Politics, off the agendas of both public life and research in Indonesia for thirty years, has returned with a vengeance in Indonesia since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. Within Indonesia there is lively debate of politics in the media every day and this has been mirrored internationally by a growing stream of academic studies.1 Do we need more? Is there anything new or interesting to say? These two recent publications address themes already well-established, but also reflect substantive changes in Indonesia as well as the benefits of a longer-term view of complex processes unfolding over time.

Graeme MacRae


ONE OF THE CENTRAL POLITICAL PROJECTS of the Indonesian state, since even before independence, has been the containment and management of its staggering cultural, linguistic and religious diversity into a coherent and unified national form. The first president, Sukarno, was ultimately undone by other factors, but the inherent contradictions of his own way of managing diversity contributed to this. A major factor in the success of his successor Suharto, was his ability to create an illusion of national unity, preferably by ideological means, but if necessary by military ones. Both regimes achieved their aims of national integration at the price of democratic representation, civil liberties and recognition of diversity of local social, cultural and political traditions.

Since Suharto’s spectacular slide from grace and then fall from power in 1998, this preoccupation has remained, but with a radical change of direction – essentially a huge experiment in finding a way out of half-a-century of increasingly centralised and authoritarian rule. The foci, and indeed the titles of works already published, reflect these themes in various combinations. Very broadly, the trend of these works has been a gradual movement from national-level perceptions of disorder and “disintegration” and the persistence of established “oligarchies” of power, to more locally grounded studies that increasingly reflect the diversity of emergent “democratic” forms and processes.

The two major planks of this reversal have been decentralisation (desentralisasi) of budgets and government, and democratisation (demokratisasi) of political representation, via free elections. The two books reviewed here, both published a decade into the process, represent the state of the art of study of reformasi. They begin, as do most of their predecessors, from the fundamental dilemma of the state and its twin projects, but each focuses on one of the two aspects of the process. Deepening Democracy focuses closely on the mechanics and dynamics of one of the key mechanisms of both desentralisasi and demokratisasi: the elections of the heads of local levels of government (Pilkada). Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy builds on an earlier book by one of its editors in retaining a focus on reform and regionalisation of governance structures. Both begin with general/theoretical chapters, but at their cores are series of case-studies and these span the length and breadth of the archipelago. There are sixteen chapters in Deepening Democracy and fifteen in Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy. Together their authors reflect a wide range of viewpoints: Indonesian and foreign, academics and others, from World Bank officials to development advisors to think-tank researchers. Rather than listing and summarising this multitude of chapters, I think it is more useful here to discuss the main themes that run throughout and the directions of thought that emerge from them.

Deepening Democracy

A number of observers have followed, analysed and written about Pilkada, mostly in the form of journal articles. “These studies have tended to be at the level of individual elections, or local series of them. Key issues and themes emerging from these discussions include the pervasiveness of “money politics”, the roles of political parties, the personal profiles and reputations of candidates, the influence of the media, the “return” or “re-emergence” of traditional aristocracies and the use of signs, symbols and practices derived from “tradition” into the formal political arena, the survival and regrouping of elites entrenched during the New Order period, and the related practices of “cassettizing” and the consequent formation of “cartels” and “oligarchies”. The bottom line of most of these studies is the practical concern as to whether the reforms have made a difference at the levels of public participation and representation – whether democracy is, as the title of this book asks, really “deepening” or not.

While there is little explicit consensus in these studies, there is at the same time at least an implicit impression of a national pattern: that the democracy developing is at best shallow and is little more than a front for the continuation of elite oligarchy supported by various combinations of money politics, inter-party collusion and more or less direct control over the media.2

Deepening Democracy provides (to my knowledge) the first detailed account of the history, legislation and technologies of the reformed election system in Indonesia as well as a set of comparative studies of actual elections from all over the archipelago. This combination of overview and comparison, along with the benefit of some hindsight, has enabled the authors and editors to address the issues listed above in a more comprehensive, balanced and systematic way than has occurred previously. The result is a more nuanced picture in which any national-level generalisations are balanced by a growing awareness of the diversity of local variations and the complex interactions of factors that influence these.

The overwhelming message repeated in various ways and from various locations throughout the book is (not surprisingly) that these are local elections, conducted in distinctively local styles, and in which the results tend to reflect local factors and influences. These observations are often accompanied by warnings against the analytic dangers of top-down national level generalisations (e.g by Subiyanto on p 199, Lindsey on p 218). However, they also consistently recognise a series of recurrent patterns that intersect in various ways with the national-level themes identified in previous studies.

One such pattern is the role of political parties, which despite significant local variations, is quite different to what we are accustomed to in western democracies. Parties, besides those defined in religious terms, generally do not represent any particular, let alone consistent constituency, point of view or policies. They are instead pragmatic political machines with distinct histories and usually focused around powerful individuals. As such they are, unlike their predecessors in the 1950s, virtually free of consistent policy, let alone philosophy. Pratikno (ch.3) does attempt to map patterns of ideological
and cultural similarity of parties, but even he admits that they mean little in practice, especially when it comes to the pragmatic business of making coalitions or alliances. As a consequence, parties command little loyalty on the part of members and candidates. Candidates shop around for parties to nominate them, often paying for the privilege, but also hop from party to party in response to internal conflicts and according to what they see as their best interests. Choi (ch.4) argues that this “weakening” of the role of parties in fact results in them being little more than gatekeepers to candidacy, resulting in advantage to existing elites (of which more later). Parties do, however, have distinctive, if changing, local styles that usually reflect existing local formations of power and traditional allegiances. Ironically voters, unlike candidates, do seem to have a degree of allegiance to parties, with some areas being seen as PDIP-F or Golkar “strongholds”.

