An Introduction to the State of Indonesian Political Studies*

Thomas B. Pepinsky
Department of Government
Cornell University
pepinsky@cornell.edu

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* This is a short introductory essay for a forthcoming volume on the *State of Indonesian Studies*, based on a workshop with the same title held at Cornell University in April 2011. I benefitted greatly from conversations with Ed Aspinall, Bill Liddle, Don Emmerson, and other conference participants. The usual disclaimer applies.
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The field of Indonesian political studies was born alongside Indonesia itself. The great early works of Indonesian politics—*Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Kahin 1952), *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Feith 1962), *The Transition to Guided Democracy: Indonesian Politics, 1957-1959* (Lev 1966)—analyzed the landmark changes in Indonesian politics almost as they happened. These early works are distinctive in their historical detail and comprehensive scope, and they are the foundations upon which the field of Indonesian political studies was built. They are conspicuously not works of political science in the contemporary academic sense, but they are deeply political, and widely read among Indonesianists across disciplines.

The academic study of Indonesian politics has weathered two important sea changes since the early 1960s. The first came from Indonesia itself, with the collapse of Guided Democracy and the rise of the New Order. Soeharto’s regime depoliticized the study of Indonesia at the same time that it depoliticized Indonesian society. After 1966, it was no longer possible to study Indonesian politics with anything close to the detail and personal knowledge of current events that Kahin, Feith, and others had. The first academic study of the September 30th movement—the so-called Cornell Paper (Anderson and McVey 1971)—resulted in one of its authors (Anderson) being banished from Indonesia until 1999. Subsequently, scholars of Indonesian politics were by necessity more careful. Many focused to topics (such as the state, or development policy) that could be studied in less overtly political ways, others gravitated towards historical topics, and still others adopted a heavily theoretical approach to Indonesian politics that did not require the collection of detailed empirical evidence. A few abandoned the study of Indonesia entirely.
The second change came from the discipline of political science, as scholars of Indonesian politics employed in U.S. political science departments faced both the behavioral revolution of the 1950s-60s and the rational choice revolution of the 1970s-80s. What both revolutions shared was a commitment to a science of comparative politics that could identify patterns in political outcomes and explain spatial and temporal variation across political units (individuals, classes, states, etc.). Deep, country-specific knowledge and familiarity with the particulars of individual country cases were relatively less important to these endeavors than it was to scholars like Kahin. It is no accident that the three great early works identified above came from the Government department at Cornell, where the behavioral revolution was late to arrive (and where scholars of Indonesian politics had a second home in the multidisciplinary Southeast Asia Program).

After three decades in which the study of Indonesian politics was made difficult by both a hostile political environment and a discipline uninterested in specific knowledge of faraway and geopolitically uninteresting countries, one might expect the field of Indonesian political studies to be in trouble. Yet in three detailed and comprehensive surveys, Aspinall, Emmerson, and Liddle describe Indonesian political studies today as vibrant and diverse. However, reflecting the changes in the academy and the developments in Indonesian politics identified above, it is also very different from the Indonesian political studies of the 1950s-60s in terms of its geographical center, its theoretical concerns, and its conceptual and methodological toolkit.

Aspinall observes that the center of gravity for knowledge production about Indonesian politics has moved from the United States to Australia. Similarly, Liddle notes that all major recent contributions to Indonesian studies by American political scientists have been multi-country studies, comparing Indonesia to at least one other country in order to make causal claims
about some political phenomenon. In the U.S., the study of Indonesian politics for its own sake has been subsumed by use of Indonesian data to make general statements about politics everywhere (or at least, in countries that are somehow comparable to Indonesia). In Australia, as in Europe and Asia, understanding the specific content of Indonesian politics remains more a priority, and scholars working in these regions tend to focus on contributions to knowledge about Indonesia rather than to mainstream comparative politics. The debate that Emmerson recalls between Feith and Benda—“why did democracy fail in Indonesia?” versus “how could democracy ever succeed in Indonesia?”—no longer animates Indonesianists. Those inclined to area studies study what Emmerson terms “the quirk and the murk” of Indonesian politics. The generalists study the parts that they think can be exported.

