John Monfries

A Prince in a Republic. The Life of Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX of Yogyakarta.

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Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX (1912–1988) is a name that is vaguely familiar to most people concerned with Indonesian studies. Although he is known from banknotes, monuments, and passing references in the historical textbooks, there are few poignant stories associated with his name. In spite, or rather because of his relatively low-key and unassuming stance, he stands out as the great survivor in Indonesian politics, from his early days as Dutch-appointed feudal monarch of the small but prestigious Yogyakarta principality to his demise during the heyday of the New Order. He survived Japanese occupation, revolutionary struggles, the Sukarno years, and the Gestapu events, holding a variety of political positions and functions, and still coming out with a relatively untarnished reputation. He is therefore an attractive subject for a modern political biography, alongside of political survivors such as Norodom Sihanouk and Deng Xiaoping. So far, however, only a few Indonesian works with an official and uncritical outlook have dealt with the life of this remarkable national front figure.

John Monfries has plied the archives of Australia, the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the United States to gather materials about the life of the sultan. He has also interviewed more than 30 people who knew Hamengku Buwono. Historical biographies were unfashionable among historians for a long time, a theme that Monfries takes up in an introductory chapter. Even the best biographies have been deemed ‘a poor way of writing history’. The emphasis on the purported greatness of the depicted personalities, the tendency of biographers to apply amateur psychology, and the postmodern doubt about an objective presentation of the data, have all contributed to the doubtful reputation of biography as a historical genre. Responding to this, Monfries seeks to visualize the sultan’s life through a series of partly overlapping circles: his position in the kraton of Yogya, his interaction with colonial authorities, his role in Indonesian politics. By putting the person into his historical and political context, explaining his actions and motives, and exploring his interaction with other political figures, Monfries tries to avoid the shortcomings of the biographical genre.

There is no doubt that the study is successful in important respects. The bulk of the book, almost 200 pages, deals with Hamengku Buwono’s life up to independence in 1949, and it is clearly the most inspired part of the biography. The author traces the formation of the future ruler, then known as Dorojatun, in the pre-war Netherlands where he underwent an indologist education program and even wrote a PhD thesis (unfortunately never defended and now lost). As

one of a very limited number of Indonesians to study in a metropolitan site of learning, he acquired important skills for the difficult challenges that lay ahead when he returned to Java in 1939 and shortly after succeeded to the throne. Although we do not know much about his inner feelings, he seems to have lost faith in the Dutch colonial system at an early stage of the Japanese occupation and became one of the focal points of the Revolution, in contrast with his much-reviled princely colleague in Surakarta. As Monfries states, the revolution was Hamengku Buwono's finest hour. Since he rarely made ideological statements, his attitudes have to be derived from his actions. These show him to be a moderate politician who was committed to a certain degree to a democratic and representational form of government, mixed with a more practical outlook on the employment of power. While he may not have been crucial for the success of the revolution, its course would likely have been much more difficult without the sultan's status and determination. His standing is highlighted by the fact that the Yogyakarta principality retained its special status after independence, while the other 300-odd *zelfbesturende landschappen* were abolished as feudal remnants over the next years.

In view of his undoubted achievements in the freedom struggle, his post-independence career could perhaps only be an anti-climax. His term as Minister of Defence ended on a bad note in 1953 after a series of tumultuous events in October 1952. He made a come-back after the Gestapu events of 1965 and the Supersemar of March 1966, joining Soeharto and Adam Malik in a triumvirate and taking the position of Minister of Economics, Finance, and Industry. In the last-mentioned position he was instrumental in improving the abysmal financial position of Indonesia in the early days of the New Order. Hamengku Buwono's term as vice president in the 1970s saw him in an honoured but powerless position, and led to an estrangement with Soeharto. This was seen, for example, in the re-writing of history, where Soeharto's role in the general offensive against the Dutch in 1949 was extolled at the expense of the sultan. The overall assessment of the sultan is positive; although he repeatedly let himself be used by authoritarian forces, his integrity, nationalism, and relatively pluralist outlook are well documented, despite some obscure points that stain the picture.

Monfries' book is very much a political biography. Details about Hamengku Buwono's private life are kept to a minimum. Especially about the last four decades of his life we learn almost nothing of his family life, and very little about private activities or even interaction with the kraton circles—somewhat baffling since one of Monfries' main points is that Hamengku Buwono managed to preserve the special status of the sultanate for the next generation through his subtle policies. To an extent this may have to do with the nature of the

sources. Private details about Asian leaders are frequently gossip and unverifiable, thus difficult to use for serious analysis. For example, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday used all kinds of oral and written scraps of information to flesh out Mao Zedong's personal life in their well-known work *Mao: The Unknown Story*, with controversial result to say the least. Even so, I think that the author should have done more to highlight the personality of Hamengku Buwono. It goes without saying that there are always links between the private and public spheres of a person's life, and the two spheres have the potential to elucidate each other in various ways. What we get is a very well-documented effort to put Hamengku Buwono in a political context, which nevertheless leaves the reader with the impression that much of the story remains untold.

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Reference

Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (2005). *Mao. The Unknown Story*. London: Jonathan Cape.