

BOOK REVIEWS

Modern Indonesia

A History Since 1945

By Robert Cribb and Colin Brown

LONDON AND NEW YORK: LONGMAN PRESS, 1995
 MAPS, INDEX, ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FURTHER READINGS
 180 PAGES

Indonesia is hardly known by most Americans, even among the most educated elite. That reality was particularly clear last year as President Suharto saw his thirty-three-year reign coming to a close under the twin burdens of economic meltdown and political challenge. As the tensions rose, until well into the drama, the *New York Times*, that most elite of American newspapers, continued to refer to Suharto merely as the “leader” of Indonesia as if he were no more than another revolving-door prime minister of the sort that used to be so common in Italy, or Japan more recently. Clearly the *Times* assumed, probably rightly, that readers—even their readers—would not recognize his name.

Even within the American academy Asian studies courses have primarily emphasized the Asian giants like China and India or nations with common histories of imperial and economic competi-

tion like Japan. Within Southeast Asia, courses addressing Vietnam and the Philippines have attracted attention for obvious reasons, but the rest of the region has largely been ignored. As to the scholarly and textbook literature, while relatively good for scholarly monographs and a few undergraduate texts on the entire region, little has been available for undergraduate reading material on most of the individual nations like Indonesia, and that is quite astounding when one realizes that Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation in the world. Yet, a search of Amazon.com’s holdings on the subject reveal almost no competitors for *Modern Indonesia: A History Since 1945*. Clearly there was a need for this book, and Robert Cribb and Colin Brown have done a considerable service to the profession by providing it. They have accomplished more than simply filling a lacuna; they have produced a very informative and readable introduction to the subject.

The book is divided into ten chapters which chronologically cover events since the end of the Second World War. The first chapter naturally offers a relatively brief introduction to Indonesia and its experience under colonization. Then the book moves forward, offering a sophisticated but quite readable discussion of important themes from the politics of independence and the first efforts at nation-building under Sukarno through the era of party politics during the 1950s. Cribb and Brown describe well the era of party dominance and the subsequent creation in their different forms of the “Guided Democracy” eras of first Sukarno and then Suharto. The book is particularly good on the complicated history behind the 1965 coup and the subsequent massacres of the followers of the Indonesian Communist Party. The last chapters emphasize Suharto’s arrival to power and his efforts to build a corporate state under the rubric of a revised interpretation of Pancasila, the government-sponsored ideology of national unity.

I mentioned earlier that the book is particularly appropriate for the undergraduate classroom, but having said that, I think I should mention that for most American students it would have to be used in an upper division undergraduate classroom. Most lower division students would probably get somewhat bogged down in some of the more detailed parts of the text.

Obviously readers of this text, first published in 1995, will want assurances that the book will be brought up to date given the enormity of changes that Indonesia has experienced over the last year. With that in mind my sources confirm that by the time this review is available, the new edition will be well underway. Thus I would suggest that interested readers check for that edition rather than the one I have reviewed here. ■

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