

Elizabeth F. Drexler. *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State*. Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008. 296 pages.

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Controversial ideas and analyses are the fuel of scholarly debates. Fresh criticism of conventional wisdoms enriches our knowledge in particular areas of research, and sometimes even leads to shifts in academic paradigms. Over time, initially disputed narratives and theories can become conventional wisdoms themselves, attracting new critiques and revisions. In Indonesian studies, there have been very few seminal works that have fundamentally altered the way we look at the country and interpret its socio-political dynamics. Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (1962) certainly was such a book, pointing to the complex interplay between declining party politics, Sukarno's quest for power, and the army's push for political participation as the main factors behind the collapse of liberal democracy.¹ This very balanced approach, which contradicted widespread mono-causal explanations for Sukarno's 1959 decree, has dominated the debate on Indonesia's early democracy to this day. Similarly, Anderson, McVey, and Bunnell's 1971 paper on the 1965 events in Indonesia discredited the government's version of a communist coup to such an extent that no credible author writing about the subject today can afford to uphold it.²

Elizabeth F. Drexler's study on the Aceh conflict aims to dismantle a whole conglomeration of conventional wisdoms in one strike. First and foremost, her book questions the collectively acknowledged narrative that the latest phase of the separatist insurgency in Aceh began in 1976 and was driven by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka). Instead, Drexler claims that there was no separatist rebellion to speak of until the escalation of violence under the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001). In her view, the killings, skirmishes, attacks, and kidnappings that took place between the 1970s and the 1990s were not necessarily related to the separatist struggle, but were part of a complex of violence that included criminal, political, and personal elements. Applying anthropological and sociological theories on the reality-shaping power of ideas and rumors, Drexler contends that both the Indonesian state and GAM had an interest in portraying these various miniature conflicts as a single separatist dispute. That portrayal, in turn, became such a strong narrative that it began to dominate the thinking of political actors at the local, national, and international levels. Eventually, this manipulated conflict narrative developed into a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to the outbreak of open war, which only ended with the signing of the Helsinki peace accord in August 2005. Drexler suspects that most acts of political violence in Aceh in the 1980s and 1990s were committed by "phantom separatists" (p. 126), who were largely deserters from the army. GAM, then, only came into being as the product of Indonesia's "threat perception system" (p. 90), which was constantly in search of issues that could be mobilized to legitimate the state and the incumbent regime.

¹ Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962).

² Benedict Anderson, Ruth McVey, and Frederick Bunnell, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1971; Cornell Modern Indonesia Project).

The second “myth” that Drexler tries to destroy is the notion of New Order Indonesia as a secure and stable polity. Contradicting mainstream accounts of the New Order as one of the most solid and long-lasting regimes in the developing world, Drexler insists that “Indonesia under Soeharto was a fundamentally insecure state” (p. 1). In her view, Suharto’s regime felt so threatened that it habitually created enemies to justify its existence vis-à-vis an increasingly critical population. Consequently, the state had an essential interest in ensuring that violence in Aceh—whether committed by street criminals, agents, or deserters—“was resignified as separatist, ideologically motivated violence against the state” (p. 114). Drexler notes that most other threats invented and cultivated by the regime, like that of communism or militant Islam, did not result in serious political consequences for the Suharto government; but “what distinguishes the threats in Aceh is that separatists did step up to claim the state’s projected threat” (p. 115). According to Drexler, then, GAM was the imaginary spin-off from Indonesia’s own security rhetoric, conceived and nurtured to serve the interests of an authoritarian regime, but which subsequently took on a life of its own—this is the leitmotif of Drexler’s book. It forms the basis for all other arguments made by the author, and frames her interpretations of the research material she collected in Indonesia during fieldwork between 1998 and 2000.

As indicated earlier, the critical questioning of conventional wisdoms and established academic paradigms is a commendable and necessary exercise. The “problem” with conventional wisdoms is, however, that they are often based on overwhelming factual evidence. Accordingly, one needs to discover even more compelling counterevidence in order to unseat reigning conventional wisdoms. Elizabeth Drexler, unfortunately, has not succeeded in presenting sufficiently strong evidence that would justify a significant revision of the currently dominant historiography of the Aceh conflict. On the contrary, what we have learned from the most recent research about GAM’s internal workings tends to strengthen the view that GAM indeed *was* a coherent and well-organized separatist organization that operated throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, it has been Edward Aspinall’s work, including his upcoming Stanford University Press book, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*, that provides us with a clear picture of GAM’s origins and further development. This research, which has also been confirmed by younger scholars such as Antje Missbach, who traced GAM’s activities in the Diaspora, makes it virtually impossible to claim that the organization only emerged in the very late 1990s as the unfortunate byproduct of Indonesia’s misguided domestic security discourse.

Drexler’s reluctance to acknowledge GAM’s existence is reflected in her rather strange treatment of indisputable historical evidence. Drawing from her theoretical assumption that “rumors are empowered through reiteration and denial,” she emphasizes that “statements by the military also enlarged the enemy, emphasizing that warriors trained in Libya” (p. 99). In this context, Drexler openly acknowledges that she is less interested in “whether fighters trained in Libya” than in the effects of this information “on the narration of the conflict” (p. 250). It is not really surprising that Drexler shows so little inclination to discuss the details of GAM’s training in Libya, for it is one of the main pieces of evidence that highlights the organizational existence of GAM at a time when—according to Drexler—it was allegedly not much more than a fantasy of Suharto’s repressive regime. In post-conflict Aceh, the “alumni” from the Libyan training camps have assumed important positions in GAM’s political wing,

removing the last remaining doubts about their importance and influence in the group since the 1980s.

