

Book reviews

Gerry van Klinken and Joshua Barker, eds, *State of Authority: the State in Society in Indonesia*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications 50, Ithaca, NY, 2009.

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Ten years after the collapse of Indonesia's New Order regime in 1998, professional Indonesia-watchers have shifted their attention from questions of regime transition to issues of democratic consolidation. In this context, a small but growing genre of literature has emerged that is looking for broader patterns in the variegated political dynamics triggered by the demise of President Suharto a decade ago. The volume edited by Gerry van Klinken and Joshua Barker is one such study.

Anchored in Bob Jessop's state theories, two introductory chapters and seven empirical case studies aim to shed light on the interplay between 'the state' and 'society' and its manifestations in Indonesian politics. The Indonesian state, the two editors argue in the introductory chapters, should be approached in terms of social relations, not political structures. Hence, the authors brought together in this volume want to study the state in relation to the broader social context in which the state is embedded. Concretely, the volume looks at subnational authority figures and how they relate to 'society' in the context of everyday politics. The book's main argument is that the present-day Indonesian state is neither completely hegemonic nor homogeneous. Societal forces have become important too.

In the first chapter, Gerry van Klinken and Joshua Barker provide an overview of political developments in Indonesia throughout the past decade. The chapter shows how new players including members of the middle class, indigenous movements, non-governmental organizations, militias and Islamist groups have become more visible in Indonesian politics in the context of democratization and decentralization. It is important to study how the state relates to such new forces, the authors argue, as a 'more balanced discussion about the Indonesian state' is

needed. Past accounts of Indonesian politics have drawn a state–society divide ‘far more sharply...than is warranted by the facts’.

Joshua Barker and Gerry van Klinken continue their discussion in the second chapter by showing how the Indonesian state has been analysed and understood in the past. Reviewing the state–society literature from past decades, the authors argue that claims about Indonesian state power have emphasized historical continuities above all else and tended to portray the Indonesian state as a monolithic entity. Making use of recent statistical data, the second chapter then aims to show how the Indonesian state is actually not very dominant on the ground. Tax collection is low, while actual healthcare and education spending is minuscule. The chapter ends with the claim that the Indonesian state is increasingly constituted from the bottom up through negotiations between societal forces and official authorities.

Joshua Barker takes up these themes in his contribution, in which he talks about changing state authority in a Bandung city slum. Looking at informal authority figures, Barker sees a historical rupture between the kind of thugs and enforcers who become local bosses today and such figures during the New Order. Present-day hoodlums, or *preman* as they are called in Indonesia, are more politically entrepreneurial than they were in the past, and rise to power based on their ability to mobilize people in the context of elections.

The new democratic setting also features prominently in the chapter by Deasy Simandjuntak. She focuses on the construction of reputations in the context of local government elections. Following the campaign trails of local politicians, Simandjuntak shows how local government elections brought the state closer to society. However, she concludes, the tighter relationship between the political establishment and the population has not led to more democracy, as real ‘discussion between elites and common people was minimal’ throughout the election campaigns.

The interplay between state officials and societal forces in the field of religion is the subject of the next two chapters. Looking at the Council of Indonesian Ulama’s fight against ‘heresy’, John Olle provides a detailed account of the organization’s ability to accumulate political power in past years. Established by Suharto in 1975 with the official aim of serving as a body to produce religious opinions on Islamic law [*fatwa*], but with the true intention to neutralize and co-opt potential Islamic opposition, the Council of Indonesian Ulama has adopted a strategy in the past decade of establishing links with radical Islamist

groups that were previously operating at the fringes of the Indonesian political system. Given the shady motivations that drive many such radical groups, Indonesia might not become more Islamized but rather more criminalized, Olle concludes his analysis.

Religion also plays a prominent role in Jacqueline Vel's account of state–society relations in Eastern Indonesia. Based on her research experience in Sumbawa – which spans over two decades – she shows how post-New Order local elites have constructed clientelistic networks around church donations with the aim of gaining leverage over the electorate.

Syarif Hidayat and Gerry van Klinken demonstrate in their chapter how democratization has helped business interests to become more prominent in local politics. Looking at the gubernatorial elections in Jambi province, they make a compelling case for how the introduction of elections changed the dynamics of political corruption. Facing high campaign costs and expenses for vote buying, politicians need to recoup their expenses once in office. They therefore implement bogus development projects, often with the sole aim of providing their financial backers with opportunities to embezzle state money. Overall, business and family networks situated outside the state have become more important in subnational politics, according to the authors.

