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The Struggle for the National Narrative in Indonesia

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Michael Hatherell is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Studies at Deakin University, Australia. He works as the Academic Director for Deakin in its relationship with the Australian Defence College, overseeing the development and delivery of specialised courses for senior public servants and military officers from Australia and overseas. Michael's research interests focus on the role of narrative and ideas in shaping political competition and grand strategy.

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CHAPTER 1

Narratives and the Nation

Abstract This chapter introduces the study by focusing on the role of narratives in shaping our understanding of the nation. The chapter begins by outlining the importance of developing a shared sense of purpose in a nation like Indonesia to achieve both domestic and international aims. We then look at the way in which narrative has been considered in existing research on Indonesia, before turning to what the relevant literature tells us about the role of narrative in shaping ideas about the nation. Finally, we discuss our approach to studying evidence of the national narrative in this study.

Keywords Indonesian politics • National narratives • National identity • Narrative politics • Ideational power

Introduction

This book is fundamentally concerned with the ideas used to bring together a diverse nation to achieve important domestic and international objectives. While national-level narratives are important in all nation-states, this book focuses on Indonesia, a nation that faces a number of pressing challenges in the 2020s and beyond. Its sizeable population—the fourth largest in the world—demands economic opportunities, better

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quality healthcare and higher education standards. The citizens of Indonesia's many cities want more liveable urban environments, while rural regions require better infrastructure and services. These domestic challenges have become much more difficult to achieve in a world grappling with the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Internationally, Indonesia holds a pivotal position within the region now frequently referred to as the Indo-Pacific (Medcalf, 2020, pp. 161–169). Indonesia will need to navigate growing geopolitical tension between the United States and China, the impact of climate change, unpredictability in global markets, rapid technological development and the ongoing influence of social media. Indonesia is likely to maintain a leadership role within Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an organisation that finds itself at the heart of competition between the United States and China, as well as receiving growing interest from other prominent states like Japan, India and Russia. To be successful, Indonesia will require not only effective domestic governance, but also a coordinated international approach at the level of 'grand strategy' (Brands, 2014).

These domestic and international challenges are immense. They will require a unity of purpose that ensures that national, regional and local leaders, as well as the non-government sector, industry and society itself are part of Indonesia's broader approach. Addressing global challenges will also require engagement with other societies and governments in a networked age, including an ability to negotiate Indonesia's place in the world and its aims within multilateral and global approaches to dealing with the challenges facing humanity as a whole. A sufficiently clear and shared sense of purpose, albeit necessarily a constantly contested one, will be crucial to the allocation of resources and effort and coordination of the activities of state and society.

Political scientists and historians have long observed factors that influence the ability to achieve order and justice within a society and developing a shared sense of political purpose. These include, for instance, the design of institutions, the rule of law, the structural realities of society and the national economy, political measures, and the coercive use of power. Each of these factors is relevant when examining the political context of Indonesia. Yet one of the most important means of developing common purpose resides in the ideational domain: leaders, organisations and movements can shape key ideas regarding where the nation has come from, where it finds itself now, and what is needed to achieve a better future. In competitive political systems like Indonesia's, candidates for office use ideas to develop their own legitimacy as capable of leading the nation to a better future.

But finding common purpose through political competition is not easy in any nation, let alone one where competition over ideas or ideology has historically been seen as dangerous. Instability in the 1950s and 1960s, the destruction of the political left, and the subsequent long reign of Indonesia's second president, Suharto, left a strong legacy of suspicion regarding political competition over ideas. Bourchier's analysis (2015) of ideology in Indonesia suggests that a form of 'organicism' emerged much earlier, with connections to Dutch academic and legal movements as well as traditional ideas informed by *adat* (local custom) from Indonesia. This ideology argues for an 'organic' understanding of political and legal institutions, with a focus on harmony and balance, and a distrust of political competition and division. While organicism was not the only ideology to influence political developments in Indonesia in the 20th century, it was a crucial foundation for the Suharto regime and its ideational legacy that reaches into contemporary Indonesia. Too often, threats of instability have led to authoritarian political measures, including Sukarno's response to the instability of the 1950s, Suharto's response to the violence and chaos of the 1960s, and arguably now the response of President Joko Widodo (better known as Jokowi) to political challenges facing his government.

