Jamie S. Davidson, *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia], 2018, iv + 80 pp. ISBN: 9781108459082, price: USD 14.00 (paperback), 9781108686518, free (e-book).

Indonesia is a very significant country (the fourth largest by population, the biggest Islamic democracy, a BRICS candidate) yet Western knowledge of it is in steady decline. University area studies programs continue to close, feeding growing isolationism in the world's wealthiest countries. What can be done to help social science departments rediscover their curiosity for this most fascinating of countries? Provide good textbooks, for one thing, but not too heavy (students are reading less) and not too light (no point in reproducing common stereotypes). They should be empirical enough to convey new knowledge, but also theoretical enough to integrate that knowledge into a coherent whole. The Elements series conceived by Cambridge University Press is in that sense a god-send. In the space of a short book—the length of three journal articles—they aim to “combine an overview of the topic with the author's unique research perspective.” Jamie Davidson's *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy* does a pretty good job navigating between these various trade-offs. Without excessive name-dropping or endless citations, he has written a well-balanced, illuminating account of Indonesia's politics, economy and society over the last twenty years. It's not perfect, and I will come back to that, but it's better than probably anything else at this time.

A core argument in the book is that the twenty years since the end of the New Order are long enough to have developed a dynamic of their own. It will no longer do to evaluate today's Indonesia by the extent to which it still resembles Suharto's era. Since then elite decisions and popular movements have come and gone that have reshaped Indonesia.

Another core argument is that democracy should be the key criterion by which to judge those twenty years. Here the assessment is on the whole positive. In Southeast Asia generally, democracy is by no means the only game in town (think of Vietnam). Many of those that did make the leap have run aground (think of Thailand's military and the Philippines' Duterte). But in Indonesia elections have now been routinely held hundreds of times, the press is free, violence is generally low, and confidence is high.

On closer inspection, though, Indonesian democracy is fraught with problems. The rule of law remains weak. Vote-buying is rampant and out in the open. In 2014 Indonesians very nearly elected a retired general as president who openly said democracy was un-Indonesian.

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

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The twenty years of democracy are divided here into three phases. Chapter titles sum them up: Innovation, Stagnation, and Polarization. In the optimistic flush following Suharto's resignation, Indonesians broke through many barriers to make genuinely competitive elections normal again. But the innovative moment had already stagnated by the time Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was halfway through his two-term presidency. And today, Indonesia is deeply polarized around the role that religious norms should play in public life.

Each chapter has sections on politics, political economy, and identity movements. Davidson brings vast reading to the table in each, shaped by his own sensible judgment. All the topics one expects in a short, accessible overview such as this are there, from separatism to anticorruption drives, from various explanations of the Asian Financial Crisis to the treatment of the LGBT community. The language is clear. Structure and pacing are excellent. New topics are clearly designated.

I particularly liked the original research on the neo-traditionalist indigenous peoples movements in the Outer Islands that have made insistent land claims in recent years.

The political economy sections are authoritative, too. President Jokowi is taking the economy away from the neoliberal marketization that Yudhoyono had pushed, in the direction of a Chinese-style state-led economy. The 1997 economic crisis unexpectedly intensified economic nationalism. The IMF had won the battle when it made deregulation a condition of its massive bailout at the time, but failed to win the war. (Jokowi has no doubt used his access to state cash to fund his re-election campaign this year.)

The fear now is that democracy is under threat in Indonesia, as it is in much of the world. In Davidson's opinion, the danger does not come so much from a loss of popular interest, but from the possibility that a cynical and destructive anti-democratic alliance may emerge linking oligarchs, the military, and Islamist nationalists.

So why is this an excellent but not perfect textbook? Because it doesn't linger enough on a theory to bring all these fine observations together into a single overarching narrative. If democracy is the all-important criterion for judging these twenty years, why is it defined so thinly as "an unfinished process replete with conflicts over power, resources, ideas, and institutions" (p. 4)? Surely we need more than that to understand why democracy is so important to Indonesia's future. All the politics sections in the book focus on electoral dynamics. Again, these are important, but far from the whole story of how collective decisions are reached in this democracy. Politics are a great lens on how Indonesia has changed, but "the political"—as Hannah Arendt called it—is poorly captured by a conventional political science account of voting

trends. She distinguished the formal, institutional mode, which she named “politics,” from the sphere of norms and public discursive contestation, which she called “the political.” The latter unleashes agonistic passions that run far beyond the voting booth (Lefort 1988). Davidson is aware of the larger social forces that can connect his diverse observations—he attributes the sudden rise of Islamist nationalism to growing inequality, for example—but doesn’t develop these suspicions enough to make them explicit.

Overall though, this book is thoroughly recommended for classroom use at the senior undergraduate and graduate level. Driven by problems rather than teaching points, the chapters serve as good examples of the essay form and should produce plenty of discussion. We wish the Elements series every success in its mission to break down the walls of insularity in the wealthy western world.

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Reference

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