A reflex of this weak and, from a western point of view, candidates, do seem to have a degree of allegiance to parties, often paying for the privilege, but also hop from party to party in response to internal conflicts and according to what they see as their best interests. Choi (ch.4) argues that this “weakening” of the role of parties in fact results in them being little more than gatekeepers to candidacy, resulting in advantage to existing elites (of which more later). Parties do, however, have distinctive, if changing, local styles that usually reflect existing local formations of power and traditional allegiances. Ironically voters, unlike candidates, do seem to have a degree of allegiance to parties, with some areas being seen as PDIP-F or Golkar “strongholds”. The longest chapter (by Endi Rukmo et al) is a comparative study of the early functioning of new DPPD's (regional parliament) in five pairs of provinces and districts from across the country. It reveals considerable variation but frequently significant difficulties in getting to grips with the technical and managerial realities involved in the new system. That this is particularly so in the (mainly eastern) regions, more remote from Java, reflects the extent of their marginalisation under, and lack of participation in, the previous regime. Anecdotal evidence that I have heard since suggests that these problems remain in 2011.

Another very important chapter is one on corruption, based on a World Bank report in 2003. Dealing with corruption remains a major challenge for the present Yudhoyono administration and this report, despite being as based on evidence several years old, sadlly confirms the widespread popular perception that corruption has neither increased nor decreased, but has simply been “democratised” and “decentralised” along with the reform process.

The highly specialised and technical nature of many of these chapters means that they will be of interest largely to specialists or people seeking fairly specific information. Consequently, the only one on which I feel well qualified to comment (by virtue of my own specialist knowledge) is the one on Bali, which happens also to be (besides Holtzappel’s introduction) the longest and most detailed, and written by Martin Ramstedt, the other editor. It is a summary of the first seven years or so of the reform period in Bali. There have been other such summaries, but this is one of the most comprehensive, providing detailed accounts of the governance reform process of which few Bali specialists would be aware. But most interesting of all are the ways in which Ramstedt links these processes with better-known social changes and public culture, and especially the subtleties of developments in Balinese religion, in which he is particularly expert.

Few of the other chapters are as rich and detailed as Ramstedt’s, but to the various extents in which they approach this, they provide valuable documentation of processes that few of us have the opportunity to study in detail. The spread of case-studies is from (central and south) Sulawesi, West Sumatra, Java, and Bali and focus on topics ranging from local efforts to annul New Order mining licences, to protection of local minorities, to intellectual property rights. An unfortunate weakness, in a book devoted to the “regional”, is the absence of any studies from eastern Indonesia, let alone the important if marginal case of West Papua. Together, however, they provide a reasonable if not entirely comprehensive overview of the variation across the country.

Major themes emerging through the book are the challenges of resolving contradictions between national laws and local traditions, the persistence of power imbalances between regional parliments and heads of government. Another significant theme, which casts light on the persistence of entrenched elites in the “Deepening Democracy”, and links the two aspects of the reform process, is the parallel persistence of senior personnel and the administrative culture of regional levels in the civil service offices. Taken together with the networks of patronage, which link incumbent district leaders with their senior staff, this chapter may be explaining the resilience of these elites in the face of both top-down reform and bottom-up desire for change.

Together the formats, analytic strategies and even the conclusions to be drawn from these two books are in many respects similar: the emergence, at a national level, of the tasks of reform and the formidable obstacles to it at every level. However, what they both provide is a strong counter-narrative of the diversity across the country, local examples that repeatedly question the certainty of national-level generalisations and evidence of methodological value of balancing such generalisations with locally-grounded case-studies. Taken together, Deepening Democracy and Decentralisation and Regional Autonomy, provide the broadest, richest and most up-to-date picture we have of the political and administrative reform process in Indonesia. Both will undoubtedly become standard references for some years to come. This brings me, however, to a point that struck me while reading both books, but also applies across the academic publishing spectrum – the sheer time delay from the research/write/itng process to final publication. In the context of changing contemporary issues, this can result in a sense of things being out-of-date by the time they are published – in these cases by five or even more years. This is nothing new. Books publishing has always taken time, and the legitimate priorities of much academic work are depth, accuracy and quality rather than speed. However, these formats can also be blogs, but also e-publishing, which can cut production times by months while retaining core academic values, raises even more serious questions about the already beleaguered monograph and edited volume formats in academic discourse.

Finally, standards of publishing and production of both books are very high, with relatively few of the types and other defects that have plagued some of the more prestigious academic presses in recent years. Singapore has for some time been a centre for quality book production, but its academic presses in recent years. Singapore has for some time been a centre for quality book production, but its emergence as a major global hub in academic publishing may also give the established presses food for thought.

Dr Graeme MacRae is a lecturer within the social anthropology programme at Massey University, New Zealand. [G.S.Macrae@massey.ac.nz]