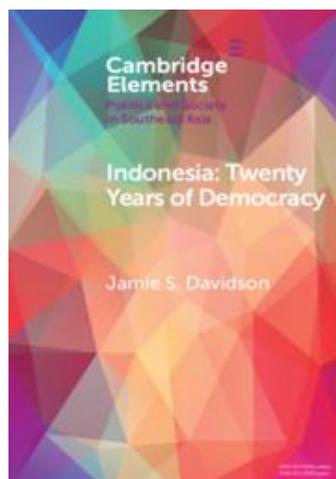


## On democracy of last two decades in Indonesia

Herdi Sahrasad\*



Jamie S. Davidson, *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia], 2019.

After Indonesia's independence in 1945, in the midst of the Cold War era, relatively backward Indonesia began an experiment of liberal democracy with the first general elections in 1955. But in 1959, due to the ideological crisis, regional uprisings and elite divisions, Soekarno finally passed the Presidential Decree and enacted an authoritarian guided democracy, which ended in 1965. In this connection, a study of the last 20 years of Indonesian democracy, often neglected to reflect the first 20 years of 1945-65: elected governments came and went; parliament is restless and contrary to ideological beliefs that permeate the masses, often resulting in violent conflict.

Jamie S. Davidson in this book noted that, during the first 20 years of its existence, Indonesia was largely governed in this way - Sukarno,

---

\* Herdi Sahrasad (✉)

University of Paramadina, Centre for Strategic Studies, Universitas Indonesia (CSS-UI) and Department of Political Science, University of Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Indonesia  
e-mail: sahrasad@yahoo.com

progressively cut the country's democratic wing, making it a "guided democracy" and allowing gradual military intervention. The last truly democratic elections were held in 1955. The setback to authoritarian and undemocratic rule continued rapidly in 1965 after a veiled military leadership coup that left an unknown military general by the name of Suharto in charge. Thirty-two years later, Suharto was overthrown after a mixture of riots and chaotic protests, which then gave way to another 20 years of democracy, which was the subject of Jamie Davidson's concise and easy-to-read monograph (pp. 1-20).

Initially, according to Davidson, a period of innovation accompanied the succession of Suharto's technology minister, B.J. Habibie, who was trained by Germany, was the country's first reform-era president. Davidson pointed to the extraordinary decentralization initiated by Habibie, who, although initially destabilizing and triggering fears of state disintegration eventually created a broader, more stable political and economic base. In some ways, counter-innovation that also marked this period - basically resistance to reforms carried out by entrenched political and economic interests - could be seen as braking against change. But it also helped the political elite of the previous authoritarian period adapt and eventually embrace institutional reform. Indonesia's reforms were not driven by revolutionary forces which completely overturned the old order. Co-optation rather than elimination is a method used to falsify acceptance of change and consensus that can be applied (pp.22-50).

The essence of Jamie S. Davidson's argument - a process of reform, which first leads to innovation, then stagnation, followed by polarization - can be seen as something like a mirror, even though the situation is much changed.

Today, in the era of Reform (Orde Reformasi), Indonesia is threatened to become a state of failure and disintegration not only because of economic disruption and external / global economic factors, but because of the failure of national leadership, failure of elites and leaders of political parties in realizing the ideology and ideals of the Proclamation of August 17, 1945.

This ideological failure was marked with a large stream of anti-intellectualism, inequality and inequality and injustice that is increasingly widespread and unsettling the people, poverty and unemployment are booming and severe environmental damage, while liberal capitalism has strengthened the structure of inequality and injustice, dumping Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. As a result,

anxious people, millennial and young people, are increasingly losing confidence in the political elite, the Political Parties and the National Leadership and the Cabinet reform regimes because there is no example, honesty, discipline, competence and openness in managing government and the state our nation today, which is marked by the decline of the economy and the decline of people's trust in the ruling regimes of the reform era. The failure of reform regimes in establishing a just and prosperous economy is the failure of politicians to practice ideology.

Today, Indonesian liberal democracy fails to realize social justice and fails to overcome inequality, and to borrow Milan Svobik's perspective (*The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge, 2012), Indonesia has experienced the ongoing "democracy breakdown", the decline of democracy, such as in various countries where authoritarianism reappears, while political polarization is sharp, sticking out in society. This situation occurs in Indonesia, marked by social polarization between the Islamist and liberalist camps, between the Ahokers camp and the opposite 212 camps, between the political camps of identity versus its opposing camps.

Recently, many intellectuals and scholars in Indonesia stressed that the liberalization of national life after the reforms proceeded swiftly. In fact, 'radical capitalism' and liberalization dominated the flow of Neoliberalism and Neocapitalism which threatened the existence of Indonesia and contradicted the existence of a proclaimed and independent Republic of Indonesia in 1945.

