

Book Review

Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy, by Jamie S. Davidson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 78. ISBN 9781108459082.

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Writing, both succinct and comprehensive, about the rise, achievements, and challenges of Indonesian democracy since 1998 is difficult. Most scholars have opted for extensive books or focused on special themes or regions. Jamie Davidson has made an admirable effort in less than 80 accessible pages in a new series entitled *Cambridge Elements*, which aims at combining “up-to-date overview of debates in the scholarly literature with original analysis and a clear argument.” He focuses on the politics, political economy, and identity-based mobilization, and arrives at three major conclusions. First, Indonesian democratization is strong from a comparative perspective, especially with regard to elections and freedoms, but weak on a closer look. It is especially poor, he says, with regard to impartial rule of law and public administration (primarily corruption, including within the judiciary), plus increased vote buying due to staggering competition between candidates after closed party lists, which was declared unconstitutional in 2008. Second, “democracy, and its related process of democratisation, is the most appropriate overarching framework for studying Indonesia” (p. 4). Third, the previous focus on “change and continuities” in studies of Indonesia after Suharto “has run its course” as the twenty years that have passed constitutes a long enough period to qualify for specific research (p. 5). Three phases are identified: one (labelled innovation) under presidents B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati Sukarnoputri; another (labelled stagnation)

under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and a third (labelled polarisation) under Joko (Jokowi) Widodo.

At first sight, this seems fine, but after a careful reading, two problems became obvious. One is that the decision to abandon the focus on “change and continuities” is not based on a review (even if brief) of that framework. Hence, it is difficult for the reader to take a stand. To the extent that the decision is to demote history, there are good reasons to object. For example, when Davidson neglects the legacy of suppression and violence, or the deep roots of the poor rule of law including corruption in the structural dynamics of Sukarno’s and the Army’s “Guided Democracy” and Suharto’s “New Order.”

The second problem is that the author neither really argues for his three main themes, nor for how they are analyzed. Possibly, this is because he does not apply his own conclusion about democratization as the organizing principle. Aside from a statement that he wishes to focus on “tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictory puzzles” (p.4), there is nothing like even a brief analytical framework for analysis of democracy and democratization. Consequently, the author’s selection of the conditions, actors, and dynamics to focus on remains ambiguous. The same applies to what scholarly arguments are deemed worthy of attention. Davidson certainly accounts for interesting factors within his three main fields of politics, political economy, and identity-based mobilization, to which we shall return. But how are these fields and factors identified and related to each other in the context of democratization? And what scholarly results are considered and why? The reader simply does not know, only that, obviously, much of the critical, especially Indonesian, scholarship on the problems and options of democratization is set aside.

An initial example is that Davidson deems the weak rule of law as the prime problem, but he does not provide an argument for ignoring the alternative conclusion from extensive research that the fundamental problems are poor organization and representation of vital interests beyond the dominant groups, particularly if one wants to foster better rule of law in democratic ways. Second, Davidson identifies one of the crucial institutional obstacles to democracy—that parties must be present around the huge country to participate even in local elections—but he does not argue for his setting aside of the additional important challenges based on thorough research for strategic socio-economic groups and citizens to organize and make a difference in mainstream politics. Third, Davidson presents his own

important analyses of identity-based mobilization as the third major theme in his book, but what are the arguments for not considering other forms of mobilization, such as those based on interests among workers (including domestic workers), farmers, and fishermen? (Labor studies, for one, is only mentioned in a brief footnote.) Fourth, why is there no analysis of the most important effort at a broad democratic alliance for improved democratic policies, the successful struggles for a universal public health reform? Further, why are the causes for the failure to sustain that alliance also not considered, even though that paved the way for conservative populism? Fifth, why are the efforts at equal and active citizenship to overcome Suharto's politics of "floating masses" and the continued politics of amnesia regarding suppression and mass killings not deemed worthy of attention in a discussion of Indonesia's democracy? Finally, why is the rise of Jokowi only explained in terms of decentralization and local direct elections, ignoring the role of local civil society groups and social movements in the building of the successful social pact in his hometown (Solo), which caught the imagination of large numbers of people in Jakarta too, but could not be applied nationally? Davidson might have interesting reasons for these and other priorities, but why are they not even hinted at? These are important so that we can sustain the primacy of intellectual deliberation against the suppositional mainstream within Indonesian studies.

