

**Kees van Dijk, *A Country in Despair: Indonesia Between 1997 and 2000*.
Leiden: KITLV Press, No. 186, 2001. 621 pages.**

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Over the past decade or so, it has become increasingly rare for social scientists to write book-length works about major historical moments or periods of upheaval. One of the major reasons for this is that time—a single month, an entire year, even several years—is not one of the standard definitive elements used to outline areas of specialization. Instead, social scientists have opted for the edited volume, with its particular strengths (academic specialization, cross-disciplinary collaboration) and glaring weaknesses (artificial compartmentalization, lack of unity). And so reporting on critical periods has generally become the domain of journalists and professional rapporteurs—some of these works are illuminating, others wretched. Such is the case with the Indonesian economic crisis and transition from authoritarian rule. There are now several English-language books about “*Reformasi*” written by journalists (Richard Mann, etc.) and a number of edited volumes by academics (G. Forrester and R. J. May, eds., Budiman, Hatley, and Kingsbury, eds., Don Emmerson, ed., Benedict Anderson, ed.), but few individual scholars have attempted to examine Indonesian politics since the economic meltdown that began in 1997 and Suharto’s abdication in May 1998.

This book by Kees van Dijk is an ambitious attempt to work against that tide. The book examines Indonesia during its economic and political crisis, from 1997 until December 2000. Oddly, however, the author never explains his goals. Indeed, there is no introduction. (Nor is there a conclusion.) The four-paragraph preface simply informs the reader that “the original intention was to concentrate on the events leading up to Soeharto’s fall,” but the subsequent events “proved to be at least as interesting. Consequently the book describes political developments in Indonesia up to the middle of December 2000.” (p. vii)

The reader quickly discovers that the author’s aim is to summarize the events—both large and small—at the end of the New Order and the beginning of the New New Order. The body of the book consists of twenty chapters and an epilogue. These cover the 1997 election (chapters 1 and 2), the onset of the economic crisis (3 and 4), the deepening political crisis in early 1998 (5 and 6), protest and Suharto’s resignation (7 and 8), the various “sins” of the New Order (9-12), political demands, regional violence, and economic troubles during Habibie’s presidency (13-17), the 1999 campaign and election (17), and President Wahid’s first year in office (18-20). Appendices provide partial information on the “Main Parties and Organizations” (nine listed), Indonesian cabinets since 1993 (five in all), an incomplete list of military officers who held cabinet posts since the 1980s, a list of some key military functions [read: officers] in operation since the 1980s, the governors and military/police commanders of Jakarta, the attorney general’s list of suspects in the violence in East Timor in 1999, a glossary and a list of abbreviations. This is a tremendous amount to cover in a single book.

To do so, van Dijk relies almost entirely on the Indonesian print media. There are a mere 126 “books and articles” listed in the bibliography, 113 published in Indonesian and thirteen in English. Given both the book’s length and the exceptionally high quality

of scholarship on Indonesia, this is surprising. The media can, of course, be a wonderfully rich source for scholars, but this depends entirely on how it is read and to what purposes it is put. Here, reports from the print media are reproduced virtually verbatim, with sentence after sentence explaining who said what, who was suspected of this, and who was accused of that. In following this method, the author does not seriously question the "official" line on topics such as Krismon (the economic crisis), SARA (communal violence), and KKN (corruption), and he tends to reproduce New Order clichés about "mobs" and "certain groups." In sum, we are treated to a blow by blow account of politics as seen through the (translated) lens of the media.

The author's reliance on the print media raises questions about who gets to speak and who does not, who gets heard and who does not—both in politics and academic writing. On the one hand, those with privileged access to the media (politicians, military officers, academics, and students) appear throughout the book, speaking about their interests, their understanding of political developments, and their hopes about what should and should not change. On the other hand, peasants, industrial workers, fisher folk, the urban poor, and even the petty bourgeoisie are seldom heard, except when they explode rudely on the scene as "the masses" or "mobs." There is, therefore, a striking contrast between the "voice" of elites and other social groups: the former commonly speaking, but not acting, and the latter acting, but not speaking. This contrast is not only a reflection of media coverage, but also of the shifting categories Indonesians use when speaking about their society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the increasing sharpness of the dichotomy between "*orang mampu*" (those with enough, referring to the middle classes) and "*orang tidak mampu*" (those without enough to live in similar style, phrased to imply that these needy people are less capable than those who have succeeded).

Which brings us to the title. Who is in despair? Not the current political elite, most of whom are unashamed opportunists. Not the domestic bourgeoisie, though a number of prominent robber-barons have indeed fallen victim to their own rapaciousness and illegal practices. Not the working class, which, though it has certainly suffered in terms of real wages, now has more hope than at any time over the past four decades. Not the peasantry involved in producing export crops in places such as Lampung, Manado, and South Sulawesi. Not the people of East Timor, who have won their long-awaited freedom and now face the tasks ahead, nor the people of West Papua or Aceh. Not even the military, which has quietly benefited from the political ineptness and opportunism of the chattering elite. Who then is in despair? The answer, I fear, is "the middle"—those who own enough to fear its loss but not enough to defend it from the vicious "masses." Perhaps too those who believed that Abdurrahman Wahid was a champion of democracy.