
Political leaders who rise to power from relative obscurity pose significant challenges for their biographers. Not only is there little documentation on their early years, but when in power, they often are so successful in fabricating the narrative of their origins that an objective reconstruction of their lives becomes nearly impossible. Biographers have responded to this problem in three different ways. First, some have substituted a description of the subject's early life with an analysis of the social and political history of the time, trying to give the reader a sense of what the environment was like in which the person grew up. Mary Elizabeth Berry's biography of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (about whom little is known until the 1570s, when he was almost forty) falls into this category. The second option for biographers is to reduce the space given to the subject's youth. Robert Elson's biography of Soeharto, for instance, devoted just 12 pages to his subject's life between 1921 and 1945. A third—and much rarer—approach is for a biographer to turn the difficulty of lacking documentation into the main focus of the book project, and to meticulously piecing together the subject's early life through decades of research.

David Jenkins’ book on the early years of Soeharto (from 1921 to 1945) adopted the latter method, illuminating the origins of Indonesia's second president over more than 500 pages, compared to Elson's 12. Indeed, the book on Soeharto's youth and the “making of a soldier” is designed to be the first of three volumes on his pre-presidential life. Once completed, the trilogy will bring the reader to Soeharto's takeover in 1965/66, from which point Elson's biography tells the rest of the story. It is a powerful reflection of the inquisitive mind of Jenkins (a respected journalist who met Soeharto and spent much time in Indonesia after his first stint there in 1969) that he chose not to write about the period he directly observed, but to begin the onerous task of shedding light onto the much less well-known aspects of his subject's long life.

The result of this effort is a deeply penetrating portrait of the young Soeharto and the times he lived in. It is a nuanced, well-written, and gripping book of the highest scholarly quality. In many instances, the reader can observe Jenkins wrestling with the material he found, trying to resolve inconsistencies and contradictions. Shying away from easy answers, he presents Soeharto “not simply as the corrupt dictator of later popular shorthand but also as a polite, clever, and capable young man who carries with him the baggage of a troubled childhood, who is quick to find his way in the world, and quick to seize opportunities for self-advancement, who is hardened by parental neglect as well as by war and revolution, and plagued by corrosive greed” (p. xxxiii). Commendably,

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while Jenkins highlights the importance of the events that shaped Soeharto in his early years, he ascribes no determinative power to them. Troubled childhoods, for instance, were common in the elite of these troubled times—and yet leaders drew very different conclusions from them. Jenkins, then, gives us the material we need to understand how Soeharto developed into the ironfisted leader of Indonesia who presided over the anti-communist massacres, but he does not excuse or justify his actions.

Similarly, Jenkins distances himself from cultural interpretations of Soeharto’s rule and life. Both during and after Soeharto’s presidency, many observers had pointed to the importance of Javanese culture in motivating his repressive regime and the specific mechanisms that underpinned it. The culmination of this strand of literature was Keith Loveard’s cliché ridden “Suharto: Indonesia’s Last Sultan,” published in 1999. Jenkins, while rigorously researching the role culture and religion played in Soeharto’s socialization, avoids such culturalist traps by recognizing the self-interested usage of culture as an excuse for repression and manipulation. As Jenkins explains, “Soeharto had far more in common with a number of European and Latin American military officers who assumed high political office—one thinks of Napoleon, Franco, or Pinochet—and with a civilian ruler such as Bismarck” (p. xxxiv). With this approach, Jenkins makes Soeharto accessible for comparison with other strongmen around the world, rather than insulating him from such analysis by misguided claims of cultural uniqueness.

Jenkins also strikes a thoughtful balance between identifying life experiences that made Soeharto stand out from the crowd and highlighting the features that, at the time, seemed to speak against a promising political career. At the end of the Japanese occupation, Jenkins tells us, “Soeharto had more military training by far, and more military experience, than perhaps 98 per cent of his fellow Peta [military force formed by the Japanese] officers, the men who would form the backbone of a new Indonesian army” (p. 304). Yet, in many other ways, he was unremarkable. “In the world of the Indonesian elite, Soeharto was very much an outsider, socially and educationally” (p. 304). He was unknown to many other military leaders, and not particularly well liked by those who did know him. Thus, Jenkins puts the spotlight on Soeharto’s agency and determination to leave his mark, despite (or maybe because) of his unexceptional adolescence.

Jenkins’ book is certain to take its place among the (few) great biographies of Indonesian leaders. John Legge’s biography of Sukarno belongs to this category, as does Rudolf Mrázek’s biography of Sjahrir. Jenkins’ contribution also added the missing piece in Elson’s Soeharto biography, which otherwise remains the standard work on his presidency. At the same time, Jenkins’ magnum opus
serves as a painful reminder that there are no equivalents yet for any of the post-Soeharto presidents. There has been no shortage of hagiographies published on B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Soekarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo in Indonesia itself, but none of these can pass as a respectable scholarly, biographical effort. Outside of Indonesia, accounts of Indonesia’s post-1998 presidents have been sketchy or, as in the case of Greg Barton’s book on Wahid, “authorized” and hence laudatory. It is to be hoped, therefore, that Jenkins’ project will inspire a new generation of historians to give the presidents after Soeharto the detailed biographical treatment they deserve.

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References