

Book Reviews

A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000. By Kees van Dijk. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001. 621 pp.

In late 1997 Indonesia's economy went into a tail-spin, culminating in social and political upheavals that saw Soeharto's resignation in May 1998, and resulting in a succession of presidents as Indonesia entered a period of democratization. These events are well known, even to casual observers, but Kees van Dijk has penned a magnificent account of Indonesia between 1997 and 2000 that fleshes out the story in rich detail and analysis. The volume itself closes as the soon to be ousted President Abdurrahman Wahid is facing two major corruption, collusion, and nepotism (*korupsi, kolusi, and nepotisme* or KKN) scandals and the political forces are arraying against him. The author has clearly sifted through a mountain of materials, principally Indonesian language newspaper sources, to bring about an excellent chronicle. At 621 pages, this is quite a large book — and one can only marvel at the way in which a vast array of sources have been combined. Despite its size and detail it is a thoroughly absorbing read — especially if one is already familiar with the events and characters that set the stage for a political and social transformation. The main substantive chapters of the book are supplemented by a large number of helpful appendices (showing political parties, cabinet line-ups, military leaders, a glossary, and so on).

Like all histories (or contemporary history in this case), there is always a tension between themes and chronology. On the whole, this volume is structured well, in this sense. In writing on Indonesia, van Dijk is also up against the problem of a near complete paucity of primary archival material (the usual stock and trade of the historian), and is thus forced to rely on secondary sources. One of the hallmarks of this vol-

ume, evident in the construction, is the conservatism of interpretation and analysis of events. The author is clearly very careful not to take on board street rumours as fact, and if they are included, they are portrayed plainly as “theories” or “rumours” — in contrast to other scholars who have chanced their arm a little more. One example is the way in which van Dijk skirts around the nature of the friendship between Soeharto’s daughter, Tutut, and former general and cabinet minister, Hartono (p. 63). Another example is the delicate treatment of both the May 1998 riots and the mysterious killings of “sorcerers” in Java during 1999, in which the author is careful not to make concrete claims about who exactly master-minded the violence (if there was indeed such a master-mind).

There is so much to *A Country in Despair* that it is not possible to relay all its main themes in a review. But one of the interesting themes to emerge is how out of touch with reality (and the masses) Soeharto and his inner circle had become towards the end of his tenure. The impact of this misrule resulted in an economic crisis that affected the poor of Indonesia in terrible ways (see pp. 112–14 for an account of this). The author brilliantly sends up Tutut’s “I Love the Rupiah” campaigns, where the wealthy élite made a great show of trading mostly small amounts of U.S. currency in a bid to shore up the rupiah. In fact, this had little impact as the majority of Indonesians were in no position to buy rupiah: “It was not they who owned [U.S.] dollars” (p. 103). Van Dijk also notes that the public displays of changing U.S. currency back to rupiah demonstrated to the masses who had been playing the overseas currency game (ibid.). Likewise, Soeharto’s announcement that serving ministers would take a one-year pay freeze (pp. 150–51) was another example of aloofness. It was supposed to be a symbol of saving the nation’s resources, yet it only served to show that the members of the Executive were so independently (and probably “unusually”) wealthy that they could afford to go without the ministerial stipend. A plan to disclose the wealth of ministers was also opposed by Tutut on the grounds that the teachings of Islam preclude one showing off one’s wealth (p. 151). Van Dijk also gives a list of “foundations” (money channels) linked to Soeharto, one of which, Yayasan Dakab, Soeharto

founded for the stated reason that he felt sorry for Golkar functionaries who had been caught undertaking illegal fund-raising activities (p. 276) — and presumably this would preclude the need for individuals to take the risk in the future. Then there was the Soeharto era *bupati* (mayor) of Bantul, Colonel Sri Roso Sudarmo, who advocated wearing of yellow (the colour of the then ruling party, Golkar) in his area. He justified this by arguing that green was less flattering to those with dark skin, while red was hard on one's eyes (p. 220). It scarcely needs pointing out that such leaders as those mentioned above should have much to fear from the sort of efficiency that democracy can drum into the political élite. One would like to think that free and fair democratic elections would punish this sort of arrogance — which is indeed what happened in 1999 when Golkar fell from power.

Although this should not detract from the magnitude of the volume, there are a few quibbles. There is the odd awkward translation. For example, *Bapak Pembangunan*, the title adopted by Soeharto, is not “Mr Development” (for example, p. 114), but “the father of development” — as a counterpart to Soekarno's moniker “the father of the nation”. The MPR (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat) is rendered here as the “People's Congress”, when it is conventionally known in English as the “People's Consultative Assembly”. There are also a number of words scattered throughout that are not translated in the text at all. Van Dijk also tends to give some credence to the controversial Red-White (nationalist) versus Green (Islamic) split within the military, when the inner working and rivalries of the military, a somewhat opaque outfit at the best of times, are most likely subject to more complicated machinations than that. Rivalries of region, service branch, unit, and most of all, personality, are at least as important as the sectarian divide represented here. In such a comprehensive volume, one hesitates to suggest more information, but perhaps more could have been said about how *reformasi* and political change impacted on the provinces beyond the restive areas of Aceh, East Timor, Maluku, and Papua. However, to put this in its proper context, this is all minor compared with the achievement of the volume.

A Country in Despair is actually quite an important book. Given the tumultuous events of Abdurrahman Wahid's impeachment and

Megawati's ascension to the presidency, Indonesia is still in despair. The depth and breadth of the volume makes it an outstanding sourcebook concerning the time period in question. Most of all, it allows the reader to delve into the detail of what actually occurred during what will be regarded as crucial years for Indonesia, although the turbulence could well continue for a time.

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