Yet while Jokowi's government has been rightfully criticised for its use of coercive legal measures to target outspoken critics, there is more to the story. Indonesia has not yet reverted to the authoritarianism of the Suharto years, and remains a competitive democratic political system. Indonesia's most recent round of national elections, on the 19th of April 2019, saw more than 245,000 candidates run for 20,000 available seats, with more than 193 million voters casting their ballot. When compared to the United States' lower turnout and the longer time period of India's rolling election cycle, Indonesia's 2019 round of elections was the largest and most complex election held in a single day anywhere in the world. And despite concerns over the coercive use of state power at the national level, and the impact of cronyism, corruption and dynastic politics in many local and regional political contests, Indonesia's elections as a whole remain relatively free and fair and feature genuine contests for power.

This is especially true of the last two presidential contests. In 2014 Jokowi campaigned for the presidency based on his track record as the mayor of Solo and the governor of Jakarta, with Prabowo Subianto emerging as his competitor: a former senior general with connections to the Suharto family. In 2019, Jokowi ran in defence of his first five-year term as president, with Prabowo again the only challenger. Jokowi won office once

more, with an official victory margin of 85,607,362 votes (55.50%) to Prabowo's 68,650,239 (44.50%). Prabowo's team unsuccessfully challenged the result in Indonesia's constitutional court, which heard their case and ultimately ruled that technical issues in the running of the election did not constitute a systematic attempt to cheat the election process. Despite Jokowi's ultimate victories in 2014 and 2019, both elections were hard-fought contests that divided Indonesian society, and even in some cases divided families.

Most importantly for the focus of this book, both the 2014 and 2019 electoral contests featured a contest of political discourse. The candidates put forward vastly different narratives about Indonesia as a nation, including its history, its present situation and what it would take to achieve a better future. The diagnoses of Indonesia's problems presented by the two campaigns were starkly different, and Prabowo and Jokowi presented their unique backgrounds and experience as ideally suited for national leadership within the broader political story that they offered.

These *national narratives*, as we refer to them in this book, are nothing new. Societies are built around stories about themselves, including their history, their present and their future. Societal storytellers adopt symbols and beliefs and differentiate themselves from the 'other' outside their borders. In modern societies, different ideas about the preferred identity and future direction of the nation have become a central feature of political competition, often overtaking more traditional cleavages based on class or 20th century notions of identity. In the United States, former president Donald Trump presented his own powerful national narrative, with still unfolding consequences for the future of American democracy. In the United Kingdom, the contested political process of Brexit featured competition between at least two very different versions of the national narrative. In other nations around the world, the economic, ecological and social pressures of the twenty-first century are already creating the conditions for new contests for the national narrative.

In the broader context of Indonesian politics, where so many other issues affect political outcomes, it is crucial that we not lose sight of the development and use of national narratives in political contests. These narratives are important not only for their potential to shape the distribution of power and the nature of those who claim institutional power through elected office, but also because of their impact on the ideational domain. Ideas in themselves are not inherently positive or negative, but they are often influential, and their impact is sometimes more difficult to assess

compared to other forms of power. The national narratives that are shaped at the highest level of Indonesian politics are crucial in understanding the basis for a common sense of purpose in governing the nation, whether we are focusing on domestic policy or on international behaviour. Put simply, the outcomes of contests over the national narrative will shape which ideas achieve dominance not only in deciding what policy approaches are desirable, but also in deciding whether there will be sufficient common purpose to achieve important domestic and grand strategic outcomes.

The Place of Narrative in Understanding Indonesian Politics

The impact of narrative is one of the least explored aspects of contemporary Indonesian politics. This is likely due to the nature of Indonesian politics itself, where clear ideational foundations of political competition have been relatively hard to find in recent years. Things looked quite different in the early post-Suharto years, where the ideological organising principles of political competition seemed to be based on the alignment of political parties to historically powerful cultural and religious streams in society (called *aliran)*. In the 1999 and to some extent the 2004 national elections, competition between ideational communities based on these *aliran* appeared to provide a logical foundation on which political competition in Indonesia would operate.

