Independence for Java? New National Projects for an Old Empire

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INDEPENDENCE FOR JAVA?  
NEW NATIONAL PROJECTS FOR AN OLD EMPIRE

Robert Cribb

East Timor is no longer a part of Indonesia. Aceh and Papua are seething with secessionist tension. The resource-rich provinces of Riau and East Kalimantan have put in ambit claims for independence, and talk has ever been heard of independence demands from Bali and Sulawesi. The Indonesian experiment, a multi-ethnic state stretching more than 5,000 kilometres from east to west, is under challenge today as never before, and all over the Asia-Pacific region defence analysts are pondering the question of whether the early 21st century will see the disintegration of Indonesia in the way that the late 20th century saw the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. For the first time since the Second World War, there is a serious possibility that the extended archipelago to Australia’s north could be divided not into five or six states as at present, but into a dozen or more. Within this fluid environment this chapter examines the historical nature of the Indonesian empire and its future status, with particular emphasis on the island of Java.

Discussion of the possibility that Indonesia will disintegrate has focused on centrifugal forces in the outlying regions of Indonesia. Observers have accepted that the provinces outside Java felt exploited and dominated by the centre during the three decades of the New Order and that there is an appetite for autonomy across the whole archipelago (see, for example, Booth 1992a). Except in relation to Aceh and Papua, however, most observers have shielded away from regarding this restiveness as embodying true local nationalist aspirations. There seems to be a general consensus that the current drawn-out attempt at decentralisation of power in Indonesia is primarily an administrative recognition that some functions of government can best be carried out by local and regional government, rather than by the central authorities. The unsuccessful efforts of the Dutch in the late 1940s to establish federal borders based on ethnic distinctions seems to show that Indonesia cannot simply be pulled apart into a number of ethnically coherent states (Cribb 1999). There is concern that a failure of the decentralisation program might create a political crisis and a sense of despair which could drive prosperous provinces to seize their own independence. This possibility has to be set against the fact that there are few significant international forces with an interest in Indonesia’s disintegration and against the continuing power of the idea of Indonesia. The Indonesian state may have been created by the force of Dutch arms, but the idea that a single large state is the best possible institution to deliver modernity to the people of the archipelago and to protect them from the depredations of the outside world is still persuasive and has deep emotional roots among Indonesians.

In this discussion, the general assumption has been that Indonesia’s survival will be determined by the interplay between centrifugal forces in the outlying provinces and the capacity of the centre to accentuate the positive features of a single Indonesian state. If we set the Indonesian state in a comparative analytical context, it becomes clear that a third key element in the events of the future is likely to be the island of Java. Independence for East Timor does not destroy Indonesia or even transform it significantly; even the loss of Aceh and Papua would leave Indonesia as the fourth most populous country in the world. If Java wanted to go it alone, however, then the Indonesian experiment would truly be over.

EMPIRES

The idea that Java might wish to leave Indonesia is, at first sight, bizarre. The island is the centre of political power in the archipelago; Javanese have held a majority of the powerful positions in the state; and Javanese culture appears to have deeply penetrated the state and political cultures of the archipelago. Not all observers have been willing to regard Indonesia as a Javanese empire, ruthlessly exploited by the resource-poor main island and held together by force of arms, but most agree that Java has appropriated more than its share of the natural resources of the other islands, that Javanese have been unduly prominent in the affairs of state, and that Javanese officials outside Java are often condescending and brutal in a style reminiscent of their colonial predecessors. In fact, however, Java’s relationship to Indonesia is a good deal more complex, and we can appreciate that complexity best, perhaps, by setting Java and Indonesia in the broader, comparative context of empires as a political form.