For a global discipline like Indonesian political studies, a division of labor like this is probably unavoidable, and might even be healthy. The Feith-Benda debate reminds us that choosing between specificity versus generality in Indonesian studies is a matter of taste, not of principle (dissenting views from some in the mainstream of U.S. political science notwithstanding). The generalists cannot ever know if their generalizations are valid unless they know all of the details of Indonesian politics. The “specifists” cannot ever know if cross-national generalizations should be rejected unless they are willing to examine all other countries and cases. Either way, to demonstrate (rather than assert) that Indonesia is special, or that it is not special, requires complete knowledge of both the Indonesian case and every other plausible comparison. Since this is impossible, scholars gravitate to the ideographic or the nomothetic approach to Indonesian politics, depending on what suits their tastes. And as Aspinall and Liddle both observe, many of the in-depth studies of Indonesian politics produced in Australia and elsewhere borrow theories and concepts from mainstream comparative politics, while U.S.-based
political scientists working in the mainstream tradition are increasingly eager to get their hands on the rich micro-data that Indonesia has to offer.

But if Aspinall, Emmerson, and Liddle are all fairly comfortable with the state of Indonesian political studies, their chapters each convey some worries about various ways that disciplinary thinking will limit the scope of inquiry by political scientists studying Indonesia in years to come. The return to multiparty democracy in Indonesia has by and large removed the political impediments to studying Indonesian politics, but disciplinary constraints remain, especially in the U.S. Broadly, the authors worry that scholars working to satisfy the demands of mainstream comparative politics will produce research that is superficial, irrelevant, or both.

Aspinall notes that throughout the past half century, scholars have tended to privilege the center—high-level, relatively formal, Jakarta-focused “national” politics—in Indonesian studies. Especially in the era of decentralization, conventional Jakarta politics simply is not relevant for the daily lives of most Indonesians (even among Jakartans). For Indonesianists seeking to study any topic other than macroeconomic policymaking or Indonesia’s foreign relations, scholars must be conversant with the informal sources of power and authority in the kampung and the unique regional concerns that motivate political actors at the kabupaten or provincial level. Ignoring local politics during the New Order was excusable, both because political research in the regions was highly restricted and because the Soeharto regime was organized around principles of political centralization, hierarchy, and control. Today, Aspinall implies, talking to Jakarta elites or following the national press will tell us relatively little about the issues relevant to the political lives of most Indonesians.

Fortunately, studying local or regional politics in Indonesia could in principle be done using the standard template of mainstream comparative politics. Not so with agency, as Liddle
argues. Agency is a slippery concept that has bedeviled scholars working across the social sciences, but the variable-centered approach of mainstream comparative politics lends itself more to structural explanations for political outcomes than to explanations that rely on agency or process. Yet it seems impossible to understand Indonesia’s political trajectory after collapse of the New Order without taking into account the personal motivations, decision-making capabilities, and political choices made by individual leaders like Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri. The course of democratic consolidation in Indonesia is not reducible to the interaction of structural pressures. Still, both mainstream comparative politics and critical political economy approach Indonesian politics with a bias towards structural variables such as religious cleavages, economic performance, class, or the nature of the global economy. These explanations are helpful because they can easily be deployed to study any country, not just Indonesia. Liddle illustrates the ways that public opinion surveys and careful field research can be used to think rigorously about how agency matters for understanding in Indonesian politics, but it is hard to publish such work in the most prestigious outlets for mainstream comparative politics.

Emmerson too laments the way that mainstream comparative politics favors structural explanations for the nature contemporary Indonesian politics. But in his view, the problem is not so much structure as it is explanation: Indonesian political studies is forever looking backwards to explain Indonesia’s past, and scholars are ill-prepared to grasp the momentous upheavals of Indonesian politics—the revolution, Gestapu, Trisakti, etc.—that have proven so decisive in Indonesian history. These events are sudden, landmark shifts in the very basis of political order in Indonesia, but mainstream scholarship in comparative politics has a much easier time working with gradual, evolutionary changes that have slow and constant effects on political outcomes.
“Critical junctures” are only identified by scholars of politics as critical much later. Much like how mainstream comparative politics marginalizes agent-centric explanations for political outcomes, mainstream comparative politics does not encourage scholars to develop the sorts of deep and sophisticated knowledge of Indonesian politics that is necessary to anticipate the most important political events before they occur. Or, worse yet, even to interpret them as they happen, in the way that Anderson and McVey could the September 30th movement.

A field of Indonesian political studies that privileges national politics, favors structure over agency, and cannot study important political upheavals until they are long past will never have the same grand ambitions as did the early works of Feith, Benda, Kahin, and others. Still, as the following three chapters make clear, the study of Indonesian politics is thriving, not least as a result of the new intellectual openness of post-Soeharto Indonesia. And happily, the new focus on subnational comparative research designs in mainstream comparative politics promises to bring renewed attention to Indonesia precisely because it is such a large and diverse country. This renewed focus on Indonesia may yet give scholars of Indonesian politics the space that they need to pursue the ambitious intellectual projects that created the field of Indonesian political studies itself.

References


