

### Rezension: Nyman, Mikaela: Democratising Indonesia: The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi

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## Rezensionen

**Nyman, Mikaela:**  
*Democratising Indonesia. The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006, ISBN 8791114829

Indonesia went through an astonishing transition from a 32-year-long authoritarian rule to a competitive democracy. This included ending the presence of the military in the legislature and introducing direct elections, marked by their high standards for the president, governors and regional heads. Mikaela Nyman's book *Democratising Indonesia. The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi* focuses on what she believes to be the drivers of Indonesia's democratization process: the "social movements" which became a visible force shortly before the fall of Suharto. Nyman succeeds in giving well-portrayed case studies for social movements, but on the whole offers little more than a general insight on the challenges of Indonesian civil society.

She focuses particularly on three groups – the student, women's and workers' movement – and their contributions to ending the authoritarian regime under Suharto. Thematically, the book also covers the contribution of Indonesian civil society in general to the country's political development up until the landmark 2004 legislative elections. The theoretical

framework is derived from the relevant literature on democratization and transition and utilizes available publications from the studies specialized on Indonesia. Nyman gained direct country insights from media articles, Indonesian-language sources and interviews.

Nyman succeeds in analyzing the enabling environment shaping the three social movements and outlines their shortcomings. She convincingly describes the students' and women's movements as catalysts for change especially in the early times of the regime transition. She notes the students' lack of inter-class alliances and their failure to bridge higher-level politics and ordinary citizens (page 159). She outlines the women's movements' mobilization and their contribution to the pro-democracy movement (page 141 onwards). The book describes cases of worker issues, which provided common denominators for action such as civil society's reaction on the death of the labor activist Marsinah in 1993. As a whole, the case studies illustrate and provide the background to rising demands to Suharto's resignation against the backdrop of an economic crisis and the strongman's failing health.<sup>1</sup>

Nyman then moves on to list weaknesses of the overall civil society-driven democratization process since 1998, such as the low empowerment of women within

<sup>1</sup> For an exemplary study of political opposition in Indonesia in the framework of regime change read Aspinnall, Edward (2005), *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance and Regime Change*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. For a thorough analysis of the Indonesian transition from a social movement perspective refer to Feulner, Frank (2001), *At the Forefront of Reform: Student Protest and Regime Transition in Indonesia*, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies: Ph.D. Thesis.

society (page 188) and the need for raising knowledge among the electorate (page 182). She also touches upon major developments such as regional autonomy (pages 171-173), civil-society activities in elections (page 180), and major advancements for institutionalizing the democratic process. She calls for greater cooperation and inter-class alliances among civil society forces, and correctly points out the strategic value putting issues such as combating corruption and the establishment of improved governance high on the agenda of civil society organizations to connect to Indonesian citizens. The author does not mention the establishment of rule of law or any organizations actively contributing to it such as the Commission for Disappeared and Victims of Violence (*Komite Untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Kekerasaan*, Kontras) or the Center for Law and Policy Studies (*Yayasan Pusat Studi Hukum Indonesia*, PSHK), although it is the main precursor for any of these achievements. In her concluding reflections, Nyman identifies the need for further structural democratic reform to enable a more equal access of citizens to the state and its institutions.

Whereas few commentators will contradict Nyman's statements, it raises the question why she chose to investigate these three particular movements. Within the framework of civil society analysis, the focus on the workers' role for understanding the pro-democracy movement is insufficiently explained. A more stringent description of the analytical aims of the

study, and the limitations on what can be assessed with the main emphasis on social movements would have been helpful. As it stands, the book fails to explain some of the major driving forces and challenges of the Indonesian democratization process and its civil-society driven achievements beyond the regime transition of 1999.

The most striking absence is the role of Islamic organizations in Indonesia's democratization. Nyman is aware of the importance but argues that the complexity of the issue and the Islamic groups' unclear position on the democratization process justifies their exclusion (page 17). This decision is regrettable, as Islamic organizations' support for democratic processes were decisive factors in the country's political development. As the author correctly points out the country's major Islamic organizations under Suharto struggled to decide between loyalty to the regime or supporting political change (page 17). It was only when the Islamic students' organization joined the movement that wider circles of the population supported the ousting of Suharto. Conversely, it was when some of the Islamist groups decided to support the Habibie government, unity split and the movement broke. With the exclusion of the Islamic organizations to the democratization process, important dynamics within the Indonesian civil society go unassessed.

The rise of the middle class in Indonesia, the emergence of civil society movements and the increasing importance of Islam in Indonesia have all occurred to-

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the topic please refer to Rinaldo, Rachel (2006), "Feminism in uncertain times: Islam, Democratization and Women Activists in Indonesia", University of Chicago: Paper for 2006 Globalization Conference.

gether over the last twenty years intertwined.<sup>2</sup> For example, the contribution of “Islamic” women organizations such as Fatayat NU and Rahima are as, or even more, important for gender issues than the organizations introduced in Nyman’s book. Islamic political parties appealing to anti-corruption measures and good governance fare extremely well in national and regional elections. For better or worse, the decision of the Islamic groups to support the democratic process based on a secular democratic system lies at the heart of challenges faced by the contemporary Indonesian society and its democratization. Nyman’s book focuses on one particular segment of Indonesian civil society within a general civil society framework. The position of Islamic organizations on *reformasi* might in the end be more decisive for Indonesia’s future than the contribution of the three social movements described in the book.

– Jan-Michael Bach –