

***Democratising Indonesia: The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi.* By Mikaela Nyman. NIAS Press, 2006. Softcover: 258pp.**

By its very nature, civil society is an extremely difficult topic for any researcher. It poses the problem of defining, selecting and limiting the objects of analysis, with a myriad of non-governmental groups trying to leave their mark on politics and society. The task becomes even more difficult when the country under scrutiny is Indonesia, which since President Soeharto's downfall has lost count of the number of NGOs in the capital, as well as in the provinces, districts, sub-districts and villages. These civil society groups are not only active in a wide spectrum of fields, ranging from political advocacy to health issues and community development, but they also have highly diverse goals and interests. In her book, Mikaela Nyman takes stock of Indonesia's civil society in the post-New Order era, trying to assess its role in the 1998 downfall of the New Order and the subsequent evolution of the democratic polity. In particular, Nyman focuses on three social movements that shaped civil society both in the late phase of the authoritarian regime and in the emerging democracy: the students, labour and women. The three chapters on these social movements form the core of the book, and they guide the author's general assessment of civil society in Indonesia.

The main argument of the book is an interesting one: the fragmentation of Indonesia's civil society movement does not only constitute a weakness, it is in fact its most important asset. The disorganized state of civil society made it impossible for Soeharto to completely suppress or co-opt it, allowing students, labour and women's groups to mobilize against the embattled president in 1997 and 1998. In the same vein, the disunity among non-governmental groups after 1998 has ensured that some organizations have continued to call for radical reform, refusing to follow the example of some of their counterparts who have been easily co-opted by political parties, state institutions or businesses. According to Nyman, the divisions within Indonesian civil society are an inherent feature of social movements, which only unite against a certain issue or regime (in this case, Soeharto), but then find it difficult to cooperate on day-to-day problems of governance and democratic reform. Thus Nyman submits that Indonesia's civil society movement needs to find ways of fostering effective cooperation among its various elements without

undermining the very heterogeneity that has prevented it from co-optation.

While the author presents her main thesis in a sufficiently convincing fashion, the book is marred by a large number of methodological, analytical and empirical problems. First of all, Nyman spent little time in Indonesia, interviewing only a total of seventeen NGO figures during two months of fieldwork. What is more, the interviewees were not key figures in their respective movements, but often rather marginal participants — so marginal, in fact, that sometimes Nyman does not even mention their full names, like in the case of a certain “Ibu Titin” (p. 137). In addition, Nyman was rather unselective in the use of her limited interview material, quoting her interviewees in excessive length and in a disturbingly repetitive manner. In most cases, the author shies away from guiding the reader through the interview material, which often appears redundant. Accordingly, many typical NGO platitudes and phrases find entry into the book, and Nyman herself at the end tends to uncritically repeat some of the slogans that her interviewees offered her (“All stakeholders need to gain a deeper appreciation of the rights and obligations of the state and its citizens in a modern democracy, and make it work in the Indonesian context”, p. 205). Even when one of her interview partners complained that the people had recklessly “exchanged” reform for democracy (p. 179), Nyman did not comment on this obviously nonsensical assessment.

The biggest problem of the book, however, is its sloppiness as far as the treatment of historical and political facts are concerned. It certainly does not speak for the quality of the editing if Nyman can claim that both Habibie and Wahid resigned as presidents (p. 40, the former was not re-elected and the latter was impeached); that the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) represented “all non-Muslims” (p. 34, most of its voters and cadres were secular Muslims); that the last election under the New Order took place alternatively in 1996 or 1998 and the first post-Soeharto polls in 2000 (p. 71, p. 34 and p. 37, they were held in 1997 and 1999 respectively); that Habibie lifted restrictions on political parties in June 1999 (p. 84, he did so in June 1998); that there were protests against the pardoning of Soeharto (p. 87, Soeharto was never pardoned); that Megawati should not have signed the 1999 Elections Law (p. 151, Megawati was not president at that time, so she could not have signed the bill); that Megawati had enjoyed a “middle class upbringing” (p. 150, she was brought up in the presidential palace); that in January 2001 the number of provinces “officially increased from 27 to 32 and Papua

was split in two” (p. 171, the number of provinces increased over time and the split of Papua was decreed in 1999 and executed in 2003); that Wiranto announced his presidential aspirations during a speech in Singapore in February 2004 (p. 184, Wiranto had already registered as a presidential candidate with Golkar in August 2003); that Golkar held “extensive nation-wide elections to determine the future party leader” (p. 185, the convention was held to select Golkar’s presidential nominee, not its leader); that “Hamzah Has and Agum Gumela” participated in the 2004 elections (p. 186, that would be Hamzah Haz and Agum Gumelar). In addition, there are many misspellings and misleading interpretations of Indonesian terms. For instance, *asas keluargaan* (p. 133, which should be *asas kekeluargaan*).

The long list of inaccuracies (the examples cited above only constitute an illustrative selection) makes it very difficult to recommend this book to students of Indonesian politics and society. The author is only partly to blame for these shortcomings, however. Instead, the publisher should have exercised more caution in the editing process. Nyman’s manuscript was originally a Masters thesis, and the quality and scope of the text reflects this. In order to turn it into a high-quality contribution to the international debate on civil society movements in general and Indonesia’s democratization process in particular, it would have needed rigorous editing based on detailed referee reports. This would have allowed Nyman to streamline the interview material and replace the phraseology of her interviewees with some additional analytical assessments and judgments by the author. Most importantly, careful editing would have saved the book from the many factual errors that now significantly reduce its scholarly value.