

THE IDEA OF INDONESIA: A HISTORY

by R. E. Elson
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Reviewed by SADANAND DHUME

TEN YEARS AFTER the end of Gen. Suharto's 32-year reign, Indonesians can look back on their achievements with some satisfaction. Democracy has taken firm root: Heading into presidential and parliamentary elections in 2009, nobody seriously questions the country's capacity to transfer power by the ballot. Separatist movements in Aceh and Papua have been quelled. Thanks to tenacious police work, the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah is on the run. An ambitious decentralization program has settled into place without, as feared, throwing the country into administrative chaos. The press, once a government poodle, is now a pitbull. Even the economy—though sluggish compared to the go-go 1990s—has recovered from the worst of the Asian financial crisis. By way of comparison, in terms of democracy Indonesia is better off than China; in terms of development it remains ahead of India.

It's hard to imagine, then, that until the 20th century the very word Indonesia—let alone the idea of an archipelagic state in its present form—had little meaning. As the Australian scholar R. E. Elson recalls in his meticulously researched new history, for the Dutch it was the Netherlands East Indies, the tropical Netherlands or, at times, the fanciful sounding *Insulinde* (the islands of the Indies). Non-Dutch travelers often preferred the vague Eastern Seas or Eastern Islands, or the nakedly derivative Indian Archipelago.

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Ruled by a relatively minor European power, one that was stingier with education and administrative responsibility for the natives than either the British or the French, Indonesians were slow to develop a national consciousness and an independence movement. Budi Utomo, or Glorious Endeavor, the association of medical students whose formation marks the country's first tepid nationalist stirrings, was born in 1908. It took another 20 years for activists at a youth conference in Batavia to famously pledge their allegiance to "one homeland, one people and one language."

At the time, the slogan represented aspiration more than reality. Portions of the homeland in question—including devoutly Muslim Aceh and Hindu Bali—had only recently been stitched together by force of Dutch arms. That the fiercely Christian Moluccans who played an outsize role in the colonial army, the refined Hinduized royals of central Java and the animist tribals of Borneo constituted a single people would have been news to most Ambonese, Solonese and Dayaks. And while the version of Malay that would be called Bahasa Indonesia already linked the trading ports of the archipelago, its usage beyond its Sumatran heartland was patchy. Suffice to say, the grandmothers, and most likely the mothers, of the Sundanese, Minangkabau and Minahasans who attended the Batavia youth conference would have been unintelligible to each other.

Indeed, when Indonesia declared independence from the Dutch in 1945—prodded by the occupying Japanese who had invaded three years earlier—its leaders agreed on little more than the desire to rule themselves. Centralists and federalists jostled over the balance of power between Jakarta and regional governments. Communists and non-Communists differed on land distribution and the nature of the economy. Javanese and non-Javanese held incompatible ideas of the cultural ba-

sis for national unity. Ethnic chauvinists and liberal cosmopolitans subscribed to opposite views on the status of the Chinese minority. Military men and civilians disputed the precise role and function of the army.

However, what Mr. Elson calls “the greatest and most enduring division” concerned the role of Islam in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation. The dominant group at independence, nationalists led by Sukarno, believed in a modern, multiethnic and multireligious state in which people of all faiths would be treated equally. For Islamists such as Mohammad Natsir (1908-93), the point of banishing the Dutch was not merely to fulfill a vague longing for freedom, but to create the opportunity to be more fully Muslim—in an environment shaped by Shariah and a polity that explicitly guaranteed Muslim dominance.

Over six decades Indonesia has seen six presidents. It has swung from Sukarno’s permanent revolution to Suharto’s dour development state to the free-for-all of the post-Suharto era known as *reformasi*. Along the way, it has experienced one of Asia’s most infamous pogroms, the slaughter of 500,000 suspected communists in 1965-66; perhaps its sharpest economic setback, the 1998 collapse that led to Suharto’s downfall; and the most devastating natural disaster in living memory, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed 225,000 people, most of them Indonesian. Through all this, the issue of Islamism, though appearing to fade between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s, has refused to disappear.

Mr. Elson does not dwell on this detail. Indonesia, as he points out, has outgrown

both the rhetorical excesses of the Sukarno era and the development-at-any-cost ambition of Suharto’s New Order regime. In their place he sees “modesty of purpose, pragmatism in attitude and gradualism in achievement.” For the first time, a country whose independent history has only known competing forms of collectivism—both Sukarno and Suharto forbade dissent and emphasized unity—has opened the door to a culture of individual rights. Should Indonesia’s democracy continue to mature, as Mr. Elson appears to believe is likely, it will gradually overcome all discrimination based on race or religion, celebrate pluralism in thought and culture, and reflexively respect freedom of speech and freedom of conscience.

Needless to say, a sunny view of Indonesia’s future is not entirely unwarranted. Compared to the rest of the Muslim world—with the possible exception of secular Turkey and Tunisia—it remains a beacon of hope and moderation. The country’s cosmopolitan elites share an unselfconscious broadmindedness; the masses have historically favored nonsectarian parties over Islamists.

Compared to their counterparts in South Asia, let alone those in the Middle East, Indonesian women enjoy a higher status in society and greater access to education and careers. In outspoken defenders of religious and artistic freedom such as former President Abdurrahman Wahid, the country boasts Muslim leaders who are moderate by any yardstick and not merely by the special one usually applied to Islam.

And yet it’s equally easy to take a less sanguine view. The most reassuring aspects of contemporary Indonesia are essentially holdovers from the past; the most

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disturbing belong firmly to the present. If seen through the prism of pluralism—a thaw in attitudes toward the Chinese minority notwithstanding—the growth of orthodox practice and Islamist politics have already shrunk the big tent the country once represented.

A generation ago, an ambitious, public-spirited Christian could aim for virtually any job in the country. Today the sectarianism fostered by organizations such as the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), and an accompanying sense of majority entitlement, have led to de facto barriers to advancement for non-Muslims in the civil service, state-owned companies and, albeit to a lesser extent, the higher reaches of the military.

State-sponsored migration has fatally altered the demographics of traditionally Christian or animist regions such as the Moluccas and Papua. In many of the most devoutly Islamic parts of the country, local authorities have begun to experiment with Shariah, complete with vice squads, mandatory dress codes and compulsory Koran reading. Vigilante groups attack “unauthorized” churches, heterodox Ahmadiyah Muslim mosques and secular liberal gatherings with impunity. In parliament and in politics at large, the fundamentalist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood, beavers away at diminishing women’s rights, cultural diversity and the ability to respond firmly to Islamist intimidation and violence.

In short, the jury is still out on the idea of Indonesia. It may well evolve, as Mr. Elson and others of an optimistic bent suggest, as a benign liberal democracy with a strong commitment to human rights. But by the same token, the alternative, a state dominated by Islamist collectivism, in which nonconformist women, non-Muslims and heterodox Muslims are effectively second-class citizens, can hardly be ruled out.