

Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze, *Merdeka. De strijd om de Indonesische onafhankelijkheid en de ongewisse opkomst van de Republiek* (*Merdeka. The battle for Indonesian independence and the uncertain rise of the Republic*) (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2022, ISBN 9789462498761).

In their introduction to *Merdeka*, the authors, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Harry Poeze, challenge their potential readers with a rhetorical question: ‘Why should two white Dutch researchers write a book about a revolution that is not theirs?’ Their response to such a question is that their intention is to provide a new interpretation of the last years of Indonesians’ struggle for independence that sets aside both the popular narrative that has sustained Indonesia’s postcolonial national identity and the dominant international interpretation. In particular, they wish to distance their analysis from explanatory devices based on more extreme interpretations of it as being a *revolusi*, and from Benedict Anderson’s influential concept of the ‘imagined political community’, which they describe as ‘romantic’. Schulte Nordholt and Poeze’s argument, in short, is that the modern Indonesian state was the outcome of a long political struggle between different Indonesian stakeholders, advocating different conceptions of a future independent Indonesian nation.

*Merdeka* provides a carefully delineated chronology of the fast moving history that took place between 1945 and 1949. In contrast to the flurry of publications emanating from the Dutch government-sponsored investigation into Dutch military operations during the 1945-1949 Indonesian War of Independence that focus on the Dutch, the authors make clear their concern is to appreciate the complexity of the Indonesian Revolution. The study, presented in thirteen chapters across 400 tightly packed pages, is based on the authors’ systematic analysis of a broad range of many hitherto lesser known – or ignored – archives. It is written in a way that ensures that, as well as being an important historical study, the book also provides a ‘gripping read’ that urgently awaits an English translation. The book is concerned to highlight the diversity of the political agendas and ideologies pursued by diverse nationalist groups and political parties. It identifies the political machinations they were engaged in, the constituencies they sought to influence, and how each contributed to shaping Indonesia’s pathway to independence. These diverse historical conceptions of a national identity, as a brief epilogue points to, have continued to disturb the post-colonial nation. Intertwined throughout this chronology of the political formation of the Indonesian state is the reference to the continuing self-interested intervention of the former colonial power and, more broadly, the

significance in the context of the emerging Cold War of the intervention of the US in its pursuit of post-war global hegemony.

Just as in a brief review such as this it is not possible to enter into all the fascinating detail that the authors uncover, the whole story of the 1945-1949 period could not be accommodated in a single volume. The individual chapters, therefore, function to isolate and analyse the key moments and movements shaping the political development of the independence struggle across this period. The first two introductory chapters set out the better known foundational years of the Indonesian nationalist movement, the first examining the impact of the conservative policies of late colonial rule, the second analysing the influence of the years under Japanese administration. After that, Chapter Three begins with the investigation of the 1945-1949 period. Here the emphasis remains firmly on the different conceptions of the role of the state entertained by the different political groupings which, the authors conclude, all emphasised 'hierarchy and leadership'. The focus was not on the individual but on the importance of the collective, where the nation was perceived as 'forming one large family whose interconnectedness [*'onderlinge verbondenheid'*] was framed by a powerful state' (78).

Subsequent chapters proceed to systematically unravel the complex detail of the internal struggles that took place as different groups attempted to take control of the political process, making clear why the ultimate outcome remained 'precarious' until the end. Chapter Four begins to lay the groundwork for this with an overview of the numerous 'local revolutions', *daulat*, including the relatively well-known *Bersiap*, the focus of numerous Dutch accounts, that targeted the residual elements of the former colonial regime. These emphasise how the revolution was a grassroots struggle against the attempted return of Dutch colonial rule. Rather than replicating an established Dutch narrative, the authors are concerned to shed more light on the social and political structural characteristics of these local Indonesian resistance movements.

