

Susan Blackburn. *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 257 pages.

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On February 23, 1998, in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, a group of about fifty women identifying themselves as “housewives and mothers” (some of whom also happened to be prominent intellectuals) staged a demonstration in a conspicuous Jakarta location under the name Suara Ibu Peduli (SIP, Voice of Concerned Mothers). The purpose of their “prayer for milk” protest was to draw attention to the failure of the state to provide for the basic needs of Indonesian citizens, particularly mothers and children, as the value of the *rupiah* plunged, prices soared, and the country’s economic situation became increasingly dire. Surrounded by police and security personnel as well as numerous journalists, the women conducted a communal prayer, sang the nationalist song “*Kulihat Ibu Pertiwi*” (I see the motherland), and read a statement entitled “When Mothers Speak.” While the protest went on, some members of the group sold milk for babies and children at below-market prices. The women also offered bread and flowers to the security personnel who had been sent to break up the demonstration, but soon the police took three of the women into custody and the rest of the group peacefully disbanded. The three women were held overnight, interrogated, and finally charged with carrying out a demonstration without a permit, for which they paid small fines.¹

This was just one of the many public protests that ultimately led to Suharto’s resignation in May 1998. It can also be seen, however, as an example of the emergent forms of women’s activism that developed in Indonesia during the late- and post-New Order period, which worked directly or indirectly to focus critical attention on the state’s lack of progress in improving women’s rights and general welfare, and which offered alternatives to state-sponsored programs for women. The organizations that came into being during this period, many of them relatively small, were a far cry from the massive, state-controlled women’s organizations that were so closely identified with the New Order, such as Dharma Wanita (Women’s duty) and PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, or Family Welfare Guidance). Nevertheless, there were reverberations with earlier moments in Indonesian history when groups of women had acted collectively on behalf of all Indonesian women, sometimes under the banner of motherhood, as the members of Suara Ibu Peduli did in 1998. While some of those organizations and movements have been individually documented, women’s activism as a whole has received scant attention in the otherwise substantial literature on Indonesian politics and social movements. There have also been few efforts to link the disparate strands of the women’s movement over time or to examine how the movement has been affected by other changes in Indonesian politics. To fully grasp the significance of even a small action like the one staged by the women of Suara Ibu Peduli—why, for example, a group of urban intellectuals chose to emphasize their

¹ Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 163–164. See also the press releases issued by Suara Ibu Peduli in Indonesian and English on February 23 and 24, 1998, available online at <http://www.suaraiupedulio.org/release1.html> and <http://www.library.ohiou.edu/indopubs/1998/02/24/0035.html>, respectively.

connection with motherhood to highlight the government's failures, how selling milk cheaply became a political tool, and why the women received so much media attention for their actions—one needs to know more about the broader context of women's activism in relation to the state.

What Susan Blackburn's *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* provides, then, is a badly needed retrospective on Indonesian women's gender activism over the past century. Ambitious in scope, the book takes up the shifting relationship between women's movements and the state from the late colonial era to the post-New Order period. To be able to include such dissimilar organizations as Dharma Wanita, Suara Ibu Peduli, and the radical nationalist-feminist organization Istri Sedar (founded in the early 1930s) in the same book, Blackburn categorizes them all under the broad rubric "the women's movement," a term she uses "to refer to the collective articulation of the desires of Indonesian women."² While acknowledging that this movement has been highly varied in its membership and goals, and that it has not adequately represented women from all sectors of Indonesian society, Blackburn maintains that "it is still possible to speak of 'a movement,' implying a common effort to improve the situation of Indonesian women."³

In addition to women's organizations, the book also focuses on individuals who have spoken out on behalf of women's rights and interests over time. Blackburn starts with well-known figures like R. A. Kartini and Dewi Sartika, but also includes lesser-known people who nonetheless claimed to represent the greater aspirations of women at different points in Indonesian history.

To do justice to a century of women's activism in one book is not easy. Drawing on a wide array of primary and secondary sources—ranging from letters and articles that appeared in a women's weekly newspaper published in West Sumatra in the early 1900s, to Dutch and Indonesian government reports, to the publications of such well-known women's organizations as Gerwani and Aisyiyah—Blackburn patiently constructs a coherent narrative out of a diverse movement. In the introduction, she lays out some of the broad questions that are addressed in the book, including: Under what circumstances has the colonial or Indonesian state been interested in taking up women's issues? How have state ideologies shaped the construction of gender under different regimes? What factors have brought about changes in state gender ideologies? When and why has the state intervened in women's issues, and what has been the outcome of those interventions? Which elements of the women's movement have been co-opted by the state, and for what reasons? Under what conditions, on the other hand, has the movement been able to operate relatively independently? When and how has the movement been effective in promoting its agendas and bringing about change?⁴ Throughout the rest of the book she attempts to answer those questions and others by looking at the specific organizations and trends that emerged in distinct political eras.

