Indonesian National History Textbooks after the New Order

What’s New under the Sun?

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Since the fall of Soeharto, rewriting and re-imagining Indonesian history has topped the agenda for many historians of Indonesia. For one part, the agenda stems from a criticism that the New Order’s national history was state-heavy, unidimensional, and militaristic (McGregor 2007). Some believe the regime ‘bended’ (membengkokkan) the existing version of national history by reducing or even falsifying historical facts, for example, about the 1965 tragedy (Asvi Warman Adam 2001). This criticism has some validity. But the problem of Indonesian historiography today does not essentially stem from the New Order legacy, for which nobody is fully justified in entirely blaming Soeharto’s regime.

For the most part, the state-centered nature in the writing of national history is rooted in what has been generally known as Indonesia-centric historiography. It is an approach of history writing that focuses on Indonesia(n) itself as the main subject and actor of the past events and as a self evidently coherent unit with an intrinsic meaning and historical destiny. The Indonesia-centric historiography originally developed as a direct counter by nationalist historians like Muhammad Yamin (1945, 1953) and Sanusi Pane (1950–1) against the so-called Neerlandocentric historiography. By the latter approach, Dutch historians of the colonial time wrote the history of Indonesia from the perspective of the white, powerful men (mostly Dutch government officials) in charge, and neglected the existence of the indigenous commoners, ignoring or denying their historical agency (Sartono Kartodirdjo 2001:29–32). The Indonesia-centric historiography was thus originally a political tool for the nationalists in order to bolster the construction of Indonesian national identity and unity. It conveys a retrospective postcolonial perspective in the framing and re-presenting of the past. But it also reproduces the state centered approach of the Dutch.