



Neighbourhood watch

Hugh White on Elizabeth Pisani's *Indonesia Etc.* and Hamish McDonald's *Demokrasi*

In April, the World Bank-affiliated International Comparison Program published figures that compared the size of economies around the world. Its new methods provided a truer picture of the relative wealth of different countries, and the results were sobering - at least for Australia. Indonesia's gross domestic product in 2011 was calculated to be \$2.1 trillion, more than double Australia's at \$0.96 trillion. That meant Indonesia had the tenth-biggest economy in the world, while Australia only came in 19th. Indonesia's economic lead over Australia is much larger than anyone had expected, and it will widen over the next few decades if Indonesia's economy keeps growing faster than ours. The secretary of the Australian treasury, Martin Parkinson, recently cited predictions that by 2050 Indonesia would be among the five largest economies in the world, up there with China, India, the United States and Japan.

You would think our neighbour's swift rise to the front rank of global power would be big news in Australia, but somehow we manage to ignore it. That Indonesia is a rich and powerful country just doesn't fit our image of the place. Likewise, you might have expected that this month's Indonesian presidential election would grab our attention. It has had all the ingredients of a gripping political drama: two candidates have been thrashing it out in a tight race; the early favourite has been losing ground as his better organised and connected opponent enjoys a late surge.

Whoever wins is sure to take Indonesia and its relationship with Australia in new directions. In the short term, the winner will decide the shape of whatever relationship emerges from the wreckage of Tony Abbott's accident-prone apprenticeship in foreign policy. In the longer term, the winner will do much to determine Australia's new strategic and political footing as the balance of wealth and power shifts away from us and our Western friends, and towards our neighbours in Asia. The stakes are high, and yet Indonesia's political contests seem no more real to us than its economic rise. We find it as hard to imagine Indonesia as a successful and highly contested democracy as to imagine it as a fast-growing economic powerhouse.

Well, at least we are not alone. No other country with anything like Indonesia's size and potential is so often overlooked by the world at large. "Indonesia is the most invisible country in the world," as one prominent Indonesian said recently. One reason perhaps is that Indonesians themselves



seem to have such a fuzzy, uncertain sense of their own country. That is the point of the title of Elizabeth Pisani's new book: *Indonesia Etc.: Exploring the improbable nation* (Granta Books; \$29.99). As she explains, the "Etc." in her title alludes to the wording of Indonesia's laconic two-sentence declaration of independence from the Dutch. The second sentence translates as "Matters related to transfer of power etc. will be executed carefully and as soon as possible."

"Indonesia has been working on that 'etc.' ever since," Pisani writes. Her book is a survey of that work in progress.

So is Hamish McDonald's new book. He is well known to Australians as a distinguished foreign correspondent and foreign editor, and he has done a lot to shape Australia's understanding of the Asia-Pacific, and especially Indonesia, for many years. *Demokrasi: Indonesia in the 21st century* (Black Inc.; \$29.99) is a kind of sequel to his *Suharto's Indonesia*, published 34 years ago. The latter has endured as one of the best guides to the origins and workings of the "New Order" that Suharto established, which brought Indonesia 25 years of stability and growth at the cost of a good deal of repression and cronyism. *Demokrasi* brings the story up to date by exploring the new Indonesia that has emerged since Suharto fell in 1998. Like the earlier book, *Demokrasi* is straightforward higher journalism in the best sense, with serious and generally well judged descriptions and analysis of the big issues, enlivened by occasional vivid vignettes.

Pisani's book is, on the surface, very different. Like McDonald, she worked as a Western journalist in Indonesia, but she later returned to spend years as an epidemiologist researching the spread of AIDS. She went back yet again in 2011 to travel, mostly through Indonesia's outer islands. She stayed in remote corners of the archipelago for weeks at a time, getting to know something of life for Indonesians in places far from Jakarta. Much of her book describes her encounters with these people; there are some great stories and she tells them well. She attends a funeral celebrated with a massive sacrifice of horses and cattle among the megalithic tombs on Sumba. She hunts whales from an open boat off the island of Lembata. She roams with jungle-dwelling nomads in central Sumatra. And she goes electioneering with a local politician in Aceh. With both a talent for engaging with strangers and a skin thick enough that she can impose on them rather ruthlessly, Pisani illustrates Indonesia's astonishing diversity.



