was especially rapid in Indonesia. Davidson argues that the growth in rice production was the result of increased rates of double-cropping, usually the result of improved irrigation, and increased yields per hectare cultivated, in turn the result of increased fertilizer use and improved rice varieties, many of which were developed at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines. He concurs with the now widely held view that the growth brought about by the "Green Revolution" in rice, and to a lesser extent other food crops, including corn, brought about "pro-poor" growth in these three countries, which contributed to the decline in poverty.

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But Davidson has written something more than just a happy story of the successful application of new technologies by millions of peasant cultivators leading to remarkable growth in rice production in countries where many domestic and foreign experts thought such an increase was unlikely, if not impossible. Far from being risk-averse, many farmers adopted with surprising speed both the new seeds and fertilizers, especially in irrigated areas. Subsidies certainly helped; in Indonesia, farmers did not pay for irrigation, although they did pay a higher land tax on irrigated land, and the Indonesian government used part of its oil revenues to subsidize fertilizers, especially urea, so it was quite cheap relative to the rice price received by farmers. Also, the government allowed fertilizer to be sold freely on village markets, so farmers could buy it without taking on debt. In the Philippines, too, Marcos and his ministers tried to support farmers, probably with less success than in Indonesia because the government had less money and there were other claims on its use. The presence of IRRI in the Philippines also helped: scientists, extension workers and farmers were able to interact and spread the new technologies, especially in Luzon. In Malaysia, support for farmers was linked to the New Economic Policy, adopted after serious race riots in 1969; whatever its flaws, the policy did channel more government support to rice cultivators through extension of irrigation and other assistance.

Much of the book tries to explain the success of Green Revolution policies in these three countries, which were all controlled by what appeared to be conservative anti-communist governments more concerned with suppressing rural unrest than with rural development. Davidson discusses the rise to power of what he calls "production nationalists" in all three countries who, for a mixture of reasons, advocated policies that supported not just export-oriented agriculture but also domestic food production. These people were found across many government ministries in all three countries; they were certainly prominent in the parastatal enterprises charged with boosting domestic rice production on the one hand and with controlling rice imports on the other. When domestic rice prices rose above world prices, these government agencies sometimes made substantial profits from

selling cheaper imports at local prices, but when global prices rose, as they did dramatically in 1972–73, they had to stabilize domestic prices to prevent political unrest. This meant selling imports at a loss, and one way or another, governments and consumers shared the cost, usually through higher domestic prices on the one hand and increased government disbursements to the parastatals on the other. As domestic production rose, all three countries claimed to have reached "self-sufficiency", itself a disputed term. In the Indonesian context, this was reached in the mid-1980s, although some economists thought the price in terms of domestic subsidies was too high. They also accused the state procurement agency (BULOG) of corruption; efforts to audit these agencies in all three countries were increased, but only in Malaysia were audit reports made public.

In the second part of the book, Davidson does an impressive job of looking under the bonnet of the various agencies in the three countries charged with boosting domestic food production on the one hand and food import policies on the other. It seems clear that the people running these agencies have often made considerable fortunes for themselves or for the political factions they support. In many cases these fortunes are made at the expense of the consumer, although it could be argued that the parastatal enterprises have displaced private traders who, in the colonial and postcolonial eras, made large fortunes by exploiting local monopolies in trading rice and other food crops. Many of the monopolies were owned and operated by the ethnic Chinese, so their enterprises have lost out. Given that populations in these three countries are continuing to grow, and that per capita incomes are also growing, it seems likely that demand for rice will continue to grow, but at a slower rate than demand for other food crops, including wheat and dairy products, which cannot be easily produced in the humid tropics.

How governments will react in future to these changes in food demand and who will profit from them remain to be seen. Davidson's arguments could perhaps have been strengthened by a deeper analysis of the extent to which local farmers have benefited from rice policies across the three countries since the 1970s relative to

government agencies involved in rice production and marketing on the one hand and domestic consumers on the other. We know from agricultural censuses and other surveys that ownership of irrigated land is restricted to a minority of all cultivators, especially in the densely settled parts of Indonesia and the Philippines. They are often among the better-off cultivators, and they have benefited from Green Revolution policies more than other farmers. But increasingly they are cultivating irrigated land with more non-rice crops, including a range of vegetables that are more profitable than rice. Some economists argue that in all three countries, rice imports will almost certainly continue in the coming decade and that the private sector could do a better job in importing and marketing rice than parastatals. These debates are unlikely to go away any time soon, and this book will continue to be an important guide to analysing the complex issues arising from rice policy across Southeast Asia.

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Ruling Indonesia: Jokowi's Presidency in an Age of Democratic Crisis and Great Power Competition. By Marcus Mietzner. University of Michigan Press, 2026. xxii+259 pp.

When Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") entered national politics in 2013, he was widely seen as a breath of fresh air: a modest furniture entrepreneur from Central Java unencumbered by the patronage networks and dynastic politics associated with Indonesia's established elites. His meteoric rise from mayor to governor and then president was fuelled in part by hopes that he would consolidate the gains of the post-Soeharto era, provide a democratic counterweight to his rival Prabowo Subianto and usher in a new phase of political and economic reform.