In more recent years the impact of *aliran* has clearly faded. A number of surveys suggested that Indonesian citizens were increasingly feeling disconnected from the party system. One survey conducted by Lembaga Survei Indonesia (2011) found that only 20 per cent of respondents felt 'closer' to one party than the others, down from 86 per cent in 1999. By 2015, this figure on the same question had further reduced to 15.9 per cent (Lembaga Survei Indonesia 2015). While there are some signs of *aliran* connections remaining relevant in relation to parties like *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia—Perjuangan* (PDIP—The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) and *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB—The National Awakening Party), Indonesia's political party system has increasingly been filled with 'entrepreneurial' parties (Svasand, 2013) set up as vehicles for presidential candidates and for controlling other important political offices (Hatherell, 2019, p. 49). The identity and marketing of these political parties have increasingly drawn on the individual political aspirations of leading political figures, and their purpose appears oriented towards

pragmatic political objectives over competing for distinct ideological outcomes. A fusion of nationalism and religiosity is common to all of Indonesia's political parties, even if there are some minor differences between more secular parties and those that see a 'stronger role for Islam in State affairs' (Mietzner, 2013, p. 236). In regional and local politics, Indonesia's political parties have formed almost every possible combination of partnerships to support candidate pairings.

The apparent lack of a clear ideological logic to political competition has in part led to the search for what Aspinall (2011, p. 312) a decade ago called the 'fundamental ordering principles of the new post-Suharto politics'. Over the subsequent years the main contenders for this new organising principle, according to notable contributions to the study of Indonesian politics, have been clientelism, patronage and money politics. Building on longer-standing arguments about the structural continuities between the Suharto and *post-Suharto* eras, a number of scholars have now noted that money politics and patronage are central in deciding who is able to compete for political office, and how they are able to gain the support of key sections of society (Hadiz, 2003; Hadiz & Robison, 2013; Winters, 2013). These factors have been noted, in particular, in local and regional electoral contests, where the support of influential figures in the community can go a long way towards delivering the support of ethnic groups, economic interests, civil society organisations and religious groups. In summarising the findings of multiple local and regional case studies collected in their edited book, Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016, p. 5) state that 'we wish to be absolutely clear on this score: our findings demonstrate that patronage distribution is *the* central mode of political campaigning in Indonesian legislative elections'. Aspinall and Sukmajati's comprehensive volume has been followed by a number of other studies charting the structural and financial realities of political campaigns, particularly at the local and regional level.

Examining the power of money politics, patronage and clientelism offers a crucial lens in the study of political competition in Indonesia, but the explanatory power of these factors is limited in some important ways. These factors might explain why individual politicians have an edge in achieving nomination for office and the basis of some electoral victories, but not others. They help explain the political decisions of some voters, but not every voter in Indonesia bases their voting decisions on economic incentives or the impact of money politics: voting rationale is diverse, money politics can only reach so many individuals, and in some cases

members of society accept incentives but vote according to their preferences anyway. At the national level, political candidates for the presidency need more than just money or connections to win. In the 2019 presidential election, Jokowi won 85 million votes to Prabowo's 68 million—a significant number of individuals voting with very different worldviews, individual economic contexts and identities. Drawing together a patchwork of voters and communities across a sprawling archipelago separated into 34 different provinces requires more than just financial resources: it requires a political message that establishes why their vision for Indonesia is more compelling.

The impact of ideas is not only important in helping decide who will win or lose key political contests. The way in which political candidates employ ideas and narratives can also impact the nature of political discourse. National political candidates possessing the opportunity to shape political narratives can impact the way in which millions of citizens view their social and political environment and even how they understand their own interests. On the other hand, individual citizens, organisations and movements will sometimes respond to the political stories presented in campaigns, seeking to reject the ideas that these stories draw on or present their own counter-claims. Beyond the winning and losing of elections, the way in which political leaders employ discourse can have longer-term impacts. This may be particularly true of a diverse nation like Indonesia with political-charged cleavages, where there has historically been a sensitivity to words or narratives that are considered offensive to particular communities or likely to damage social harmony.

Indonesia's own history provides evidence of how ideational power compliments other forms of power. Indonesia's founding father and first president, Sukarno, sought to control different structures of power within the emerging Indonesian nation post-Independence, but his own power rested partly on the idea of who he was and his ability to continue crafting influential political stories. Indonesia's second president, Suharto, devoted himself to cultivating structures of power and political institutions that would support his rule and the legitimacy of his regime. Yet Suharto too could not have done this without also dominating the ideational realm. More recently, the rise of some of Indonesia's most prominent contemporary politicians would not have been possible without the way in which they have developed political narratives around the context and nature of their leadership (Hatherell, 2019).