



Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal (eds)

Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia:

Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia

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review by **Ian Douglas Wilson**

1. *Challenging Authoritarianism* provides a detailed comparative examination of a variety of responses to authoritarian rule in Indonesia and Malaysia in the late 1990s, particularly during the 'reformation period' since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998. It is surprisingly, considering the cultural and geographical proximity of the two countries, one of only a handful of comparative studies of Indonesia and Malaysia. More generally, the book also addresses the dominance of the 'transition from authoritarianism to democracy' paradigm within political analysis, especially in regards to Southeast Asia. Considering the complex intertwining of culture and politics in the two societies covered in this book, it would be misleading to work from the presupposition that moving away from 'authoritarianism' necessarily entails moving towards 'democracy'. As Heryanto and Mandal point out in the introductory chapter, the authoritarianism-democracy polarity is but one way of understanding power relations and political contestation.
2. In recent years, the 'transition' paradigm has come under increasing criticism, and a number of new theories have emerged that attempt to describe post-authoritarian political environments, such as Larry Diamond's theory of 'hybrid regimes' and the concept of 'semi-authoritarian regimes' articulated by Marina Ottaway.^[1] While these have gone some way towards developing a more nuanced understanding of the types of institutional and discursive configurations found in post-authoritarian societies, the tendency has still been to concentrate largely upon the state itself, its institutions and practices.
3. In this respect the book constitutes a vital contribution, as its contributors provide detailed empirical accounts of social activists and 'extra-parliamentary actors' working outside of formal institutional frameworks, as well as describing sets of political dynamics away from political elites. After the introduction, Ariel Heryanto looks at the cultural politics of public intellectuals and the Indonesian middle classes. Philip Kelly examines the complex relationship between economic development, democratisation and civil society formation via case studies on environmental activists in Penang and Batam. Vedi Hadiz looks at the changing nature of state-labour relations in the two countries since the 1997 crisis. Norani Othman details the

process of Islamisation in Malaysia, and its impact upon civil and human rights and the rights of women. Melani Budianta gives an account of grass-roots women's activism during the reformation period, before Sumit Mandal concludes by looking at activist arts workers and how they have attempted to use creative expression as a medium of protest. The contributors shift attention away from the political and cultural elites of both countries, either as the main bearers of authoritarian values and practices, or as the vanguard of 'democratisation'. In doing so, a broader and more inclusive definition of politics and power is articulated, one that includes voices and practices often ignored or marginalised.

4. Some of the most interesting material in this book are the accounts of the impact upon anti-authoritarian forces of the economic and subsequent political crisis that struck Southeast Asia in 1997. According to Budianta the crisis was a 'blessed tragedy' for the women's movement as it forced a reassessment of previously unchallenged ethnic, religious, class and regional differences, as well as awakening many women to the gender exploitation institutionalised by the New Order. The result was not so much a radical break from the past, but a sharp learning curve in terms of developing practical networking and solidarity building skills and political strategies at the grass roots level. Budianta also makes a critique of the essentialist argument that gauges advances in feminism in terms of the position of women in existing political institutions. Some Western commentators were dismayed and bewildered at the lack of enthusiasm shown by the Indonesian women's movement towards the election of the country's first women president, Megawati Sukarnoputeri. However as Budianta points out, from the perspective of local activists, Megawati, as well as Wan Azizah in Malaysia, represent patriarchal and conservative discourses that are in conflict with a truly reformist agenda.
5. Sumit Mandal, in his chapter on activist art workers, recounts how for the first time during the reformation period, Malaysian and Indonesian arts' activists began to draw inspiration from each other, rather than western artistic and theoretical movements. This theme of mutual inspiration and support also appears in other chapters. In Indonesia, the ideological separation of 'culture' and 'politics' engineered by the New Order was challenged by art activists such as Moelyono who insist that 'art is for all.' Art activists working with the rural and urban poor have attempted to deconstruct and transcend the ideological divide created between what was identified by the state as 'high' art (that produced by the political and cultural elites) and 'low' art (identified with the urban and rural poor as well as marginal social and cultural groups). In doing so they subverted established hierarchies and other 'invented traditions' of the state, recasting cultural and artistic production as egalitarian, socially engaged and politically aware.[2]
6. Placed together, the chapters in *Challenging Authoritarianism* create a rich and complex comparative account of the types of authoritarianism found in Indonesia and Malaysia and the forces that have emerged to challenge them. The well-researched material detailing some of the political and social dynamics at work within Indonesian and Malaysian civil society in the last decade are a significant contribution to our understanding of this period of great change. With Indonesia facing general and direct presidential elections this year, and with the recent end of the Mahatir era in Malaysia, the assessments of the prospects and problems facing anti-authoritarian forces given by the contributors are also especially relevant. Considering the book's high price, it is encouraging to see that a soft cover version is scheduled to be published by RoutledgeCurzon, along with an Indonesian language version by Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia. This will help allow the book to reach the wide readership it deserves.

Endnotes

[1] See Larry Diamond, 'Thinking about hybrid regimes,' in *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 2002, pp. 21-35; Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2003. For more on the transition paradigm see also Thomas Carothers, 'The end of the transition paradigm,' in *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), 2002, pp. 5-21

[2] For more on Moelyono's 'conscientisation art,' see Ian Douglas Wilson, 'The politics of possession: community arts in New Order Java,' unpublished honours thesis, Murdoch University 1997.

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