

Getting to grips with Indonesia through its past

State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging

By Ariel Heryanto,
Routledge, 242pp, \$110

A History of Modern Indonesia

By Adrian Vickers,
Cambridge University Press,
291pp, \$47.95

After the corruption,
coercion and fear of
communism, there is
much to learn about our
northern neighbour,
writes **Dewi Anggraeni**

EARLY in 1993, finally allowed back into Indonesia after being briefly black-listed, I became aware I was being followed. Friends and colleagues who saw the person lurking around joked about him fancying me but tried to help me lose him nonetheless. After a month, I felt distressed enough to plan my return to Melbourne. Three days before I left Jakarta, someone phoned to tell me he would be at the airport to help me get through Customs and immigration. When I arrived, he introduced himself and, as promised, accompanied me right through to the passengers' lounge. Though he gave his name, I still don't know who he really was. I only know he was not the person who had been following me. But at least it confirmed I'd been the subject of surveillance.

Ariel Heryanto's *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia* helps put my experience

in context. In New Order Indonesia (1966-98), where people accepted the ever-present tension between the government and those it regarded as suspect, being under surveillance was nothing unusual.

Heryanto describes the political ambience of the era as that of state terrorism, the centrepiece being the government's version of what happened on September 30, 1965. Blaming communists for a "failed coup" in which five army generals were murdered, the government constructed a master narrative, with the communists painted as evil, ruthless and forever alert: they would become omnipresently power-

ful if the population showed the slightest complacency. Any suggestion a particular person was a communist or a communist sympathiser became a powerful weapon, because if "proven", that person could be jailed as a threat to national security.

The strategy was more effective than its authors had intended because the master narrative assumed a life of its own. Not only did a fear of communism permeate the population's collective psyche, it also became a genuinely believed mantra among those who wielded power, namely the political elite, the military and the intelligence agency, whose adherence to it was close to obsession.

Practically everybody wanted to be seen as collaborating with, and in some cases even championing, the master narrative. Within each layer of the power-holding elite people felt the need to prove to their superiors and boast to their subordinates that they were doing better than anyone else in the fight against the resurgence of communism.

Understandably, this led to a fair extent of paranoia, where the slightest dissent was quickly weighted with communist intent. It also

lent itself to manipulation by those in power to undermine their opponents, which they did with varying degrees of success.

While the general population was more passively accepting of the situation than actively engaged in hunting suspected communists, people genuinely seemed to believe that, if called upon, they were obliged to collaborate for the sake of national security. This sentiment prevailed until they became the hunted.

To a significant degree, even victims of this continuous witch-hunt co-operated with the authorities, making the situation worse for themselves. Heryanto offers several examples, one being a series of cases in Yogyakarta where, under the infamous Anti-Subversion Law (now defunct), student activists were charged with subversive activities — one for selling Pramoedya Ananta Toer's books — in 1989 and 1990. Heryanto followed these cases closely at the time and documents them in detail, including his own interviews and correspondence with the accused.

His observations revealed that far from being solid custodians of national security, the military and the intelligence agency accusers were themselves not sure of the real nature of the activists' crimes. His report also vividly illustrates how vulnerable those who were arrested during these times were, because unless they had enough social, political and legal awareness, international backing and unwavering self-confidence, rigorous interrogations disoriented them into giving the answers the authorities wanted. The fact that there were individuals who challenged many government policies and corrupt practices is a credit to the rising social capital and social awareness in the community.

While those challenging the authorities were generally regarded as members of the intellectual class, the rest of the population was not necessarily paralysed with fear.

Humour abounded, despite the limitations imposed by the constant threat. Humour was even used to undermine those in power, one example being the hyper-obedience shown by the numerous cheer groups that performed for each of the three approved parties in the run-up to elections, turning the campaign into a circus.

Adrian Vickers's *A History of Modern Indonesia* does not directly explain the picture

painted by Heryanto in *State Terrorism*, but it does provide a wider background to help readers understand the complexity of today's Indonesia. Vickers has skilfully painted the historical picture by combining available materials with his own research and observations. He uses excerpts from biographies of notable characters and segments from famous novels, such as those of Toer and the colonial Dutch writer Louis Couperus, as well as scholarly works by noted historians and sociologists, to convey the ambience of the times.

The result is like opening a scroll, revealing a lively, continuing story that fascinates and grips the imagination. The prose is dense yet far from boring, telling how the Dutch arrived in the region motivated not by expansionist ambition but in search of wealth. Later, of course, they were seduced by, and duly capitulated to, the idea of territorial domination.

Among hardships and atrocities, a rich cultural life developed: in theatre, for instance, Chinese culture mixed with a host of others to contribute to a new urban style, where *The Merchant of Venice* and *Ali Baba* were staged alongside indigenous Panji romances.

Vickers's deconstruction and reconstruction of the five national principles known as Pancasila is particularly fascinating, with each principle explained in terms of the ideals held by the fathers of the revolution.

It is worth noting that the first principle, based on faith in God Almighty, underwent lengthy debate before its final endorsement. Those who argued that the majority religion, Islam, had to be the basis of the state were overruled by leaders who were against excluding minority groups.

The story is gradually unveiled until today, when globalisation is being played out in typical Indonesian fashion and democracy is slowly being instituted by many of those in power, who are determined to clean up ingrained corruption and a residual general inclination to use coercion to achieve a goal.

Both books are compelling and should deter readers from the popular tendency to regard Indonesia in a reductionist manner. *State Terrorism*, however, is more immediately relevant to today's situation, when another kind of master narrative — that of Islamic terrorism — is spreading in the Western world.

Fortunately, there is sufficient checking and monitoring of the unedited master narrative to prevent it from capturing the global imagination. For which we owe a great deal to the continuing existence of a free press.