Anthony Reid (ed.)


For years, many have anticipated Indonesia’s rise as an economic power and an important player in international affairs. Keating (2010) used the term ‘the Indonesian tiger’ and Roubini (2011) enthusiastically pronounced ‘goodbye China, hello Indonesia’ (in Reid, 2012). Amid this optimism, Anthony Reid’s edited book, referring to ‘Indonesia’s rise’ in quotes, presents a more balanced, and often contrasting, portrayal of the country’s current state by engaging the perspectives of various experts.

Ross Gaurnaut follows the opening chapter by stating that the ‘Indonesia-influenced culture of collective decision making within ASEAN and APEC in the late twentieth century will be important to successful global cooperation among states in the emerging multi-polar world’ (p. 22). Chapter 2 highlights Indonesia’s potential in contributing to open regionalism, particularly based on its recent performance in international trade and climate change policy. While M. Chatib Basri (Chapter 3) agrees that Indonesia does possess this potential, he explains that Indonesian industry is struggling due to ‘inadequate infrastructure, poor human resource [sic], and a lack of product diversification and innovation’ (p. 40). In other words, Indonesia might not be able to take advantage from the very liberalization it has espoused, and ‘the benefits of lower tariffs would be enjoyed, rather, by the country’s trade partners’ (p. 40).

In Chapter 4, Donald K. Emmerson addresses the question of whether or not Indonesia is ‘rising’. He argues that it is, but ‘the rise of Indonesia is led by the country’s prominence and lagged by its performance’ (p. 72). Although Indonesia’s economic growth has been respectable, it does not warrant the attention it is receiving, indicating that ‘Indonesia’s rise’ is related more to future potential rather than past performance. During President Yudhoyono’s period, diplomacy has been largely ‘mainstream in outlook and low in key’ (p. 73). However, Emmerson argues, it is perhaps this modesty that has been the stabilizing factor in the region.

This idea conflicts slightly with Rizal Sukma’s view in Chapter 5. Firstly, he notes, there is new activism in foreign policy evidenced by, for instance, former foreign minister Nur Hassan Wirajuda’s criticism of ASEAN’s lagging human rights performance (p. 80). Secondly, on a global scale Indonesia is showing a desire to become a true global leader by being a ‘bridge builder’ and ‘problem solver’ (p. 89). However, Sukma contends that these ambitions will have to wait until Indonesia ‘manages to eradicate the constraining factors
in its domestic politics’ (p. 91), including ‘defective democratic institutions, terrorism, communal violence, religious intolerance, corruption, and weak law enforcement’ (p. 90), all of which impinge on Indonesia’s diplomatic clout. Instead, he suggests a strategic repositioning within East Asia by making it Indonesia’s new theatre (mandala) for foreign policy (p. 90).

In Chapter 6 Frank Lotzo illustrates how Indonesia’s domestic politics impact climate change. Indonesia is the fifth largest contributor to the world’s annual greenhouse gas emissions (p. 102), thanks largely to deforestation and peat land degradation (p. 104). Curbing such destruction requires reform that would threaten ‘the profits of established business interests [or] would run counter to local economic interests as perceived by local elites or local people’ (p. 107). In this case, there is a clear link between climate change objectives and overall economic reform and good governance.

Thus, to identify the connections between global and domestic agendas, understanding the nature of what Indonesian institutions and actors are facing becomes crucial. In this sense, there is a connection between Chapters 7 (Martin van Bruinessen) and 8 (Scott Guggenheim). Van Bruinessen raises the question of the relative invisibility of Indonesian Islam (p. 119) relating it to the history of Islamization in Indonesia. He states that Indonesian Islam is ‘characterized by a vibrant intellectual discourse, a remarkable openness to alternative views and a broad acceptance of religious pluralism’ (p. 136). However, Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, particularly those who flourished during and after the New Order (p. 127), have used the knowledge they’ve gained more to organize social and political activism than to synthesize works that can be exported outside of its local context (p. 136).

Guggenheim also raises this concern within the context of the ‘knowledge sector’. Indonesia’s scientific productivity between 1996–2010 has been far below that of neighboring Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore (p. 144). This results from government policies that ‘deliberately undermine the institutional preconditions needed for a healthy knowledge sector to develop’ (p. 146). To address the above, the definition of the ‘knowledge sector’ needs to be broadened to include and form alliances with the media, research organizations, and networks enabled by communication technology innovations (p. 167). While these structural barriers are still in place, ‘increasing the comfort levels of officials with these new alliances may well be the precursor needed to generate reform’ (p. 167).

The book closes with R.E. Elson’s discussion of Indonesia’s place in the world that traces historical continuities in which ‘Indonesia’s identity has been [the] subject of continual fundamental reworking by different generations of leaders’ (p. 181). Elson argues that the failures of past leaders in creating a viable national
identity has resulted in a weak ‘internal strength’, which explains Indonesia’s lack of legitimacy and self-assurance that resonates throughout the book.

In this sense, this volume provides more than an update on Indonesia. It raises a key question on whether the country, nearly seven decades after its independence, has yet to address fundamental issues that propelled its founding. As Reid observes, Indonesia based its national identity on the anti-imperialist struggle, rather than past achievements or its many cultures (p. 7). An imagination of a foreign entity, whether ally or enemy, echoes throughout the different sectors each chapter focuses on. How this unfolds in the future will depend on how the next leader uses this to his or her advantage. This warrants revisiting Reid’s closing statement in the opening chapter alluding to the idea that Indonesia’s ‘lack of self-assurance’ may be ending, ‘with consequences that may not be stabilizing for the region’ (p. 12).

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References