The author herself looms large in all this, because like any traveller's tale it necessarily centres on the traveller. Pisani is happy to frame her engagement with Indonesia in very personal terms: she describes the country as her "bad boyfriend", irresistible but infuriating. This approach carries risks. At times her account feels a little self-absorbed and slightly Orientalist, but overall it works surprisingly well. From the threads of her adventures she weaves a picture of Indonesia that is unexpectedly full and rich, and she has something insightful and valuable to say about many of the big issues. In fact, in their very different ways, Pisani and McDonald touch on many of the same issues and offer similar or complementary insights.

One common theme is Indonesia's puzzling and seemingly contradictory sense of its own identity. On the one hand, it has always been, and remains, a remarkably open place, accepting and absorbing foreign ideas and influences throughout its history. At the same time, Indonesia is remarkably self-contained. Its 240 million citizens conduct their own debates about their society, their country and their future without much reference to what people elsewhere are thinking or saying. They go their own way.

This philosophy is reflected perhaps most strongly in the changing place of Islam in Indonesia. Indonesia is open to the trends common throughout the Islamic world. Commentators have noted a rise in piety and observance, which is partly a result of much greater exposure to ideas from elsewhere through social and mass media. At the same time, a clear majority of Indonesian Muslims remain stubbornly resistant to the idea of an Islamic state, or indeed to any wholesale intrusion of Islam into politics. In none of the elections since Suharto fell have Islamic parties done as well as they did at the height of their appeal in 1956, and though Islamic organisations continue to influence politics in significant ways, the studiously secular national ideology of Pancasila remains a touchstone of political legitimacy.

Another theme in both books is the importance of Indonesia's unique experiment with decentralisation since Suharto fell. In the 1950s, President Sukarno tried to centralise rule from Jakarta. The bureaucratised New Order imposed by his successor Suharto in the late 1960s went a long way to making that a reality. For the past 15 years, however, Indonesia has expanded the scale and reach of a hierarchy of elected governments all the way down to local councils. Indonesians have a lot of opportunities to vote, and their politicians have a lot of opportunities for corruption. Politics and campaigning are a big part of life throughout Indonesia – much bigger than in Australia, it seems – and they provide Pisani with some of her best stories. But most importantly, against the odds, it seems to work. Among other things, it



means an awful lot of people have a stake in the continued functioning of the new decentralised democratic system.

Tellingly, neither of these books has much to say about Indonesia's economy, and what they do say focuses mostly on the bad-news stories of cronyism and corruption. These are, of course, major problems, but they are hardly new and they are not unique to Indonesia. What is interesting is how Indonesia has managed to keep growing strongly and steadily despite these problems and others, such as seriously poor infrastructure and a dysfunctional legal system. Some things must be going right to keep the economy growing: it would be interesting to hear what they are.

As both books were written before the precise shape of the contest was known, neither has much to say directly about Indonesia's presidential election. However, McDonald especially provides some fascinating insights into the two contenders. Both Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and Prabowo Subianto have promised Indonesians a new and stronger kind of presidential leadership. Both identify with Sukarno and offer something of the sense of excitement and lofty aspiration that surrounded Indonesia's first president post-independence. Both sharply depart from the tentative, passive style of Indonesia's recent leaders. Yet they differ markedly from one another.

Jokowi has a relatively modest background. He was a businessman before he became mayor of his home city of Solo in central Java, and he graduated to the national stage as governor of Jakarta less than two years ago.

Prabowo is the son of one of Indonesia's founding figures. His family is very wealthy, he was married to one of Suharto's daughters, and he has been at the centre of national affairs all his life. He has been accused of grave human rights abuses that date back to his time as a military officer, and his attitude to democratic and constitutional processes is also worrying. McDonald gives a chilling account of how Prabowo challenged new president Habibie's authority immediately after Suharto fell, deploying troops under his command in the centre of Jakarta to pressure Habibie over senior military appointments. Incidents like this cast a disquieting light on Prabowo's calls for stronger presidential leadership. His campaigning has also played on some distinctly nationalistic and xenophobic themes. It is not hard to imagine which of the candidates Canberra would prefer to deal with as president of Indonesia, but even Jokowi could prove a less amenable leader than we have been used to.

Both *Demokrasi* and *Indonesia Etc.* help explain why



Indonesia's democratic transformation since 1998 has been so much smoother and more successful than that of other developing countries. But they also show how much is left to be done to create a fully realised and sustainable political system and culture in such a diverse and complex country. And why we need to pay a lot more attention to what is happening there. **M**