

R. E. Elson. *The Idea of Indonesia: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 394 pages.

Edward Aspinall

In this ambitious book, Robert Elson explains, as he puts it in the preface, “the origins, development, triumph, tragedy and, more recently, persistence and reframing of the idea of Indonesia as both state and nation” (p. xxiii). Prompted, he says, by the “shapeless, restless years surrounding and especially following the fall of Suharto and his long New Order” (p. xxiii), Elson seeks to explain where ideas about Indonesia came from, their content, how they have changed over time, and how they have been put into practice.

Beginning his narrative with the creation of the term “Indonesia” (or “Indonesians”) by the English writer George Samuel Windsor Earl in 1850, most of the book is devoted to the grand sweep of twentieth-century Indonesian history. The chapter structure is based, conventionally though usefully, on the key periods that marked the genesis of Indonesian nationalism, the foundation of the Indonesian state, and the different regimes that governed it. Elson has in mind that this is essentially a book of intellectual history, insofar that it focuses especially on the “minds, values and actions of key Indonesian political thinkers who have wrestled with the idea of Indonesia for nearly a century” (p. xxiv). To that end, he has mined an astonishingly wide array of primary and secondary sources, and the book is dense with beautifully illustrative quotations from key nationalist thinkers and leaders from every period he surveys. From the views of Douwes Dekker and Suwardi to those of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the book presents a satisfyingly complete (as much as that is possible in a single book) survey of Indonesian nationalist thought and of many of the debates and events that have shaped Indonesia’s history. It also covers a broad array of topics. Elson does not narrowly confine his account to debates concerning the Indonesian nation, such as those about what Indonesia’s “national personality” might be, or about how ethnic and regional diversity, and Islam, might be accommodated. He also devotes much attention to debates concerning Indonesia as a state, such as those about the role of the army, economic development, and democracy.

In fact, the book is much more than an intellectual history of ideas about Indonesia. It also presents a highly readable narrative of modern Indonesian history, describing many of the key personalities, events, and forces shaping Indonesia not only as an idea, but as a polity and a society. By incorporating this material, researching so widely, and using refreshingly straightforward and lucid prose, Elson has performed a valuable service to the wider community of Indonesia scholars. The book will be a handy starting point for many students of modern Indonesia, and no doubt many university teachers will use it for their courses. But experts, too, will find the book useful as a reference book and overview, and they will admire both the impressive synthesis and original research that have gone into it.

But there are costs, too, in the breadth of the approach that Elson adopts. One is that there are few surprises for Indonesia scholars in the book, or in the arguments that are made there (with one exception, which I discuss below). Instead, the story it tells

about the emergence of the idea of Indonesia, and of post-independence history, will be broadly familiar to most experienced readers, as will Elson's choices of the main themes, actors, and debates. To be sure, specialist readers will find many new vignettes and striking quotations. They will find new historical details, and will also admire the stylish and powerful ways by which even familiar events are retold. However, on the whole, they will find no revolutionary or innovative approaches to the study of Indonesian nationalist ideas, no overturning of conventional wisdom or dramatic repositioning of scholarly perspective.

In part, this lack of surprises results from the way Elson arranges his material. The book often reads more like a narrative history of modern Indonesia rather than a sustained interrogation of how various ideas about Indonesia have changed over time. Rather than presenting debates about Indonesian identity thematically, Elson instead scatters material on similar themes throughout the narrative, placing them wherever they arise in the chronological account. The result is that readers who make their way through the book get a good sense of how key themes have recurred over the course of the century (e.g., the idea that Indonesia is an ancient entity that long predates the colonial period), but few sustained arguments about those themes or their significance.

