

Edward Aspinall. *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005. 328 pages plus introduction.

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Opposing Suharto should become the standard work on the last decade of the Suharto presidency in Indonesia. In this revised version of his doctoral thesis at the Australian National University, Edward Aspinall anchors his analysis in political-science transitions theory. Within that framework, he offers accurate descriptions and well-argued, nuanced, and balanced analyses of the major government and opposition actors and their actions, helping us to understand both the manner of Suharto's departure and its implications for today's democratic politics and politicians.

Despite the book's high quality, it is still possible to question several of the author's interpretations and judgments and what they tell us about current politics. These include: the claim that Suharto became an increasingly sultanistic ruler; the underplaying of such external factors as the end of the US-USSR Cold War and the 1997-1998 financial crisis; and insufficient attention to the ways in which autonomous choices of certain key actors pushed events and therefore outcomes in directions they might not otherwise have gone. Of these key actors, perhaps the most important is Suharto's immediate successor, President B. J. Habibie, who made several major decisions outside Aspinall's analytical box with significant and lasting consequences, most of them positive, for today. Put differently, Aspinall's interpretation of the legacy of Suharto's final decade leaves us in the end with a suprisingly one-sided, much too gloomy, picture of the democratic present.

Aspinall begins by explicitly throwing down a gauntlet in front of those analysts who have attributed Suharto's longevity solely or mainly to his arbitrary use of violence against his opponents. "It was not repression alone, but rather the combination of repression with toleration for constrained forms of political action that made Suharto's New Order one of the most durable and successful third world authoritarian regimes" (p. 2). Borrowing from Juan Linz, Aspinall argues that the New Order was an instance of an authoritarian (as opposed to totalitarian) regime that allowed "limited pluralism." On page three Aspinall compares New Order Indonesia with late 1960s Spain, where, according to Linz, there was a "wide-spread tone and mentality of opposition" together with "a simultaneous failure of structural or principled opposition."¹ And, writes Linz, "[t]he semifreedom under such regimes imposes on their opponents certain costs that are quite different from those of persecution of illegal oppositions and that explain their frustration, disintegration, and sometimes readiness to co-optation, which contribute to the persistence of such regimes as much as does their repressive capacity."²

¹ Juan J. Linz, "Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain," in *Regimes and Oppositions*, ed. Robert A. Dahl (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 176.

² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

In the Indonesian case, this pattern explains the long life of the New Order and many characteristics of opposition leaders throughout the period, including their excessive caution and willingness to compromise. Much conflict took place in a “gray area” between state and society, involving contests for control over state institutions that opposition forces mostly lost. The end came in 1998 in the form of a massive social uprising, forcing opposition leaders to act even though their movement “remained poorly institutionalized, deeply divided, and largely ideologically incoherent...” (p. 4). Although Suharto was overthrown, and democratic institutions eventually replaced his authoritarian system, three decades of limited pluralism left a powerful legacy in the form of “a high degree of continuity between the new democratic politics and those of the authoritarian past...” (p. 269). Aspinall highlights worsening ethnic and religious conflict, the continuing pervasiveness of corruption and money politics, under-organized, shallow-rooted, and visionless political parties, no new reform-minded social or political organizations, a still politically active military, and a general blurring of the line between the new democratic and the old authoritarian players and politics.

The core of the book, between a stage-setting Chapter 2 on the early New Order and a penultimate Chapter 9 comparing Indonesian democratization with other Southeast Asian cases, is a part-thematic, part-chronological description of interactions between government and opposition in the 1990s. Separate chapters discuss: (a) the activities of three elite dissident groups—Petition of Fifty, with roots in the 1980s; Abdurrahman Wahid’s Forum Demokrasi; and the retired-military based YKPK (Yayasan Kerukunan Persaudaraan Kebangsaan, Foundation for National Harmony and Brotherhood); the latter two groups were founded in opposition to the government’s promotion of ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslimin se-Indonesia, Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals); (b) the proto-opposition provided by NGOs, in particular LBH (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Legal Aid Institute), headed by Adnan Buyung Nasution; (c) student activism, which evolved from moral force to embryonic political movement; (d) two chapters on the rise and temporary fall of Megawati Soekarnoputri as head of PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, Indonesian Democracy Party); and, finally, (e) the events leading to the resignation of Suharto on May 21, 1998.

