

Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessell, editors. *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2002.

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Women in Indonesia is a compilation of twenty short articles based on presentations given at The Australian National University in Canberra as the annual "Indonesian Update" for 2001. The book itself is part of the Indonesia Assessment series. As the subtitle indicates, the theme for this conference was Gender, Equity, and Development. A good number of the participants were Indonesian; some have been intimately involved in policy-making at high levels of the government, in research on the condition of women in Indonesia, or in efforts to empower Indonesian women through education, civil action, and other means. Their articles are invaluable in assessing the changes affecting and affected by Indonesian women during the remarkable period of political and social dynamism, now sometimes referred to by the acronym "*krisal*" (total crisis), in the years immediately preceding the Update and continuing on into the subsequent stage of halting democratization. While the articles focus on women, this volume is so packed with information on recent events and changes that it should be consulted by anyone desiring to keep abreast of contemporary currents in Indonesia.

The articles vary in style and motivation and include what are essentially reports on particular topical concerns, such as Mari Pangestu's essay on economics, Khofifah Indar Parawansa's discussion of women's status, Saparinah Sadli on feminism and education, Carla Bianpoen on women artists, and so forth. Some articles trace historical, political, and cultural movements through the crisis and beyond; for instance, Sen, Baso, and Idrus deal with media representations, Oey-Gardiner examines women's participation in toppling Suharto, and Noerdin discusses the detrimental effects of increased regional autonomy. Other contributions are interwoven with pertinent theoretical perspectives, such as Tiwon's essay on the manipulation of Kartini's image by the New Order and Hatley's essay on cultural imagery and its contestation in literature. Some chapters are commentaries on other articles by the conference discussants. This refreshing dialogic element helps the reader to view events and issues as process and debate, rather than as polarized facts and opinions.

Obviously, these varying tasks require different writing styles and strategies; yet the editors have carefully arranged the contributions so that they coalesce as well as one could expect, especially considering the large number of topics. I found the language clear and concise in most cases. The substance of the book is considerable, providing an array of quantitative and qualitative information on the profusion of events and political, economic, and social reconfigurations that have characterized Indonesia of late. The tables and figures are helpful, and the glossary lists an array of Indonesian acronyms helpful for reading not only this material, but any Indonesian newspaper or magazine. Even longtime Indonesia observers will appreciate this feature, due to a recent proliferation of name changes and acronyms.

"Turning the tide, she became Indonesia's first woman president." (Bianpoen, p. 113)

A number of the articles (Bianpoen, Mohammad Sadli, Pangestu, and Sen) deal with the ascendancy of the first woman, Megawati Sukarnoputri, to the presidency in 2001. This is certainly one of the most significant recent events in Indonesian history, yet a number of people have expressed disappointment in the president's performance as she has tried to lead a nation recovering from economic disaster and authoritarianism. Yet few other countries, including those that consider themselves "progressive" in their advancement of women, have elected a female head of state or contemplated ways to insure that at least 30 percent of the nation's legislators were women. The first is a reality in Indonesia today, and the second has been officially proposed by the State Ministry for Women's Empowerment and is being seriously considered by a number of governmental agencies, including the Ministry of Home Affairs (Parawansa, p. 76). Furthermore, "the 1945 Constitution accorded the same rights and responsibilities to both men and women" (Bianpoen, p. 113), although in practice this parity has yet to materialize. The report of the former minister, Parawansa, reveals instance after instance of legislation proposed and enacted, laws changed, and action taken to empower women in Indonesia. In view of these facts, one could interpret Megawati's emergence as a leader more as part of a pattern of increased inclusion of women in politics than as an anomalous event. Let us not forget that years prior to becoming president, Megawati had headed a major political party, was feared by the most powerful man in Indonesia, and served as Vice President.