Another source of the conventional character of Elson's analysis is the unproblematically empirical approach that he takes. This is clearly not a book about, or even much informed by, theory or comparison. The bibliography lists no work that does not substantially deal with Indonesia or its colonial predecessor, and though Elson indicates from the outset that the book is about "Indonesia as both state and nation," he does not define those terms or explain how they might differ. Instead of framing his work theoretically, Elson instead takes as his starting points the views and actions of Indonesians themselves; his own assessment of their consistency, moral value, and consequences; and the terrain marked out by earlier scholars of Indonesia's nationalist history. In fact, this book may remind readers of some of the classics of liberal historiography of Indonesia from a generation or two ago, such as works by George Kahin, John Legge, and Herbert Feith. The themes and topics addressed, the actors who take center stage, and even the grand and elegant mode of expression often seem reminiscent of these earlier scholars' works. (Take, for example, Elson's description of Sukarno's skills in "formulating expressive ideology, celebrating political ritual [and] wielding political symbols" on p. 218.) It is a tribute to the breadth and depth of Elson's work for it to be compared with the classics, but it is also indicative of the conservative nature of his approach.

There is, however, one way in which Elson's approach *is* strikingly distinctive from the tradition of American (and Australian) liberal historiography of Indonesia founded by Kahin. *The Idea of Indonesia* is marked by a pervasive tone of negativity that will be both striking and disturbing for readers educated in a tradition that is broadly sympathetic to Indonesian nationalism. For Elson, the idea of Indonesia has a deeply disappointing history: "Indonesia's erratic course has been a tale of continuing failure, of an inability to harness and direct the potencies of its people towards achieving the aims of justice and prosperity for all" (p. 318). Efforts to provide Indonesia "with a sustaining sense of its meaning and trajectory" over the course of the twentieth century have "failed" (p. 314), according to Elson.

It is perhaps not surprising that Elson excoriates the vainglory and empty rhetoric of the Sukarno years or the dull repressiveness and ideological stagnation of the New Order. Critiques of these things have been familiar, indeed standard, themes in Western liberal Indonesian-studies literature over the last four decades. What is remarkable, however, is that Elson extends his scorn back to the pre-independence period and independence struggle, and finds the sources of Indonesia's latter-day maladies in the nationalist thinkers and ideas of those years. In doing so, he seems to delight in belittling all the mythic moments of Indonesian nationalist historiography. Thus, he blandly summarizes Sukarno's famous "birth of Pancasila" speech and, not pausing to give the usually obligatory praise for its genius as a formula for accommodating Indonesian pluralism, instead concludes that "the surge to independence produced a state ideology, Pancasila, the inclusivist pretensions of which foreclosed rather than promoted thinking about forms of identity" (p. 112).

But where Elson especially tramples on hallowed ground is in his assessment of the early twentieth-century nationalists. Whereas earlier writers have praised their creativity and legacy, Elson is not impressed. Instead, for him, "The history of the imagining of Indonesia in colonial times had been, indeed, a sorry one" (p. 97). He sees the early nationalists as the source of many of Indonesia's later difficulties. The problem was that they did not properly think through the idea of Indonesia itself, or the values they attached to it. Their commitment to democracy was "weak, shallow and confused" (p. 53), few of them had "more than the slightest interest in real local autonomy" (p. 67), the socialist ideas they espoused "never developed great sophistication" (p. 57), and even though freedom was central, "Indonesian thinkers gave almost no attention to unpacking what it might actually mean" (p. 54). Later, in the revolution, the idea of justice was "vague and undifferentiated" (p. 138). In describing the nationalists' ideas, one of Elson's favorite words is "vague," and the reader has the impression that he generally disapproves of what he sees as their intellectual sloppiness and shallowness. He concludes that, by the end of the colonial period, the various nationalist movements

had never much spoken to each other, never engaged in the kind of vigorous debate and dialogue which might have moulded a clearer sense of what this Indonesian state and nation might look like or develop into. All they could agree upon was that there should be an Indonesia, and that it should, in some vague sense, be free. What Indonesia might mean, or what it might stand for, or even less, how best it might be managed and administered, remained contentious, though there was little serious effort to overcome or compromise those contentions. (p. 97)

For Elson, "This lack of fundamental agreement on just what Indonesia might mean, and how the idea might best work, was to curse its later history" (p. 79). It cursed Indonesia's history because many of the conflicts that the early Indonesian nationalists papered over came back to haunt the nation. To make matters worse, even as Indonesia moved into independence, the country's elite continued to ignore problems rather than resolutely face up to them. Thus, after the revolution, Indonesia began independent life with a "framework of values and institutions ... uncommonly underdeveloped and unagreed" (p. 149). Later, Sukarno promoted a "vague kind of

authoritarianism, ... an ideological monotone of uncertain hue" (p. 200), and "meaningless institutions and sloganeering" (p. 222). The Suharto period, in contrast, involved "the sustained and total effort to control the complexities of society from above" (p. 278), but its collapse "left Indonesia with no sense of purpose or meaning nor the institutional means which might serve to re-create them" (p. 279). Indonesia's birth defects apparently still mar the nation.