More surprising than Drexler's unwillingness to address historical facts that contradict her theoretical conclusions is the ease with which she endorses highly controversial narratives that support her case. Indeed, she even makes use of the very military historiography that she otherwise dismisses as the manifestation of a politically interested conflict narrative. During much of the 1980s and 1990s, the Indonesian armed forces and other security agencies referred to separatist insurgents in Aceh as *Gerombolan Pengacau Keamanan* (GPK, Gang of Security Disruptors). In fact, most individuals and groups that violently opposed the Suharto regime across Indonesia were described as GPK—including the OPM (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, Free Papua Organization) and East Timor's Falintil (*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*, Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor Leste). The classification of an oppositional movement as GPK helped the regime to denounce separatists easily as criminals who lacked a legitimate political agenda. But the New Order's GPK rhetoric was not only instrumental in outlawing oppositional groups, it also tried to deny them the opportunity to build up a following around a recognizable brand name such as GAM. In her book, Drexler chooses to adopt the term GPK, presumably because its use allows her to depict the 1980s and 1990s as a period in which criminal gangs and military deserters—and not the separatist GAM—were involved in most of the violence that occurred. Drexler writes that "GPK and GAM were not simply names for the same group, and the GPK was a distinct element that was later fused with the AM [Aceh Merdeka] to become the current GAM" (p. 106). To my knowledge, Drexler is the only serious scholar of Indonesia who believes that GPK existed as a group of some sort; most other authors view it as the code name used by the regime for GAM and other dissident groups. Given that Drexler's main theoretical concern is with the political manipulation of conflict narratives, it is curious that she would so uncritically sanction a term coined by Indonesia's military for its separatist enemies.

While Drexler's description of GAM's development is clearly contradicted by factual evidence, her depiction of New Order Indonesia as an "insecure" state is much more open to scholarly interpretation. Of course it is true that Suharto, like any other authoritarian ruler, was concerned about the defense and perpetuation of his regime. Given that he had come to power as a leader of the armed forces, he was also fully aware of the "performance dilemma" that haunts all military regimes: if the New Order managed quickly to stabilize the economy and restore political stability, it could expect calls from society to end the military's "emergency" intervention and return to civilian rule. In order to address this problem, many military-backed regimes create imaginary enemies that serve as justifications for continued authoritarian rule, and Suharto's government was certainly very creative in this field. But does that mean that such preatorian states are "insecure"? The New Order faced a number of security disturbances, but to call it "insecure" would mean ignoring its exceptional power over the state and society. In fact, one could argue that Suharto was able to invent bogus enemies because he felt confident that his regime was strong enough to control its "real" opponents. Against this background, it is perplexing to note Drexler's assertion that the New Order exhibited a "chronic inability to create a stable political framework" (p. 1). A political regime that delivered six unchallenged "re-elections" for

its rulers and imposed unprecedented levels of uniformity on Indonesia's society and institutions can be termed static, undemocratic, and incapable of change, but its longevity seems at odds with the notion of an unstable political framework. To be sure, Drexler could have pointed to Suharto's failure to define a mechanism for his succession as the most important institutional weakness of the New Order polity, but her discussion on the alleged instability of its rule rarely goes beyond cursory remarks.

Drexler's deeply problematic reconstruction of the separatist conflict in Aceh raises the question of her motives and intentions. Given that she is one of the most experienced and studious observers of Aceh in the last decade, it seems peculiar that she would write an account of the conflict that so systematically overlooks the overwhelming evidence unearthed by other academics. The denial of GAM's existence as an independent and active separatist group in the 1980s and 1990s is a bizarre scholarly blunder, and *not* a reflection of groundbreaking new research. But the answer to this mystery can be found at several places in Drexler's book. There, she confesses that her goal is to write a history of the Aceh conflict that does not fuel further tensions among its main protagonists. In Drexler's words, she is led by the question of "How can history be written that cannot be turned into renewable ammunition in a perpetual self-renewing conflict?" (p. 81). Drexler believes that previous histories of the Aceh conflict have contributed to the escalation of violence by categorizing it as a separatist dispute rather than as "acts of indeterminate violence" (p. 39). The solution, then, apparently lies in "creating" a history that is more helpful in promoting peace—a history that downplays the significance of the separatist campaign in the province, even if evidence of its existence is difficult to ignore. While Drexler's activist approach may be noble, and certainly will find its supporters among conflict-resolution specialists and aid managers, it should have no place in the field of scholarly research and analysis. From a strictly scientific perspective, it doesn't make any difference if history is manipulated to stir up conflict or to advocate for its resolution. Both are examples of falsified and politically motivated narratives, designed to serve partisan interests rather than the objective of balanced scholarly research. It is one of the most disturbing aspects of Drexler's book that, while claiming to unmask the strategic intentions behind other conflict narratives, it has chosen to develop a counter-narrative that openly states its non-scholarly agenda. Truth and objectivity are big words and by definition almost unachievable, but they should nevertheless remain the guiding principles of academic endeavour.