Keeping such critical questions in mind, however, the reader may indeed benefit from Davidson's review of a number of other aspects of the post-Suharto development, especially in the sections on the political economy and "identity-based mobilizations." One example is the discussion about the consequences of the immediate decentralization of politics and administration after 1998, followed by the commodity boom, much driven by China's and India's economic growth. On the one hand, one might conclude from Davidson that decentralization along with the boom saved Indonesia's establishment after the Asian economic crisis and turbulent political transition. The undermining of previous centralized authoritarianism provided room of maneuver for a wide array of leaders and business persons. The oligarchs adjusted. And after some time, local strongmen substituted new business opportunities for regional rebellion. Moreover, the state gained fresh revenues, enabling President Yudhoyono, in particular, to foster stability and provide some handouts to voters from among vulnerable sections of the population. On the other hand, much of

the decentralization and the increasing demand for commodities fostered primitive accumulation of capital, including predatory practices. Economic growth was to a large extent based on plunder and extraction of natural resources. In contrast, investment in manufacturing and industry was less profitable, in spite of increasing demand based on privileged upper- and middle-class consumption. Most importantly, few new jobs were created and the much-needed improvement of the infrastructure was lagging behind. In short, state-private partnerships flourished and most powerful actors were happy, but inclusive development was held back.

This brings to mind similar problems of fostering inclusive rather than extractive growth during and after the commodity boom in a number of other countries in the Global South, such as in Latin America. So far, Indonesia under Jokowi has avoided an Argentinian, Venezuelan, or Brazilian catastrophe by reducing fuel subsidies in favor of state-directed investments in the poorly developed infrastructure and some welfare reforms. But growth is below the seven percent that Jokowi aimed for; and more importantly, again, as Davidson underlines, the question is how many new jobs can be created and what will happen within manufacturing and industry. At the time of writing this review, media reports focus on senior ministers, servants, and state-enterprise leaders trying to attract foreign investments when China is getting risky and more expensive. To Davidson's factors, one might also add, however, that Indonesia's more fundamental problem might be its weak and fragmented interest-based organizations among productive-oriented capital *and* labor, which could negotiate inclusive development along with investments in improved workers' education and training plus productive welfare. Worse, neither reform-oriented populists nor their right-wing equivalents have an answer to this crisis of representation.

Another example of important processes that Davidson draws attention to is the combination of the local extractive growth along with rent-seeking activities and identity-based mobilization. The rush for resources and funds, and the proliferation of new local district administrations, came with intensified identity politics. It would have been helpful to analyze this case on a firmer historical framework of reinvented elements of the colonial indirect rule of commodity production through strongmen and religious-cum-ethnic communities, in contrast to the direct relations between citizens and the state fought for by socialists and communists in the nationalist movement. Yet, the

best parts of Davidson's book do include elements of this perspective, especially the analysis of the rise of new movements based on, but not always, inclusionary customary rule (*adat*), in addition to religious and ethnic identity politics. This partial resurgence of earlier dynamics—along with vigilante groups—comes with new mobilization against the LGBT community and frequent support from sections of the oligarchs and military. Thus, Davidson also adds important insights about the attempts at weakening the Jokowi government, especially since 2016.

Davidson rounds up with an interesting discussion about “(w)ho and which strategic group might bring down Indonesia’s democracy” (p.55)? Most oligarchs, he contends, have good reasons to be sufficiently satisfied with their firm control of resources, electoral politics, and media. The military, moreover, lost out initially but have regained control of their corporate interests and sustained its territorial organization, which is helpful in controlling people as well as local resources. Senior officers are also making headways within business and politics. Instead, according to Davidson, Islamic nationalism poses the largest threat. This, he adds, is not about Islam, which has long been compatible with Indonesian democracy, but Islamism. Worse, there is a possibility of horse-trading between anti-democratic Islamists, oligarchs, and military leaders, with politicians such as the ex-general-turned-tycoon Prabowo Subianto at the forefront. To counter this, Davidson concludes that the creation of more jobs and better rule of law are crucial priorities. Unsurprisingly, however, given the weak analysis of democratization, he has nothing to say on who can foster this by way of strengthening and deepening democracy.

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