Obviously, one cannot assume that these legislative actions will automatically result in equal opportunities for women and men, and Parawansa is cognizant of the potential shortcomings of these measures. And yet the will and effort behind such legislation merit praise, in my estimation, as such efforts raise previously dormant issues to the level of the state, focusing media and public attention on them. I was impressed when I first heard of the name change proposed by Parawansa in 1999, during Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency, when she recommended that the State Ministry for the Role of Women be called the State Ministry for Women's Empowerment. Such a name alone might stimulate thought about women's access to national and local resources and the varying conditions under which women live and work. Even when "merely" symbolic, such gestures can be powerful in motivating otherwise indifferent bureaucrats to live up to the public expectations embodied in a new name. It may be a small step forward, but is headed forward nonetheless.

I visited Jakarta and Yogyakarta one week prior to the general elections in 1999 and witnessed impressive political demonstrations in the streets. In Yogyakarta, the PDI-P party headed by Megawati seemed by far the most popular, with the most impressive numbers of demonstrators, organization (color coordination, motorcycle brigades, etc.), and roadside displays of banners and posters. Support for Megawati was palpable, as was open and vocal derision of former President Suharto, something that struck me as remarkable after such a long period of silencing. At the investiture celebrations for the new Paku Alam at his palace, I met three remarkable Javanese women representing three generations, whose lives spanned the terms of all of the country's presidents from Sukarno through Wahid. The elder was the widow of a

minister in Sukarno's government, the middle a university professor, and the youngest a student. They all seemed to have been touched by the expectant atmosphere pervading Yogyakarta at that time, an atmosphere that reflected the remarkable freeing of public speech highlighted in several of the book's articles.

Krishna Sen examines discourse in the media regarding Megawati who, as head of the party with the most votes in the 1999 general election (PDI-P), and thus the most viable presidential candidate, was denied that position after backroom maneuvering. Many Indonesian political elites, religious leaders, and both national and international media pundits and scholars underscored Megawati's gender as a factor that made her undesirable as a candidate. Although some were careful to avoid explicit references to gender, allusions to her supposed lack of intellectual capacity, "silence," and experience only as a "housewife" echoed more stridently sexist comments in a manner that was only slightly veiled. And yet after she was unanimously chosen by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) to replace Wahid following his well-meaning, but chaotic, stint as president, the rhetoric changed, even veiled references to gender faded, and writers began to focus on her charisma and symbolic power as the daughter of Sukarno. Put simply, gender counted when it could be used to keep a popular woman out of office, but its importance was dismissed when the woman attained that office anyway. The "gender card" is often used against women when they are engaged in a competition, but rarely played after a woman gains a victory; that is, her critics hinted that Megawati probably could not and should not win because she was a woman, but when she did win they changed their story, saying that her victory was surely due to her father's status.

Through history, women have used many different styles of leadership effectively. In the matrilineal Minangkabau society of Sumatra, for example, women elders have shared their power with men, from the level of kinship and family to the larger political sphere.¹ Bianpoen describes Megawati's style in the following passage: "Enduring public scorn, defamation and even victimization, Megawati has never retaliated. Instead she persisted in silence, while nurturing an inner strength that conquered the fiercest arguments against a woman becoming leader" (p. 113). The term "silence," used positively in this quote, in media accounts about Megawati is often merely a code term for "indecisive" and "inarticulate," or even "uncaring."

Megawati's reputation as a "silent" or "inarticulate" leader persists despite evidence to the contrary. In a speech given in Singapore prior to the Indonesian general elections, Megawati was no less articulate than Amien Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid when they spoke in the same series. Rais is now speaker of the Parliament and Wahid, as it turned out, was to become the next president. As I recall, Megawati was calm, composed, and determined, but did not strut and posture as much as the two more politically seasoned men. Wahid unself-consciously discussed the media's designation of him as a "king-maker," belying his own ambitions for the top position. Rais, the most intellectually astute of the three, denied any need or desire on his part for an Islamic state, which some had claimed he advocated. Megawati stuck to the issues,

