Authoritarian collectivism: The origins and course of New Order Ideology

David Bourchier’s monograph makes a significant contribution to Indonesian studies by placing the ideological origins of the New Order state in a rigorously historicized transnational context. Organicist conceptions of authoritarian collectivism that inspired Suharto’s Pancasila Democracy can ultimately be traced to the Anti-Enlightenment sentiments of European Romanticism. The deep humiliations suffered by German-speaking Central Europe at the hands of the Napoleonic war machine elicited a highly emotive reaction amongst social thinkers who found the primordial bonds of blood and soil to be far superior to the positivist individualism that embodied legal-rationalist discourse.


Liberalism, with its emphasis on competitiveness and the protection of individual rights, overrode artificial divisions within an organic entity. The class conflicts and inequities that came with liberal ideologies were entirely unnatural. The same was true of socialist solutions to capitalist problems. Component parts could not turn against each other because they were all elements of a unified whole. Instead of perpetuating internal conflict, organicist approaches would minimize difference by emphasizing the essential function each component part of the body politic had to play in serving the commonweal.

Bourchier stresses that the unification and growing power of Germany during the second half of the 19th century caused its idealized notions of national community to seep into neighboring states. The Dutch gradually disregarded their liberal French intellectual heritage and incorporated organicist thinking into elite institutions of higher learning. Law faculties were particularly influenced by notions communal collectivism. These perceptions were only strengthened by colonial knowledge systems. Colonial intellectuals claimed that oder, or customary law, was a cultural essence that bound together the far-flung possession of the East Indies. While Dutch officials hoped to use such pronouncements to justify their domination of the entire archipelago, a nascent Indonesian intellectual elite saw it quite differently. The purported commonality of adat, or customary law shared by all archipelagic peoples would instead be used as the basis for the construction of a single nation. Indigenous elites sent to complete their education in the Netherlands thus immersed themselves in a colonial discourse that lauded the ‘primordial’ culture of the colonized.

Whatever the merits of these pseudo-historical musings, the debates in question remained highly arcane to the vast majority of colonial subjects across the archipelago. A second, and according to Bourchier far more consequential, stream of organicist thinking came by way of Japan. Japanese political thinkers had themselves been deeply influenced by ethno-nationalist ideologies emanating from Central Europe. These organicist conceptions of social thought might long outlast a former First World Power.

In Indonesia, internal conflict had to be circumvented for the sake of national development from within a deeply divided electorate. Bourchier stresses that once the economy had been mobilized, the political landscape was set of practices harnessed by Suharto and his cohorts to the New Order project. A more extensive examination of how coercive governmentality intertwined with organicist systems of social thought might long outlast a former First World Power.

There is no denying that Bourchier has written an important book. By focusing on processes of ideational formation, it is an important counterweight to thoroughly statist Administrative interpretations of the New Order. However, it might have been more interesting if Bourchier had engaged in a deeper discussion of the lineages of Indonesian state power. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras not only established the foundations of modern liberal thought, they also set a time of intervention by European powers in Asia. This apparatus was not merely a limited presence; it enabled the undermining of multi-cultural societies by the imposition of European languages. Hence, the underprivileged elites and increasingly reliant upon a small coterie of palace elites, who claim to know what is best for people with whom they have little in common have generated understandable angst within electorates across the globe. Hence, the underprivileged search for candidates who will at least give voice to their grievances. Thus, Suharto’s most important legacy for the future of Indonesia might be an ideological one. The precepts of authoritarian collectivism he did so much to embed into systems of social thought long outlasted a former First Family now seemingly gone to seed.

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