At the root of these problems, according to Elson, was the "conceit and complacency" (p. 153) of the nationalist elite who eventually became Indonesia's rulers. Indeed, a second great theme of the book—alongside the vagueness and incompleteness of Indonesian nationalist ideas—is the selfish narrowness of the elite that generated them. As Elson concludes: "The problem was not 'Indonesia' as such, but what Indonesian leaders, characteristically self-serving, inflexible, arrogant and unwilling to take the people into their confidence, did—or failed to do—with the idea" (p. 318). Again, this is a theme he traces back to the colonial period, when ideas about Indonesia failed to gain popular support due to the "top-down, self-aggrandising and condescending attitudes of many leaders" (p. 76).

While some readers will no doubt enjoy reading such an iconoclastic take on Indonesian history, there are also many objections that one can make to it. An obvious one is that Elson is simply unnecessarily gloomy: where he sees vagueness and irresolution in Indonesian nationalist ideas, others might see the flexibility and inclusiveness that give them their strength. Where he sees a national history consisting mostly of abject failure, others might see great successes, especially when we compare Indonesia with many similarly diverse postcolonial states.

Another possible objection is that Elson is unfairly and even ahistorically judgmental about his subjects, especially the early nationalist thinkers: what opportunities, really, did they have for "thrashing out their differences in creative ways" (p. 79) in a manner that might satisfy later scholars? Those nationalists were, after all, products of their time, with all the limitations and constraints that this implied. Indeed, in reading Elson's account, I could not help thinking that he had in the back of his mind an alternative, more sensible, history in which the early nationalists had simply rolled up their sleeves, worked out all of Indonesia's future problems, and developed practical solutions for them. If all of that had happened, perhaps all or most of Indonesia's subsequent problems might have been avoided. But surely it is not fruitful to speculate along those lines. What other countries manage to sort out a blueprint for the resolution of all their future problems in the first few decades of nationalist awakening?

This observation leads to a final point: while reading the book, I repeatedly thought that readers would have benefited greatly from an element of comparative or theoretical analysis. The point here is that Elson *does* seem to have some sort of intellectual measuring rod by which he assesses Indonesia's nationalist leaders and their ideas, and finds them wanting. But this measuring rod is not stated explicitly. And because Elson is not making any sort of theoretical or comparative argument, he ends up casting his judgments mostly in moral terms and with an air of weary disappointment. Doubtless, Elson is right in suggesting that Indonesian nationalist thinking was often vague and that nationalist intellectuals often failed to think through their ideas or live up to their promises. But it would be helpful for readers to know

how unusual this makes Indonesian nationalism. To that end, some consideration of theory and comparative literature may have helped. Is Indonesian nationalism, comparatively speaking, really as lacking in coherence and sophistication as Elson concludes? Would other countries' founders' thinking on national identity, if subjected to similarly critical scrutiny, escape such an assessment? Would we not find plenty of vagueness, contradiction, immodesty, and aggrandizement in the ideas about state and nation in neighboring countries, other postcolonial states, or even, perhaps, in countries like the United States and Australia? In fact, scholars of nationalism have often suggested that defining features of nationalist thinking everywhere are malleability and, yes, vagueness, and that these features contribute to nationalism's power, ubiquity, and durability in the modern world. These same features, however, as Benedict Anderson once pointed out, often produce "among cosmopolitan and polylingual intellectuals, [...] a certain condescension" toward nationalism.¹ Despite its many merits, Elson's book of intellectual history ultimately expects *too much* intellectualism in Indonesian nationalism and, as a result, ends up being stamped by such condescension.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, new edition (London: Verso, 2006), p. 5.