These chapters are analytic gems that can stand on their own as the best short treatments of their respective subjects. In each, after carefully weighing the evidence for alternative views, Aspinall offers a clear and generally persuasive argument and conclusion. For example, Chapter 4 contains a penetrating analysis of the politics of LBH, the self-proclaimed “locomotive of democracy,” but Aspinall is careful not to conclude that either LBH or other NGOs ever became more than proto-opposition forces. Instead, he argues that “NGOs were accurate mirrors of middle-class opinion, cautious and ambivalent while trying to influence state action and create an autonomous zone for societal initiative” (p. 114). In Chapter 5 he argues convincingly against the oversimplifications of Michael Vatikiotis and others who claimed that student activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s were front men and women for discontented army officers. *Au contraire*, students in this period were conscious of the extent to which their predecessors in the 1960s had “helped disguise [the Armed Forces’] seizure of power and insisted that they would never repeat this error” (p. 138).

This measured approach is already apparent in the analysis of the military in Chapter 2, where Aspinall first resists the temptation to fit Indonesian military politics into the Procrustean bed of hard-line/soft-line regime splits beloved by transitions theorists. On page 34 a claim is made that in the early 1990s officers' discontent began for the first time to be directed at Suharto and his palace loyalists. But Aspinall is careful to point out that older patterns of second-level factional competition (between officers as well as between officers and civilian officials, but not directed at Suharto) continued, that many officers were ambivalent toward Suharto, and that intra-military factional alignments were typically shallow and shifted frequently. On a related and highly controversial issue, the "greening" or Islamization of the armed-forces leadership at this time, Aspinall is appropriately skeptical (p. 46). Finally, in Chapter 8, "The Fall of Suharto," he shows how the top armed forces leadership, despite internal splits, remained loyal to Suharto until the last few months of his presidency.

Chapter 8 also contains Aspinall's one substantive claim with which I disagree, that Suharto's rule became increasingly "sultanistic" in the 1990s. Sultanism is a term borrowed from H. E. Chehabi and Juan Linz that emphasizes personal rulership.³

In such regimes, loyalty to the ruler is based on "a mixture of fear and rewards to his collaborators," rather than ideology or charisma, and the ruler "exercises his power without restraint." As a result, "corruption reigns supreme at all levels of society," the leader makes repeated arbitrary decisions, and the ruling circle is chiefly made up of individuals who owe their positions to "their purely personal submission to the ruler...." A process of "sultanization" is especially likely toward the end of a ruler's term in office: ..."One might call this *fin de regne* sultanism."

Aspinall is characteristically careful with this claim. He does not deny that there was a personal element in the New Order regime from the beginning, but argues that the senior army leadership, senior technocrats, and certain civilian politicians constituted "a collective enterprise, grounded in the military-civilian alliance of 1965-66, and it took Suharto the better part of the 1970s to establish his unquestioned dominance" (p. 204). The evidence for 1990s sultanism includes Suharto's personal attacks on Megawati and lesser figures, the flagrant corruption of his children and the accompanying atmosphere of palace decadence, his reliance on competition between former personal adjutant Wiranto and son-in-law Prabowo Subianto to control the army, and his purges of those individuals in Golkar, the armed forces, other state institutions, and ICMI who doubted his leadership.

