



Port security and preman organizations in Indonesia

by Senia Febrica, Singapore, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, xvi + 177 pp., SGD 30.00 (hbk), ISBN 9789815011883

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To cite this article: Yanwar Pribadi (09 Oct 2024): Port security and preman organizations in Indonesia, South East Asia Research, DOI: [10.1080/0967828X.2024.2392342](https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2024.2392342)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2024.2392342>



Published online: 09 Oct 2024.



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BOOK REVIEW

Port security and preman organizations in Indonesia, by Senia Febrica, Singapore, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, xvi + 177 pp., SGD 30.00 (hbk), ISBN 9789815011883

Strongmen have long been widely associated with bandits, violent entrepreneurs or revolutionaries. Such strongmen should be differentiated from the strongmen of politics. The latter are defined as political leaders who rule by repression and exercise an authoritarian administration, while the former are defined as gangsters who benefit from local insecurities to obtain an occupation, build their reputation and accumulate social and political influence when they become involved in politics.

In the case of Indonesia, there have already been several significant works on these stereotypically sturdy and muscular people, who have been represented as bandits (Suhartono 1995), village leaders (Onghokham 1978), rebels (Cribb 1991), local heroes, powerbrokers and criminals (Schulte Nordholt 1991). *Preman*, Indonesian contemporary free men (Dutch: *vrije mannen*), stand in between a blurred line of strongmen and violent groups. *Preman* (thug) was originally used to refer to irregular or demobilized soldiers; later, the term came to mean bandit and then gangster.

It is exhilarating to see the recent publication of this exciting study on the interrelationship between port security and strongmen/violent groups in Indonesia. Senia Febrica's *Port Security and Preman Organizations in Indonesia* is a crucial addition to the field of thug-group studies, a rather neglected sector in research into Indonesian social groups compared to counterparts such as religious groups. In a broader sense, the book's main focus is to examine the contradictions and implications of the use of thug organizations within Indonesia's efforts to establish a truly democratic society. In doing so, the author investigates the involvement of thug organizations in securing Indonesian ports in the Jakarta area, North Sulawesi and the Riau Islands.

Febrica argues that although the state remains an important actor in the realm of security, the challenges posed by globalization and the emergence of private authority have affected its delivery of security functions. The way a state conducts its security and military tasks in response to globalization's major challenges is shaped by institutionalized local practices and domestic political dynamics. In turn, she reveals, such practices and dynamics within the Indonesian state have redefined relations between state and private authorities in the provision of security. Thug organizations have begun to play a greater role in security, their engagement becoming more apparent as they have increasingly participated in providing intelligence information and helping the government to guard ports since the collapse of the New Order administration in 1998 (6–8).

This book is based on the author's postdoctoral research, funded by Gerda Henkel Stiftung, which employed various methods, including fieldwork, interviews and the use of archival sources. It consists of six chapters, including an Introduction and Conclusion. The introduction chapter provides a background of the study and a literature review, and it sets out the book's main arguments. Chapter 1 discusses the main question that the author seeks to address and provides a detailed background for the chapters that follow. Febrica argues that the interaction between international politics and the domestic structure may influence the use of thug organizations for port and coastal security in Indonesia. In addition, she maintains that the involvement of thug organizations in port security needs to be

understood as an expansion of the security role of thug organizations from their traditional land-based areas of work to include maritime frontiers (22).

Chapter 2 focuses on a comprehensive explanation of the involvement of thug organizations in port security in Jakarta. It also discusses the challenges this practice has brought. In this chapter, the author contends that thug organizations have taken part in port security by working with licensed private security companies and providing information on the security situation and illicit activities in ports and surrounding areas to government authorities (50).

Chapter 3 observes the participation of thug organizations in port security in North Sulawesi. The author reveals that the participation of ethnic thug organizations in securing ports and coastal areas in North Sulawesi has received unusually welcoming support from the local government, the government security apparatus and the media. Nevertheless, the involvement of these organizations in providing protection to businesses that act unlawfully poses a challenge to government authorities seeking to maintain order in the province (78).

Chapter 4, the book's final substantive chapter, investigates the role of *preman* organizations in the Riau Islands, focusing on Batam and Tanjung Pinang. Febrica argues that thug organizations have played a role in securing ports and outlying islands. Nonetheless, the organizations' involvement in illicit activities and the tensions between them, government authorities and members of society have generated insecurity in port areas and other parts of the port cities in the province (107). She writes that thug organizations have only limited roles in the ports (112) and that they are involved in securing ports and other vital locations in the run up to public holidays or local elections on the basis of requests made by the police or local government (114).

In the conclusion chapter, the author brings together the threads of argument and the main findings presented in the core chapters.

Febrica painstakingly scrutinizes the convoluted relationship between non-state security providers and the state in Indonesia. Her description of the ways in which they shift between mild competition and out-and-out contestation is an important contribution to the study of uncivil components of civil society that have been overlooked by many scholars of politics, political anthropology and sociology. This book is among the studies (cf. Barker 1999; Masaaki and Hamid 2008; Pribadi 2014; Wilson 2015) demonstrating that strongmen/violent groups have undertaken a variety of functions, from entrepreneurs of protection and perpetrators of violence to their other functions as powerbrokers. Febrica, meanwhile, argues that thug organizations have been involved in various unlawful activities, ranging from providing protection to businesses that violate laws to conducting violent attacks against the government security apparatus. The book clearly offers an important case study to understand that at some points, thug organizations appear to be the right solution for solving problems or conflicts and for offering security, whether through violence or via compromises. These explanations indeed indicate the importance of thug organizations that offer protection when certainty and trust of the authorities and between people, and, more importantly, confidence in law enforcement by the authorities, are absent.

Regrettably, however, this book has some shortcomings. While claiming that 'this book offers a comprehensive account of the involvement of non-state security providers in securing ports and coastal areas in Indonesia' (5), Chapter 2, for instance, pays insufficient attention to the results of this involvement. Rather, the author discusses the conflicts that often arise between *preman* organizations and various parties, from other thug organizations to the government authorities, as indicated by the frequent clashes between Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR) and Pemuda Pancasila (PP), the two largest thug organizations in Jakarta (66). Chapter 3 is better in this sense as it focuses on the involvement of *preman* organizations

in port security. For instance, the author addresses joint security operations between government authorities and thug organizations to prevent the smuggling of weapons and to halt militants from the southern Philippines and vice versa (95).

Moreover, making a link between international politics and the domestic structures that influence the use of thug organizations for port and coastal security in Indonesia (Chapter 1) is questionable. Thug organizations may benefit more from local insecurity rather than from international politics, for instance, to gain employment, enhance their reputation and spread their social and political power when they become involved in turbulent political constellations that enable them to build alliances with other parties. Finally, a further chapter on the nature of *preman* organizations in the three areas, preceding discussions about the involvement of thug organizations in Indonesia's port security in subsequent chapters, might have led to a more coherent and readable structure.

Despite these critiques, this book is a very positive addition to scholarship not only on national security but also on strongmen/violent groups and on a dynamic of political constellations in the post-New Order period. Students and scholars of political science and political and sociological anthropology will find in it rich materials on non-state security providers, the study of civil society and Indonesian politics in general.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2024.2392342>