The first chapter after the introduction provides a fairly brief but useful overview of the history of the Indonesian women's movement and its changing relationship to the state from the early twentieth century through the year 2003. It

² Blackburn, *Women and the State*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

shows how the shifting concerns and policies of the state over this period of time contributed to the emergence of particular types of women's organizations, and examines the ways in which these organizations were either closely tied to the state or allowed to operate with comparative autonomy. The chapter discusses major women's organizations and federations that were dominant during different periods, and traces continuities among these organizations as well as important ruptures. It also identifies particular gender ideologies and policies that were fostered by each regime, and how those ideologies influenced the expectations and activities of the women's movement.

Rather than taking a strictly chronological approach throughout the entire book, however, Blackburn chose to structure most of the book along thematic lines. Beginning with Chapter 2, each chapter takes up a particular issue that has been especially significant for the women's movement in its relationship with the state. Some of these issues were of concern throughout much of the twentieth century (the era covered by the book); others received considerable attention at certain historical moments but were ignored or seen as less important at other times. The chapters are organized around the following themes: education, early marriage, citizenship, polygamy, motherhood, economic exploitation, and violence. Those are all matters that have been publicly defined as "women's issues" at various times by Indonesian women themselves, if only those of certain social strata.⁵ A major objective of the book is to understand why some concerns have been treated as "women's issues" by both the women's movement and the state, while others have not.⁶ Each chapter, although organized more or less chronologically, concentrates primarily on the period in which the issue under focus was first highlighted as a public concern and was addressed by the state. Within each chapter, Blackburn analyzes how state policies and gender ideologies shaped the debates and forms of activism that characterized the women's movement, and how and why particular issues were brought to the fore of the movement in certain political periods but then receded or failed to emerge in others. The advantage of focusing the chapters on thematic issues is that it enables her to examine both continuities and disruptions that occurred in the movement as the political system and the larger society underwent major transformations, and to bring to light the tangible ways in which state policy affected the concerns of the movement and the ability of its members to effect positive change for women.

The book's historical perspective offers greater insights into the women's movement as a whole and into the broader social and political contexts in which it has existed than would be available through a study that concentrates on a shorter time period. For example, Blackburn's analysis of developments in women's organizations from the early post-independence period through the end of the New Order points to some significant continuities between the later Sukarno years and the Suharto period that run counter to common assumptions about the rupture that divided the two political eras. In the chapter on citizenship, for instance, she argues that during an initial period of liberal democracy—beginning with the transfer of sovereignty from the Dutch to the Republic of Indonesia in 1949 until the imposition of Guided Democracy in 1958—the women's movement had considerable latitude to set its own agendas and to operate independently of the state. Sukarno's establishment of a more

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

authoritarian regime in the Guided Democracy period, however, brought an end to this independence. It was at this time, she asserts, that the state established the pattern of co-opting women's organizations for its own purposes, a precedent that was soon to be followed by the Suharto regime. The demands made on women as citizens under the Sukarno and Suharto regimes were very different, but the two regimes "equally disdained notions of their rights. Both regimes mobilized women for their own purposes."⁷ She adds that both regimes generally emphasized citizens' obligations rather than rights: "Under both Sukarno and Suharto, talk of 'rights' smacked of Western liberalism, which was declared un-Indonesian."⁸ Not until fairly late in the Suharto period did some women's organizations and other groups become vocal in pressing for basic rights; even then their activities were circumscribed, and some organizations were subjected to harassment when the government felt that they had overstepped their bounds.⁹

Examining the women's movement through a deep timeline also enables Blackburn to show how certain grievances have been raised again and again by the women's movement but have never been satisfactorily addressed by the state. Some of the most enduring of these complaints concern women's lack of rights in marriage. While a number of problems have been raised over time with regard to marriage, such as the matter of girls being married off too young and of women having fewer rights in divorce than men, she finds that none of the issues taken up in the book has aroused more emotion among Indonesian women than that of polygamy.¹⁰ Despite the relatively low incidence of polygamy in Indonesia, it has been a recurring theme in relations between women and the state since the colonial period.¹¹ As one woman wrote in a women's weekly in 1913, "Polygamy is the poison of the world for us women. There is nothing so painful, so troublesome."¹² Blackburn cites a number of examples of public actions taken by women against polygamy, including speeches delivered in the first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928; protests against President Sukarno's polygamous marriage in 1955; repeated campaigns for a marriage law from the 1940s until a law was finally passed in 1974 (which restricted but did not prohibit polygamy); and demonstrations against polygamists that took place in 2003.¹³ The chapter on polygamy not only documents those protests and the events leading up to them, but also analyzes the reasons that Indonesian regimes have not been willing to take the step of prohibiting polygamy altogether even when the regime itself did not approve of the practice, as was the case during both colonial rule and the New Order. In addition, the author discusses some of the arguments that women have used as the basis for their demands that the state restrict or outlaw polygamy (e.g., moral, economic, social, legal), but she also makes it clear that not all Indonesian women or women's organizations have supported such demands because of their unwillingness

⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸ Ibid., p. 99.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 104, 184–86.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 112.

¹² "Bermadoe," *Soenting Melajoe*, 2,23 (1913): 1, cited in Blackburn, *Women and the State*, p. 111.

¹³ Blackburn, *Women and the State*, pp. 111–112. For further discussion of the anti-polygamy protests of 2003 and the events that precipitated them, see: Nina Nurmila, "Polygamy and Chickens," *Inside Indonesia* 83 (2005): 19–20.

to have the government interfere in matters that they have deemed to fall under the domain of religion rather than that of the state.

This book is most interesting in the details it provides regarding particular individuals or organizations operating at specific historical junctures, which give glimpses into the complex workings of the women's movement over time as it has attempted to negotiate with regimes that have not necessarily had women's best interests in mind. One sees how members of the women's movement have tried to convince the state and its citizens that women's rights are of importance not only to women themselves, but to the national good, at the same time that the state has tried to manipulate women and women's organizations to serve its own agenda. The welfare of women and their families has been repeatedly linked to the strength of the nation, whether by women activists or by the state. Thus, in a speech delivered at the 1928 Women's Congress, Siti Sundari, an outspoken advocate of women's rights, insisted that polygamy should be banned for nationalist reasons: "The stronger our households, the stronger the Indonesian nation; the happier and more secure the marriages of Indonesians, the happier and safer the Indonesian nation."¹⁴ This remark has a striking but perhaps not surprising resonance with later state rhetoric linking strong families to the well-being of the nation, as in the following statement taken from an official government handbook published during the Suharto era: "The (nation) state can only be strong if it is made up of strong families. A just nation can only be achieved through a just arrangement of families. For that reason, building a family implies participation in the building of the foundation of a nation."¹⁵ As Blackburn's book unfolds, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of such statements and why they have had such strong political as well as emotional impact over the course of the past century.

In choosing to focus the book on the relationship of the women's movement with the state, Blackburn made the decision to minimize discussion of women's organizations that have tended to avoid or downplay direct involvement with the state. One of the consequences of this choice is that Islamic women's organizations, including such major organizations as Aisyiyah and Muslimat (affiliated with Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, respectively) receive only passing mention. Although she acknowledges that "it is impossible to be truly nonpolitical, and Islamic groups have been influential in many ways," she adds that these women's organizations "have rarely been outspoken on the issues under consideration in this book," especially in comparison to the more publicly demanding secular women's organizations.¹⁶ While she does refer to Islamic women's organizations when it seems relevant, as in the chapter about polygamy, I would have liked to see more about how state policies and ideologies have shaped those organizations at different points in history as well as the ways in which they have worked either in accord or at odds with the state. When writing a study that is so broad in scope, however, certain choices and

¹⁴ *Congres Perempuan Indonesia yang Pertama, 22–25 Desember 1928 di Mataram* (Djakakarta: Administratie 'Isteri,' 1929), p. 55. Cited in Blackburn, *Women and the State*, p. 123.

¹⁵ "Panca Krida: Five Creeds/Points," *Indonesia Official Handbook* (Jakarta: Republic of Indonesia, Department of Information, 1989), p. 65. Cited in Julia I. Suryakusuma, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 97.

¹⁶ Blackburn, *Women and the State*, p. 13.

omissions have to be made, so Blackburn's justifications for not devoting more attention to Islamic organizations are understandable.

Women and the State in Modern Indonesia is a genuinely important book that was, by the author's own acknowledgment, many years in the making. Its thoughtful analysis, clear and accessible style, and comprehensiveness make it useful to a wide audience, including specialists on Indonesian politics and gender issues as well as more-general readers. It also provides a valuable complement to more focused studies of women's politics, such as Saskia Wieringa's recent book, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, which concentrates on the leftist women's organization Gerwani.¹⁷ Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this book lays the groundwork for future studies of Indonesian women's politics, pointing to exciting areas of research that have yet to be tapped.

¹⁷ Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).