After four amendments to the 1945 Constitution under era of President Megawati Soekarnoputri, many fundamental aspects underwent "extreme" changes such as the existence of the MPR (Congress) which no longer became the Supreme State Institution, economic liberalization that were very liberal, the changes of article 33 of 1945 Constitution which contained elements the entry of the interests of predatory capitalism, the loss of the word "original Indonesia" in terms of being President, regional autonomy that resembles a federation, and other things that have led to a backlash to return to the original 1945 Constitution and other controversy responses.

Likewise, the practice of hegemony of state control and Indonesia's natural wealth by a handful of parties (elites) who had an affair with oligarchic politics which was very detrimental to the lives of the people and the future of Indonesia. Such nationality issues are not free

from the pull of radicalism and extremism and neoliberal capitalism in the complex domain of Indonesian-ness. The rise of the Caliphs (radical Islamism) as an alternative ideology is the excesses and negative impacts of the rise of Liberal Capitalism in Indonesia.

Since the era of President Megawati Soekarnoputri (2002-2004), as repeatedly conveyed by many intellectuals and scholars, In Indonesia, the democracy that the people crave has been hijacked by plutocrats and oligarchies that grip and control the political-economy power. The plutocrats, oligarchs and predatory capitalists dwindled with the power of capital, technology and networks to control the resources and all the instruments of democracy in their hands, subdue the people's sovereignty and eliminate the voices of the people who long for freedom, justice and general welfare. The people have voted in every election, but after that the people are forgotten, abandoned.

As a result of these bad conditions, what happened to what Davidson called "stagnation" covered the period of Indonesia's first direct presidential election in the reform era under President Megawati Sukarnoputri in 2004 to 2014, as well as President Joko Widodo's era 2014-2019.

Davidson attributed this mainly to political forces that "colluded among themselves to write rules of the game in their favor and to maintain their access to favorable state-controlled rent". But at the same time, direct elections and brave voters are building a new political landscape; where "personality and mass media erode the effectiveness of the attachment flow (traditional alignments of socio-religious identity)" (pp. 25-27). This is what Davidson called "stagnation" covering the period from Indonesia's first direct presidential election in the reform era in 2004 to 2014, also the era of President Joko Widodo 2014-2019. Davidson attributed this mainly to political forces that "colluded among themselves to write rules of the game in their favor and to maintain their access to favorable state-controlled rent". But at the same time, direct elections and brave voters are building a new political landscape; where "personality and mass media erode the effectiveness of attachment flow (traditional alignments of socio-religious identity)" (pp. 25-27).

Therefore, civil society, including the mass media (Tempo, Kompas and other media), who care and commit to quality democracy, must be brave more critical, honest, sharper, sustainable and in-depth than social media (Social Media), in exercising control social with anti-corruption, collusion and nepotism (KKN) agenda and vision-mission

of the strategic elite who continue to grip the government and state, as part of democratic control to save the nation and state from destruction. So that our country and nation will not fall into an economic crisis like 1997/1998, which will make the nation go bankrupt and almost collapse.

Indonesia has entered more than 20 years of reform, and the role of the media and civil society in general, remains important to build credible / professional political parties, good government and civilized society.

Unfortunately, even political parties that claim to be reformists are still amateurs and far from hoping to form themselves as credible forces. In fact what is happening is the diminishing people's trust and people's hope for a better and fairer life.

The people see that political elites and political parties work together with officials, technocrats and bureaucrats to raise taxes, energy and food prices that burden people's lives until they become victims of the reformation itself, while they enjoy state facilities and high incomes (including comparative studies abroad), using official cars or private cars that are relatively luxurious, far from the people aspirations, let alone the great sacrifice of the people in realizing democracy. The actions of political parties and government elites who have coalesced into oligarchic powers such as Robert Michel's description of the Iron Law of Oligarchy or Jeffrey Winters and Tom Pepinsky's description of the Politics of Wealth Defense of the oligarchs and plutocrats who rule the country political-economically.

In Davidson's view, Islamism, predatory capitalist forces and anti-democratic elements constitute the greatest threat to Indonesia's future, which is still filled with injustices and extraordinary inequalities between a handful of the rich and the poor who form the majority of the people. Socially, Indonesia experienced an upsetting uptick in physical attacks on religious minorities. A number of Christian churches were damaged and burned, especially on the outskirts of Jakarta. The Achmadiyah group, Shi'a. The LGBT group and other minorities were often targeted by religious violence, while the government and the national elites remained silent and powerless to address this social problem.

This book is important and relevant for students, researchers, academics and interested in Southeast Asian studies, with focus more closely to inspect Indonesia's political regime, political economy, and how identity-based mobilizations have emerged.

After reading this Davidson's book, it is clear that Indonesia still has many serious challenges to overcome, some so pressing that they could potentially erode or reverse many of the democratic gains the country has achieved since its former authoritarian ruler, Soeharto, was forced to resign in 1998.