

**Adrian Vickers. *A History of Modern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 306 pages.**

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For all its evident discontinuity, the history of twentieth-century Indonesia remains remarkably amenable to narrative recounting, often by reference to a number of its most central and persistent conflicts. These include narratives of revolutionary unity's descent into parliamentary contentiousness and authoritarianism; the gradual "Javanization" of the archipelago and Outer Island resentment; and political conflicts between organized Islam and state secularism, and between Islam and communism, the military and communism, and the military and society. The larger structures are indisputable, but so is the fact that the entire period spans not much longer than a single lifetime—a lifetime in which memories can be reshuffled, along with hopes for the future and the allegiances of one's political present. It is very apt then that in his new *History of Modern Indonesia*, Adrian Vickers should frame his history around the life and writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's greatest author, but also a revolutionary historian who did much to shape new kinds of national memory based on a politics of organization, movement, and possibility. Vickers's book thus represents a significant effort at stepping back from some of the accustomed frames in which we perceive recent Indonesian history by presenting it instead as a succession of social worlds, each with its own characteristic styles of governance, social organization, and cultural production.

Chronologically, the book covers a period beginning with the outbreak of the Aceh War in 1870 and ending with the December 2004 tsunami. In between, chapters are arranged both thematically and chronologically, so that the first chapter, entitled "Our Colonial Soil," deals with some of the contradictions faced by the Dutch in administering their East Indies possessions and in addressing issues of racial politics, the colony's place in the Dutch and world economies, and the cultures of Dutch colonial inhabitants. The second chapter, "Cultures of the Countryside," covers much of the same temporal ground, this time emphasizing social patterns of native living, with Pramoedya's own small town of Blora taken as the primary example.

Vickers's chapter on the advent of modern political life, "To Assail the Colonial Machine," holds off reporting on mass organizations and political parties so as to first provide an account of modern transformations in Indies urban life. He touches on issues including the newcomer's experience of the city, novel cultures of working life and entertainment, the use of Malay, and the advent of modern literary traditions. Only once this groundwork has been laid does Vickers then set out the more familiar story of the parties' rise and development. From here on, chapters move ahead chronologically, describing World War II and the revolution, the parliamentary period (in a chapter entitled "Living in the Atomic Age"), Guided Democracy and the early New Order (in "From Old to New Orders"), life under Suharto, and a final chapter covering Suharto's fall and the first years of a post-New Order state.

The book is peppered throughout with examples drawn from Pramoedya's life and work, and this provides a very natural sense of continuity as the nation's history rushes from the colonial era and on into the present. Vickers's translations are

uniformly excellent, providing much of the visceral punch contained in their originals. There is nonetheless a troubling tendency to treat Pramoedya here more as an icon and source of useful quotations than as an author and thinker. The book contains no close readings, nor is there any discussion of the kinds of work Pramoedya's writing does in constructing new narratives of Indonesian history and identity—arguably the very thing that makes Pramoedya so important. Similarly, while Pramoedya is first mentioned by Vickers as an historian ("one of a few with a coherent and developed vision of the nation's history" [p. 3]), the book lacks the dialogical quality one might expect of an historian framing his work around the life and writings of a fellow historian. A deeper engagement with Pramoedya's thought might have opened up a very interesting space for addressing themes of memory, history, and literature in the writing of Indonesian history. These are categories that Pramoedya's work itself challenges with remarkable ingenuity, and which are particularly relevant to a retelling of twentieth-century Indonesian history, in which the record has been subject to violence of such unusual scope.

Vickers's book is most impressive in its fluid movement among the levels of elite politics, social and cultural history, and individual life stories. Indeed, this is perhaps the major contribution of the book, which successfully creates an impression of how it might have felt actually to live through the Indonesian twentieth century. It is indeed refreshing to see a history textbook devote this amount of space to architectural developments in Jakarta, arts in Bali, and the much-vaunted "moral crisis" of the 1950s. There are numerous references to film, theater, and, of course, the writing of Pramoedya. Nor does the book present any static cultural fantasy—at no point do we get the impression of a nation in which regimes come and go while the people trudge on as before. Yet, while the presentation remains holistic, Vickers's narration of historical change rests far too firmly on the personalities of a limited number of political actors. Vickers writes, for example, that "Sukarno in particular favored centralism over federalism, so on 17 August 1950 ... a unitary Republic was declared," (p. 115) and later on that, "Sukarno's declaration of Guided Democracy was the most dangerous step taken by a political leader in Indonesia's history ... From 1957 to 1965 Sukarno's authoritarian tendencies pushed the country beyond the limits of its economic base, its social framework and its political institutions." (p. 144) The advent of the unitary republic was preceded by popular mass movements for incorporation in many of the federal states, and by the collapse of a Dutch opposition to republican power in the archipelago as a whole. Yet here the fact of a unitary state is attributed almost entirely to a predisposition of the president. Guided Democracy similarly emerged from a byzantine series of maneuvers and counter maneuvers among the military, the parties, and the president, each reading the political crisis differently, and none wishing to be held entirely responsible for democracy's demise.<sup>1</sup> One wonders if the characterization of Sukarno found here will not be read by some students as a

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Lev, among others, has pointed out that Guided Democracy as it took shape in 1959 was not all that different from what the military had offered Sukarno in the failed coup of 1952. At that point the president had stepped in to save Parliamentary Democracy. Yet in the meantime, the institutions that Sukarno had once relied on to counterbalance the army—including the parties themselves—had begun to fall apart. See Daniel Lev, "Lembaga, Elit, Dan Kontrol: Tentang Politik Indonesia Tahun 1950-an dan 1990-an," in *Mencari Demokrasi* (Jakarta: ISAI, 1999), pp. 95–158.

justification for his eventual toppling, since how could a leader of such enormous power and erratic disposition be allowed to continue?

The flip side of this overestimation of elite politics comes in Vickers's characterization of the peasants and masses. He notes at one point, for example, that "the Dutch were always anxious that every riot, demonstration, or peasant strike might escalate into an anti-colonial uprising, but in most cases those who took part in such actions were thinking of the short term, refusing to do work that was beneath them, struggling to get an advantage over fellow villagers, or despairing of having to pay yet more tax." (p. 46) Of course, these are the motivations from which major political movements are made, and so Vickers's dismissals appear here rather too abrupt, again confirming the impression of a real separation between politicized elites, on the one hand, and a prepolitical mass, on the other.

I have one final note regarding a wording I hope may be changed in future editions. In reference to the failed coup of 1965, Vickers writes that the "'Movement' ... set out to kill seven of the country's generals." (p. 156) Among the many mysteries of that night—which Vickers otherwise handles very admirably, dedicating appropriately far greater space to the massacres that followed than the bungled coup itself—is just what *did* the conspirators set out to do. Many of the more authoritative works on the movement (including an important recent book by John Roosa) argue convincingly that the murders were in fact the result of botched kidnap attempts.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the evidence remains too tendentious, and the stakes too high, for Vickers simply to claim that the G30S conspirators set out that night with the intention of murder.

Despite the caveats, however, Vickers's *History* is an extremely rewarding book that provides a compelling series of snapshots of Indonesian social, political, and cultural life over the course of the last century, even if it does not always succeed in combining these snapshots into a convincing whole. The book will make a very useful and highly readable text for introductory courses on Indonesian history. Students who wish for a more cogent reconstruction of political change may then be referred to Ricklefs<sup>3</sup> or any one of a number of more conventional histories.

<sup>2</sup> John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> M. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200*, third edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).