The years immediately following the collapse of former President Suharto’s New Order regime (1966–1998) were marked by euphoria, but also by increased precarity and bloodshed across the Indonesian archipelago. In regions as diverse as Aceh, Papua, East Timor and Maluku, widespread violence, along with newly-vocal claims to resources and power, challenged confidence that the post-authoritarian period would be a smooth march towards democracy. In the academic and policy communities, a host of explanations were marshalled to account for these rising levels of violence. For some, communal violence reflected long-standing ethnic and religious tensions that had been held in check by the Leviathan of Suharto’s state. For others, violent conflicts were signs of the fundamental illiberality of Indonesia’s social and political institutions, requiring concerted efforts at democratic remediation. And for still others—including many Indonesian activists—violence was the bitter legacy of colonial and post-colonial inequalities and human rights abuses that had gone mostly unaddressed in the enthusiasm for neoliberal economic and governance reforms.

Dave McRae’s book, *A Few Poorly Organized Men: Interreligious Violence in Poso, Indonesia*, enters into this contested analytic arena, offering a meticulous study of violent conflict in the Poso region of central Sulawesi. Poso’s conflict raged from 1999 to 2005, leading to the loss of at least a thousand lives and the displacement of tens of thousands more. Described in the international press as a “religious conflict” between Christians and Muslims, the Poso violence, McRae argues, was less a singular, homogenous conflict than a shifting and escalating series of political disputes, riots and revenge killings, culminating in a widespread civil conflict exacerbated by the presence of diversely-motivated external actors, including the Indonesian police and military and the militant groups Laskar Jihad and Mujahidin Kompak. In this thorough and comprehensive book, which draws upon an impressive range of primary and secondary data, McRae offers a detailed analysis of the fluid dynamics of violence in Poso, with an emphasis on the ‘organised men’ of the book title: those local elites who were able, with varying success, to mobilise communities to engage in perpetrating harm.

McRae begins by detailing some of the main analytic frameworks available to explain violent conflict in post-Suharto Indonesia. His overview rests heavily on scholarship in comparative politics and emphasises, following Sidel, increasing de-agrarianisation, competition for scare state resources in the con-
text of an underdeveloped private sector, and the presence of a substantial non-Muslim minority as key factors enabling conflict. McRae also identifies economic disparities between migrant and indigenous communities, and a weakened Indonesian military incapable of halting violence once it had started, as important exacerbating elements. Yet, McRae stops sensibly short of assigning causality to these explanations, highlighting the absence of sufficient data about regions and districts of Indonesia where these factors prevailed in the absence of broad-based violence. McRae's analysis instead focuses on the changing patterns of the Poso violence itself, concluding that it was the unstable local context, including fluctuations in community support, that drove and shaped violence once it had been established as a possibility. This emphasis on what he terms ‘the organisational underpinnings of violence’, which allowed for a distinct division of labour between brokers of violence and community perpetrators and supporters, provides important theoretical insight into the importance of context in the analysis of conflict. McRae also compellingly refutes the reduction of motivation to either grievances between social groups or the calculations of elite actors. While the Poso violence could be said to have started as ‘politics by other means,’ with local power-holders competing for resources and influence, as the conflict escalated it could no longer be explained simply as a series of rational political calculations. Narratives of fear, revenge, identity and threat grew increasingly salient, shaping the range of possible responses to on-going violence.

McRae's book is an important addition to the literature on conflict in Indonesia, and should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the history of the violence in Poso. In addition to providing rich data on the major events and actors of the conflict, the book offers a careful recounting of its different stages, defying attempts to reduce violence to a single set of root causes. Its emphasis on context and the deep understanding of local dynamics is laudable and refreshing in a field often dominated by generic models for analysing and addressing conflict. At the same time, the book leaves substantial room for further research. The book's tight focus means that Poso's history, including its implication in state networks of power and meaning that shaped relations between elites and communities, as well as how ‘identity’ itself could be imaged and debated, is glossed over. Little is said here about the post-Suharto national context in which market liberalisation and decentralisation exacerbated local conflicts in the absence of effective mechanisms for their peaceful resolution, or about the legacies of Suharto-era cultural politics that framed ethnic or religious difference as inherently divisive. This leaves open the question of how identifying ‘weak states’ as precipitants to conflict may fail to account for the role of state power in driving inequality, suspicion and militarism deep into