

Taufik Abdullah. *Indonesia: Towards Democracy*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009. 640 pp.

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This is a gigantic book for many reasons. First is that it's lengthy, containing over five hundred pages of text. Further, the time span it covers is long, for it encompasses nearly a hundred years of modern Indonesian history. Finally, it takes nearly a century of scholarship concerning Indonesian national development and melds it into a solid national history of the Indonesian nation-state. This book is truly a *tour de force* by one of Indonesia's most noted scholars. It is given added stature by being one of several histories on nations of Southeast Asia to be written by important, indigenous scholars under the leadership of the well-known intellectual Wang Gungwu, under the auspices of Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, perhaps the preeminent scholarly study center in Southeast Asia. The book has solid credentials.

This history centers on the Indonesian nation-state, from its nascent beginning in the early twentieth century, through the important periods of its national history under two prominent presidents (Sukarno and Suharto), up to the current period of readjustment as it undergoes democratic rejuvenation and economic recovery. Its point of view centers on the seat of government in Jakarta and discusses the issues that challenged the two leaders in the development of the modern Indonesian state since 1945. The author, Taufik Abdullah, focuses on how the decisions of the two presidents took the state in particular directions and how the nation itself weathered its challenges to emerge as the successful nation-state that exists today, as flawed as that success has been. He gives great credit to Sukarno for his crusade in bringing Indonesia into being, for overcoming its early obstacles, and for giving it its initial direction. Taufik is less entranced by Suharto, but recognizes the value of the stability and economic achievement that he attained after the economic barrenness of the Sukarno years. The author is highly critical of both leaders for rejecting democratic forms of government in favor of self-serving administrations that he claims hindered the political advancement of the Indonesian nation in general. He regards the great challenge for the current government to be promoting ideals and forms of governance aimed at making Indonesia a long-lasting democratic bastion. If the author is the consummate realist in discussing the past, he is equally an idealist in facing the future.

As national history, this book is well-designed and well-written. At times it chews the material too fine, perhaps rehashing some political events that have lost their meaning with time, and sometimes it repeats descriptions of events, albeit from a slightly different perspective. However, both characteristics are intentional, meant to provide insight into the developments that led to the shaping of the Indonesian nation-state at particular times so that the analysis is complete and meaningful; it succeeds very well in this regard. The most satisfactory part of the book is its description of the first historical era, when Indonesian nationalists and intellectuals developed, mostly in an *ad hoc* way, the key concepts and understandings that ultimately undergirded the Indonesian nationalist movement that most political groups supported as the new state emerged. The book's discussion of the rise of a new nation-state, of Indonesia's

formative period, is likely to be the volume's most enduring feature. Also of great value is the thorough discussion of long-running regional challenges in East Timor, Aceh, and Irian Jaya, which have bedeviled recent governments; it is seldom that analyses of all these separatist movements are brought together under one cover.

Are there important points that were omitted? Perhaps, but only two come close to being important enough to be considered for possible inclusion. First, there was the creation of the "Berkeley Mafia," the technocrats of the middle and late Suharto period who engineered the "economic miracle" of that era. They were originally bright, young Indonesian students, sponsored for overseas study during the late Sukarno era by a group of international aid organizations, who realized that Indonesia needed profound economic development along modern lines. The second possible omission might be the staffing of an enormous state bureaucracy, whose members needed modern education. This educated staff not only made it possible for the state to function, but also gave stability to the Indonesian nation by serving as a core for the middle-class citizenry that saw Indonesia—not their local ethnic affiliations or regional identifications—as its point of loyalty. But to be fair to the author, those two factors (i.e., the influence of technocrats and bureaucrats) were dealt with tangentially in his study. Not everything of importance can be included in-depth in such a study, even one of this size. Choices have to be made, and the author made good ones. Overall, the book is very well done and has no weaknesses from an intellectual view. If comparisons are to be made, it comes closest in analysis and sophistication to three classics in political writing on Indonesia: George McT. Kahin's *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, and Deliar Noer's, *Partai Islam di Pentas Nasional*.¹ Taufik's volume promises to become a classic in its own right.

The primary audience for this book will be intellectuals, initially, and it is easy to foresee how it will quickly become the standard reference for Indonesian national background because of its great scope and clarity. A second audience is likely to be found in the Southeast Asian middle class, whose members are interested in the development of the region and enjoy scholarly works that speak directly to that subject. It is being marketed in Singapore precisely because that audience is important. Finally, the book will be popular among Indonesian scholars, as an example of the kind of mature scholarship that is beginning to emerge in that country. To date, this is one of the leading examples of that trend. It is unlikely to serve as a beginner's reader or as a textbook, except possibly at the graduate level, because of its great length and wide-ranging discussions of events. But whoever uses it will come away with a great sense of appreciation for the work and for the insight and diligence of its author. This is an outstanding contribution.

¹ George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2003); Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); and Deliar Noer, *Partai Islam di Pentas Nasional, 1945–1965* (Islamic Parties in the National Drama, 1945–1965) (Jakarta: Grafitipers, 1987).