Chapter Six, 'The *Persatuan Perjuangan*', shows how leaders of the Republican faction had to deal simultaneously with two key issues: how to bring the revolutionary *pemuda* under control, while attempting to navigate a pathway between compromise and resistance in its negotiations with the Dutch and win over international support. Although the Republican Party was clearly emerging as the leading contender to take over the former colonial state, it was being challenged by more radical (and impatient) political groupings. In emphasising this diversity, the authors demonstrate the revisionist nature that their narrative is intended to draw attention to: what actually constituted the 'political community'?

Chapters Seven and Eight elaborate on this internal struggle by focussing on how the attempted return of the Dutch, with British and American support, placed increasing importance on the role of an effective military force for all nationalist groups, thereby reinforcing the perception

that the army represented a crucial instrument of state power. This was particularly so in the case of Republican Party, and its rise to prominence during this early period is the background to the central role the TNI played after 1949 in consolidating the Republican-led state.

While attending to its diverse internal competitors, the Republican Party also needed to play the 'diplomatic card' and, as Chapter Eight ('Diplomacy and the [military] battles') emphasises, this confronted political leaders of the Republican Party with what the authors define as 'a crisis'. They had, on the one hand, to show the world that theirs was a viable project, while on the other, attempt to quell the 'urge for revolution amongst the young', and accommodate or reject the demands of its multiple political competitors (213). The Dutch on the other hand, engaged with these diverse regional and ideologically alternative groupings in an attempt to curtail the territorial expansion of the Republican Party's influence even though these were no less passionate in their desire to achieve independence. Many of the groups competing with the Republicans signed up to a concept of 'Federalism' which is the focus of Chapter Nine. By demonstrating their concern to also constrain the ambitions of the Republican Party, Federalists hoped to find a pathway to resolve the diplomatic impasse with the Netherlands. The 'crisis' that had now developed within the broader independence movement climaxed in a civil war (February–November 1948) described in Chapter Ten. Here the authors make explicit their view that any presumption of there being a single 'imagined political community' is inappropriate (253).

In the end, as the final substantive chapter details, the Dutch government reluctantly gave way under US pressure to accommodate what was now presented as a united Republican and Federal (BFO) agreement on the constitution of an independent Indonesian state. Even then at the Roundtable Conference in The Hague in 1949, the former colonial power continued to demand outrageous terms, including payment for the cost of the four years of Dutch military action that had attempted to suppress Indonesian aspirations! To make this somewhat palatable for the Indonesians, the US promised to help finance the bill – a promise which in the end it reneged on.

Schulte Nordholt and Poeze conclude that, while the Revolution can be considered as having 'brought people closer together' in a more egalitarian and linguistically unified social order, all political groupings emphasised the importance of state formation to suppress the evolution of a democratic society (395). At the same time, it is important to recognise, they stress, that the revolution was not driven by 'the development of impersonal and irresistible social processes', but was an outcome of 'the actions of persons and of circumstances which influenced the course of events' (393). These persons apparently did not include 'the millions of women who by and large remained invisible', both in the historical record and, the authors admit, 'in our book'. Regarding this half of the Indonesian political community, they briefly note that 'Apart from all the burdens they shared, they also

experienced more freedom and autonomy because their menfolk were away from home' (397).

Fairly predictably, in their final listing of 'winners and losers' the authors nominate as 'the winners' of the Revolution the secular political and military leaders of the Republican Party, and the main 'loser', the possibility of a 'social revolution'. Readers familiar with the scholarship of these two historians will not be surprised that in the authors' view, its main advocates were those on 'the Left', whose aim 'had been to create from the independence movement a social revolution' (396). On the other hand, there is little discussion in the book on the role of a specifically Islamic perspective which, after all, remained central in political debate on the nature of Indonesia's constitution.

In conclusion, after reading this extraordinarily detailed account of the Indonesian revolution, we may need to agree that the ultimate achievement of *Merdeka* had to await the democratic revolution that followed the collapse of the Suharto regime, which is briefly referred to the book's epilogue.

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