The introduction of democratization and decentralization has also changed power relations at the village level, as is shown in Dorian Fougères' chapter. Examining the involvement of village heads in authorizing and protecting illegal cyanide fishing – in which divers target fish in coral reefs with a poisonous solution in order to catch the creatures – Fougères shows how resource exploitation in the archipelago state is now being negotiated in everyday encounters between the state and local interests rooted in society.

In the last chapter of the book, Loren Rytter argues that many present-day parliamentarians have been politicized in paramilitary youth organizations rooted in the New Order, such as the Communication Forum for the Sons and Daughters of Pensioners of the Indonesian Armed Forces. Such corporatist organizations situated somewhat outside official state structures served as training grounds for many current party members, Loren Rytter states. Despite being official parliamentarians now, many of these thugs remain closely connected to their societal networks of henchmen, on whom they rely to get things done.

The volume has two main weaknesses, in addition to a somewhat odd structure – the book has two introductory chapters that overlap in

many ways, but no concluding chapter that would summarize and generalize the findings of the book.

The first weakness lies in the editors' critique of past literature on the Indonesian state largely ignoring societal forces. This is overstated. The state–society divide has never been drawn as sharply in the literature on Indonesia as the two introductory chapters suggest. In a volume published by the very series that has now printed the book under review, Ruth McVey, for example, 20 years ago challenged the supposed isolation of the South East Asian bureaucratic state from its surrounding social context.¹ In fact, van Klinken and Barker themselves frequently refer to such literature in the footnotes throughout the first two chapters.

Second, and most importantly, after closely studying the findings in each chapter, this reviewer comes away with a feeling that political players closely tied to the state continue to dominate Indonesian politics. For example, Barker shows that slums in Bandung are actually more deeply penetrated by officialdom than one would assume. Simandjuntak concludes that local elections bring the state closer to the people, 'yet the state does not become more democratic as a result'. Olle shows how local commissioners of the Council of Indonesian Ulama continue to have their roots in a confined religious, political and socio-economic elite whose 'network of...affiliations has changed little since the New Order', while Vel's exercise of tracking donations to the local church in Sumbawa reveals that the overwhelming bulk of cash accumulated for the creation of social identities in the context of local elections comes from sources within the Indonesian state.²

The book's focus on everyday politics is a welcome contribution to a discourse on changing state–society relations in Indonesia that is being dominated by the development industry and its obsession with 'civil society' organizations. In a country whose civil society has traditionally been weak and where NGOs have failed continuously to spearhead political change over the last 10 years, studying subtle forms of resistance, acts of insubordination and evasion observable in everyday politics might reveal more about changing state–society relations than focusing on organized groups. However, reading each chapter in the current volume carefully, it seems that even in everyday interactions with the state, Indonesian 'society' has not managed to create a political or economic 'barrier reef' of its own that would force the 'ships' of the political elite to halt or result in a change of course.³ While there is no doubt that democratization and decentralization have opened up interstices –

which have allowed societal forces to become more visible and more directly involved in politics, the book's findings suggest that such societal forces continue to dance to the tune of a political elite that is firmly embedded in state institutions and the state's affiliated networks. True and meaningful alternative power centres remain absent in Indonesian politics.

Against this backdrop, any endeavour to initiate a 'new discussion' of the Indonesian state should not look solely at state–society relations, but at intra-elite dynamics. Tensions in present-day Indonesian politics run horizontally, not vertically. The impetus for new modes of power accumulation and the exercise of power, manifesting itself in changing state institutions, new electoral dynamics or various 'reform' initiatives, comes from changing relations between players *within* the Indonesian state.⁴ Such an alternative reading of the findings presented in the van Klinken and Barker volume suggests that, while Indonesian analysts should calibrate their vocabulary, they should not quite yet abandon their 'language of continuity' when analysing present-day politics in the archipelago state.

Notes

- ¹ McVey, Ruth, ed (1992), 'The materialization of the Southeast Asian entrepreneur', in *Southeast Asian Capitalists*, Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, NY.
- ² This seems to be somewhat different at the national level, where political changes since 1998 have greatly increased the leverage of Chinese–Indonesian conglomerates in politics. See Chua, Christian (2008), *Chinese Big Business in Indonesia: The State of Capital*, Routledge, London.
- ³ The 'coral reef' metaphor is borrowed from Scott, James C. (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- ⁴ Crouch, Harold (2010), *Political Reform in Indonesia after Soeharto*, ISEAS, Singapore.