Aspinall, Edward, Marcus Mietzner and Dirk Tomsa (eds.)

The Yudhoyono Presidency. Indonesia's Decade of Stability and Stagnation.


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How do new democracies maintain stability while engaging in reforms that might remove the old vestiges of authoritarian rule? This is an acute dilemma for presidents in young democracies like Indonesia. On the one hand, a newly invigorated civil society demands progressive measures to overcome the corruption, venality, and political inequality that had marked the authoritarian rule. On the other hand, the economic and political establishment, which rose to power under authoritarian rule, typically resists new policies that aim to undermine their privileges. Coming to power six years after the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime, this was the central challenge faced by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's decade-long rule (2004–2014) of Indonesia—although he might not have perceived it as such. Yudhoyono's presidency thus offers a useful occasion to reflect on the challenges and obstacles that often characterize democratization processes. Yudhoyono's approach to this balancing act was relatively straightforward. He prioritized stability over progress. In the interest of maintaining the support of different (elite) factions, Yudhoyono felt compelled to cancel or weaken important reforms.

That at least is the conclusion of this superb collection of essays that evaluates Yudhoyono’s achievements and failures in a wide range of fields. The introduction by the book’s editors Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner, and Dirk Tomsa, sets the tone: using a candid interview with the president himself, they describe Yudhoyono as a ‘moderating president’, who understood his main task as to ‘balance’ and ‘maintain harmony’ between competing interests. The subsequent essays—all written by experts in their fields—provide the reader with highly informative accounts of what that balancing entailed in practice. Time and time again, Yudhoyono refrained from choosing sides in debates and he fre-
ently backtracked in the face of (elite) opposition. ‘Missed opportunities’ is the recurring phrase: in the various topics under discussion—the reform of the security sector, anti-corruption reforms, human rights and minority rights, gender equality, and environmental governance—the authors describe a remarkably similar pattern, where Yudhoyono initially sets ambitious goals but then either backtracks or bungles the actual implementation of plans in the face of powerful interests, such as the military, political figures, the palm oil industry, and Islamic groups. For example, while Yudhoyono announced a moratorium on deforestation in primary forests, he allowed the ministry of forestry to reduce the area to which this moratorium applied—which meant that deforestation still continued at a considerable rate.

The authors do credit Yudhoyono for various achievements. They laud, for example, the democratic consolidation that his rule achieved and the economic growth that accompanied this stability, as well as policy initiatives on the environment, bureaucratic reform, and social welfare. But even in these fields the authors note that Yudhoyono's reluctance to take sides has meant that actual progress on the ground was limited. Overall, Yudhoyono's focus on balancing and maintaining harmony brought stagnation in a wide range of policy fields, in a way that largely served the interests of these established elites.

Two poignant essays at the beginning of the book—by Greg Fealy and John Sidel—invite reflection on the roots of Yudhoyono's indecisiveness. Fealy relates Yudhoyono's penchant for harmony and moderation to personal traits, in particular a profound sense of insecurity and a desire to be liked and accepted after coming from a modest background. In contrast, Sidel attributes these tendencies to the particular pressures due to the character of Indonesia's democratization process. Drawing attention to the fact that the Phillipines and Thailand also had moderating presidents with military backgrounds in early phases of their democratization processes, Sidel argues that Yudhoyono's obsession with moderation and harmony is due to more structural tensions between popular demands and attempts from military and economic elites to safeguard their privileges. The unfolding of the presidency of Yudhoyono's successor, Joko Widodo, lends credence to this thesis as, once again, structural constraints stand in the way of reform. Sidel's ominous conclusion is that moderating presidents like Yudhoyono can suppress these tensions only temporarily.

In this sense this book invites reflection on how, and in what ways, democratization progresses and reform may take place in comparable societies. The book will, I think, convince the reader that some more conflict is needed bring about progress. While Yudhoyono's caution can be credited for giving Indonesia a decade of one kind of political stability, his lack of principled opinions and...
refusal to take sides largely served entrenched interests. Because progress on important fronts—natural resources, human rights, corruption—is unlikely to occur without antagonizing at least some sections of Indonesia's elites, Indonesia's 'decade of stagnation' will be prolonged unless a president dares to take side in policy struggles. In that sense the book's subtitle—'Indonesia's decade of stability and stagnation'—is well chosen. The book describes Yudhoyono's decade as a trade-off between stability and stagnation, with most of the authors arguing that Yudhoyono unduly prioritized political stability over engaging in progressive reforms.

In another sense the title of the book actually undersells this book. This book is not only an insightful account and evaluation of Yudhoyono's presidency. With wide ranging and well-written articles this book is also a highly informative overview of the main challenges facing Indonesia. This is not just a book for political junkies but also highly recommended for those who want to get a quick grasp of where Indonesia stands, 18 years after the fall of Suharto.

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