

## Race, Islam and power: ethnic and religious violence in post-Suharto Indonesia

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Race, Islam and power: ethnic and religious violence in post-Suharto Indonesia**, by Andreas Harsono, Victoria, Monash University Publishing, 2019, \$34.95, ISBN 978-1-925835-09-0

Numerous travelogues on journeys across Indonesia have been published, but none of them are quite like Andreas Harsono's new book. Harsono focuses exclusively on ethnic and religious conflict in his account of a thirty-month trip through the archipelago state. Travelling from West to East, and drawing on decades of experience as a journalist and human rights activist, Harsono describes and examines tensions and violence between and within ethnic and religious groups in countless districts, towns and villages along the way. The result is a fascinating if somewhat sobering account of the circumstances ordinary Indonesians find themselves in, more than twenty years after the oppressive New Order regime collapsed.

In a narrative divided into seven parts, Harsono shows that (too) many Indonesians continue to be surrounded by violence. Chapter 1 focuses on Aceh, Indonesia's western-most province, whose citizens were subjected to decades of violence as the result of a civil war between the national government in Jakarta and a local independence movement. While the tsunami that hit Aceh in 2004 – and that killed hundreds of thousands of people – ended the civil war, Acehnese have become subject to new forms of violence. The introduction of a strict penal code based on Islamic law has resulted in frequent discrimination and violence against sexual and religious groups. Chapter 2 provides an account of Harsono's travels in Kalimantan. There, he meets with residents who tell him about the violence against Chinese-Indonesians in 1967. Harsono shows how this history of violence and impunity then paved the way for massacres against ethnic Madurese after the demise of the Suharto dictatorship decades later. The author then moves on to Sulawesi to examine the roots of conflicts between Christian and Muslim groups in the central part of the island. How has the Christian-dominated north of the island prevented a spill-over of the conflict into those areas, Harsono asks? He finds a possible answer in the interfaith dialogues and fora set up by local activists in Manado, the provincial capital. While such local-level initiatives are cause for hope, Harsono also wonders how sustainable they are, given their small-scale nature and lack of financial support.

The subject of Chapter 4 is Java, Indonesia's most populated island. Political and economic power remains concentrated in Java, home to over half of the country's inhabitants. There, Harsono tracks the recent rise in inter- and intra-religion conflicts back to the constitutional debates of the 1940s, when secular-nationalist and Islamist groups debated whether Islamic law should become the basis of newly independent Indonesia. However, some of the worst religious conflicts have not occurred on Java, but in the Moluccas, a group of islands situated in the eastern part of the archipelago. Between 1999 and 2005, thousands of people were killed in clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, as Harsono reports in Chapter 5. Religion played less of a role in the violence that descended upon East Timor, when the latter decided to become an independent state in a referendum in 1999. Rather, the Indonesian army and affiliated militia ransacked East Timor before pulling out, which brought an end to decades of brutal occupation, as Harsono describes in Chapter 6. Finally, in Chapter 7, Harsono describes the fate of the indigenous population in West Papua, which is caught between mining interests, rent-seeking activities by political elites from Jakarta, an influx of Javanese migrants, and tribal warfare. The book concludes with an Epilogue, in which Harsono tries to connect the different dynamics that have triggered ethnic and religious conflicts in



Indonesia in so many parts of the country for so many years. Some of the most important causes for the enduring violence in Indonesia, Harsono concludes, are an exclusive form of nationalism, a Java-centred state, and a failure to bring human rights abusers from the New Order regime to justice.

All seven chapters are rich in empirical detail and personal observations, and bring to life the daily struggles and hardship many Indonesians continue to face. Harsono has documented violence and human rights abuses in Indonesia for decades. Hence, one would understand had he run out of patience and produced an angry report of the situation on the ground. However, Harsono's book is less a *J'accuse!* than a sober account of the causes of ethnic and religious violence across the archipelago. His message – that colonial legacies, corruption, an unreformed state apparatus, predatory elites and a lack of accountability and transparency are at the heart of the violence ordinary Indonesians face – is all the more powerful because of it.

Foreigners visiting Indonesia for the first time as well as ordinary Indonesians will find this book interesting for its comprehensive overview of violent clashes in the world's third largest democracy over the past twenty years. Professional Indonesia-watchers ought to read this book for its rich and original anecdotal evidence, insider accounts, vignettes and personal encounters with both perpetrators and survivors of ethnic and religious clashes. These testimonies complement and give life to the rather abstract statistics and accounts that characterize the scholarly literature on religious and ethnic violence in Indonesia.

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