My own view is nearly the opposite of Aspinall's: there was great consistency and continuity in New Order political structures and policies. The regime was a collective enterprise committed to stability and development (and hierarchy) from beginning to end. Within that enterprise, Suharto became the unchallengeable decider, the first among unequals, no later than the late 1960s. Army officers, including General Soemitro but certainly those after him, did Suharto's bidding or paid the price. The

³ Aspinall, pp. 203-04. The quoted passages are from H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, "A Theory of Sultanism 1: A Type of Nondemocratic Rule" (pp. 3-25) and "A Theory of Sultanism 2: Genesis and Demise of Sultanistic Regimes in *Sultanistic Regimes*" (pp. 26-48), in *Sultanistic Regimes*, ed. H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

technocrats were never more than his assistants for economic affairs. It is hard to think of a party or other civilian politician, including the Sultan of Yogyakarta and Adam Malik, both of whom became vice-presidents, who had significant power or autonomy. Events comparable to those described by Aspinall occurred throughout the New Order, not just at its end. The only real difference is actuarial. Suharto at the end was weak and vulnerable, which explains both his lashing out at real and imagined enemies and the ease and suddenness with which he finally fell.

Fortunately for his overall argument, Aspinall does less with his sultanization thesis as causal variable than with his original limited pluralism concept. While sultanization did make Suharto's final years and perhaps especially his final months in power more turbulent, in the end Aspinall concludes that it was mainly the long decades when repression was combined with limited tolerance that have so powerfully shaped the present.

Aspinall's remaining analytical sins are of omission rather than commission. He claims that though the opposition was unable to provide a clear democratic alternative to Suharto's authoritarianism, "it had been effective at inculcating an oppositional mood in society and in eroding the ideological bases of authoritarian rule" (p. 271). Less discussed are the changes taking place beyond Indonesia's borders during this same period, specifically the end of the US-USSR Cold War. The New Order had been a response, with broad support both domestically and internationally, to the threat of communism. In the 1990s, democracy became the only form of government with widespread international legitimacy and increasingly the indirect and direct favor of the United States. Was it the behavior of the domestic opposition, the changed international climate, or some interaction of the two that inculcated an oppositional mood and eroded the ideological bases of authoritarian rule in Indonesia? Aspinall never confronts the issue.

Similarly, the political impact of the economic crisis and collapse of 1997-1998 is never considered seriously. If the crisis had not occurred, would Suharto have been driven from power? If not, does that suggest that the power of the opposition was not, in fact, very great at the end of the 1990s, maybe no greater than it had been when it rose on two occasions in the 1970s?

Finally, unless we believe that social forces act directly in politics, analysis of constraints—whatever their source—must be mediated by analysis of the choices of individual actors. Some actors are undoubtedly more constrained, more predictably the product of particular social forces (e.g., culture, social structure, personality, rationality), than others. But nearly all have the capacity for autonomous choices that have consequences, sometimes great consequences, for others. They exercise this capacity by choosing strategies and tactics, as opportunity permits, that maximize or transform the political resources they possess and minimize or circumvent constraints such as those imposed by limited pluralism or sultanization. It is because of their capacity for autonomous choice that political leaders can be held accountable for their actions, a basic requirement in a democracy.

Aspinall's cast of characters is large, but he never offers a systematic analysis of choice under constraint that would enable us to hold them accountable. On the evidence available, President Habibie appears to have been the most successful of them

all by making three decisive choices that had a huge impact on society. He laid the foundation for today's presidential democracy by freeing the press, permitting political parties to form, and holding genuinely democratic elections. He initiated the process that freed East Timor, saving the Indonesian body politic from a malignant tumor before it could metastasize. And he oversaw passage of the decentralization laws that have since transformed governmental decision-making and implementation. While it is too early to tell whether these specific laws will be successful, there is no question that in the post-Suharto Indonesian context democratization presupposed decentralization.

To conclude, Aspinall has provided us with a sophisticated and generally persuasive analysis of the Linzian constraints faced by Indonesian politicians during the last decade of the Suharto presidency. But Habibie's choices in the immediate post-Suharto period demonstrate that constraints are only half of the analytical picture. By choosing wisely and at opportune moments the strategy and tactics that maximize resources and minimize constraints, entrepreneurial political leaders can produce positive outcomes for their societies. The defects that remain in Indonesian democracy today can be removed by political action tomorrow.