¹ Evelyn Blackwood, *Webs of Power: Women, Kin, and Community in a Sumatran Village* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

even after a questioner's comment about "charisma" indirectly impugned her qualifications. All three were impressive speakers in their own ways, advocating democratic principles and measures; the question was merely which one was most sincere and most capable of carrying out the difficult tasks projected. Although Megawati did not speak in English beyond a few remarks, while the other two candidates showed themselves to be fairly fluent in English, facility in English had never before been a factor for presidential candidates in Indonesia. Again, it appeared that special concerns, having to do with her "silence," gender, and now competence in the English language, only emerged in response to a woman's candidacy, rather than as bona fide considerations of qualifications. Ultimately any leader must be judged by her or his effectiveness and willingness to place the matters of state above all else. The Sultan of Yogyakarta is attributed with the following opinion regarding leadership: [Javanese] "leadership . . . requires a king to control his own desires [in order] to serve the people. . . . That . . . is where Suharto . . . went wrong."² It remains to be seen just what Megawati might accomplish in her presidency and what her staying power will be. The task, as all agree, is monumental by any standard, and expectations should not be unreasonable. Like any politician, President Megawati has a political ideology, style, and practice which will not suit everyone, but at the very least she should be given the chance to help lead Indonesia out of its quagmire into a functioning and thriving democratic state.

No, as a number of the authors point out, Megawati is not known for separately championing the aspirations of women as a special category or group, even though they, as a category, have been disenfranchised by past regimes. But she does champion the constitution and a rule of law which would grant all citizens equal treatment. In Indonesia today, at least, there are many organizations, educational programs, and individuals willing and able to promote the causes of women. With the constitutional mandate of equality, new legislation supporting women, and greater awareness through education, I daresay there is an army of women willing to do the work in her stead, if only the President can keep the country operational as a democracy. The recent bomb blasts in Bali, which obliterated over two hundred human lives, wounding many more, an island economy, and a huge chunk of a nation-state's economy and reputation, will put the President's powers to a test. Only time will tell.

Finally, I would like to touch upon the issue of labor migration, specifically the migration of workers who move from Indonesia, a relatively poor country, outward to wealthier countries such as Malaysia and Singapore within Southeast Asia, or beyond, particularly to the Gulf states. Graeme Hugo gives a balanced and detailed rendering of this subject, noting that the individual experiences of migrant women can be either empowering or denigrating. I met some of these Indonesian household workers in Singapore when I lived there. Indeed, their stories ran the gamut: some had been badly abused, whereas others had earned money that ultimately empowered them and their families at home. In comparison to their Filipina counterparts working in Singapore, however, Indonesian household workers were more vulnerable and had less

² Jose Manuel Tesoro, "A Presidential Dark Horse: The Sultan of Jogjakarta is a Modern Reformer," *Asiaweek*, March 19, 1999, p. 26.

organizational support.³ Since the trend over the last two decades toward increased participation on the part of Indonesian women in this migration is expected to continue, protections need to be instituted by the government. The "receiver" countries are obviously not as motivated to protect foreign workers, leaving the onus on "contributing" countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Measures taken by the Philippine government have in fact improved conditions for Filipina overseas workers and provide a Southeast Asian model for Indonesia to emulate. Most troubling are the undocumented cases of migration, since human trafficking, including for the sex industry, preys on the poor, young, innocent, and less-educated of Indonesia's population. The documentation of this serious problem is a big help to all concerned with finding workable solutions for humane international labor migration.

There are far too many articles and topics covered in *Women in Indonesia* to be included here. I have focused on a few that coincide with my own interests and concerns. Suffice it to say that this book is indeed a valuable resource, not only for gender scholars, but for Indonesia observers everywhere.

³Mei Chen Lee, "Sojourners: The Case of Indonesian Maids in Singapore (BA honors thesis, National University of Singapore, Southeast Asia Programme, 1995).