Review Essays

Reading Ideology in Indonesia Today

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Ideology is not dead. Herbert Feith and Lance Castle's classic Indonesian Political Thinking, 1945–1965 was first published in 1970 and delved into Indonesian political thoughts through passages and speeches of various leaders. Their analyses show that there were four dominant ideological positions. Two were imported from the West (democratic socialism and radical nationalism) while two came from below (Islam and Javanese traditionalism). Another major work to be published on Indonesian ideology appeared much later when David Bourchier and Vedi Hadiz published Indonesian Politics and Society in 2003. Bourchier and Hadiz stressed on the shifting nature of Indonesian political thinking. ‘Just as Indonesia itself is not a ‘natural’ entity, there are no ‘natural’ or permanent factors that divide it. Any discussion of cleavages and streams
of thinking must therefore be situated clearly within their historical context’ (Bourchier and Hadiz, 2003: 2).

The purpose of this review article is to test the assumption of Bourchier and Hadiz about the impermanence of ideological thought in present day Indonesia. I shall try to do this by selectively reading the materials on current day publications available at the kitlv library. Although perhaps read by a minority of people, the ideas in these books often percolate throughout society and make their way into the various comments and opinions posted by anonymous individuals on the internet. It therefore seems worthwhile in the academic discussion on Indonesian politics and society to devote some attention to understanding the discussion and how political tropes are deployed. This review essay gives a preliminary assessment of these discussions.

Instead of seeing the end of ideology and the freeing of the individual from the historical and ideological myth that modernism and liberalism promises, the production of books entailing political ideas in post-New Order Indonesia is a continuation of the effort of various Indonesian thinkers to ground the Indonesian person within a value and a historical system, providing visions of both the past and the future. The themes and tropes of these ideological visions could be analyzed by perusing the political publications in an ordinary Indonesian bookstore. Some are tragic, others are optimistic or even triumphalist. It is important to note that none of these discourses represents fully formed ideologies in a sense of a political program. I would argue that they represent visions of yearning that are constantly evoked as strategies of speech acts without being a political programme. The groupings made in this article are based on my own subjective reading. I leave out the variety of local discourses that arose as a result of decentralization.

Engaging with the Problem of Indonesia

I read books that have been published within the last five or six years. The books are randomly chosen but must engage in what may be called the ‘Indonesian problem’, that is, it engages in the various discourses dealing with Indonesia’s problems and future. The writers belong to a variety of Indonesian ‘intellectual’ groups composed of academics, politicians, religious leaders and so forth. The publishers also represent a wide selection from a large and famous national publishing company to smaller local ones.

I will be discussing the aforementioned four books in the context of related recent publications listed below, which I feel represent the four major themes that connect to four ideological positions in present day Indonesia. I call these