Empires can be defined simply as polities that cover a large territory and rule a large, ethnically varied population. This definition excludes one or two polities traditionally called empires – Vietnam and pre-1895 Japan, for instance – but it highlights the two factors that make empires vulnerable. It is
not just because of Gibbon that empires are assumed to ‘decline and fall’: the
difficulties of communication and the strength of ethnically based resistance
together make empires much more fragile than smaller, more homogeneous
units. Historically, most empires have been created when a particular society
develops a technological (generally military) innovation or a particularly
effective form of social organisation (often including a gifted leader) which
enables them to sweep across a vast territory and to topple enemies one after
another. The Roman empire was built on the military prowess of the legion;
the Mongols conquered half the world thanks to superior horsemanship,
supratative communications and great generalship. The European empires
were made possible by a combination of firearm and military technology,
along with generally superior logistical backing. The advantages that allow a
society to create an empire, however, tend to be short-lived. Technology can
be transferred and forms of organisation can be learnt. Even if the imperial
power remains superior to its subordinate peoples, it may not remain so su-
perior that it can retain control. Successful empires, therefore, require a political
format.

In a few cases, this format involves the absorption or extermination of the
subject peoples, as was done in much of the Americas, in Australia and by
China. More common, however, is the construction of an imperial ruling elite
and an imperial ruling idea. The successful empires of world history have
generally engaged their subject peoples in the imperial enterprise by creating
a multi-ethnic administrative and military elite which was accessible to the
best and the brightest from among at least some of those subject peoples. The
Mongol, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires were all ruled by adminis-
trative corps that included many peoples other than Mongols, Turks or Aus-
trians, and these administrative elites meant that each empire took on a
character different from that of the supposedly dominant ethnic group. The
Soviet Union, too, was an empire in precisely this way. Even though it was
dominated by Russians and held together by force, there was always the
opportunity in the Soviet Union for capable figures of other nationalities –
Georgians, Ukrainians, Kalmyks and so on – to achieve power and influence.
Even the United States is an empire in some respects. Its traditional centre
of power may have been the northeast, but its great regional diversity is held
together by an imperial idea that can deliver presidential power to a Georgian
or a Texan. The words ‘empire’ and ‘imperial’ today resonate with connota-
tions of repression and inequality, but the successful empires of world history
have been rather meritocratic, the imperial bureaucracies, civil and military,
typically providing avenues of social mobility for ambitious men who might
never have been able to make much of themselves in a smaller, more rigid
society.

dynamic. Established by force of arms and the strength of capitalism, these
empires could survive only by recruiting subject peoples into the ranks of the
colonial army and the colonial bureaucracy. One of the clearest examples of
this process is the way in which England’s dominance over Scotland from the
17th century was made palatable by the expanding range of opportunities that
Scots began to enjoy in the empire, but to a lesser extent individuals from other
ethnic groups, especially Indians, also participated in the imperial venture.
The paradox of empire is that the more successful the construction of a
broad imperial identity is, the less palatable it may become to the supposedly
 dominant group. Rather than being ‘their’ empire, it becomes an empire that
rules them, often through people of other nationalities. Thus the Turks became
a subject people under the Ottoman Empire, the Russians a subject people in
the Soviet Empire and so on. This condition of subordination, or the threat of
it, tends to produce an unpleasant chauvinist reaction within the ethnic group
which imagines that it should be dominant. This chauvinism may be expressed
in an attempt to discard imperial identity in favour of imposing the
national identity of the dominant group; Turkish nationalists took powerful
positions in the Ottoman empire in the late 19th century and sought to impose
Turkish culture on the Arabs of the empire. It may be expressed in the impo-
sition of ethnic discrimination; in the Dutch and British colonies, the rise of
formal racial discrimination coincided with the emergence of educated
Indonesian and Indian elites who were every bit as capable as their European
rulers and who would have risen to positions of great authority if the colonial
powers had been willing to allow the principle of meritocracy to continue
(Fasseur 1994; Ballhatchet 1980).

In the worst of circumstances, this chauvinism may lead to expulsion or
extermination, as in the Turkish treatment of Greeks and Armenians in the
early 20th century. No parallel to the Turkish example has occurred in Indone-
sia, although there was perhaps an element of such chauvinism in the 1740
massacres of the Chinese in Batavia. Facing pressure from the Chinese and
Eurasian communities for a greater say in public affairs in the Dutch East
India Company colony, the company authorities responded to rumours of an
impending Chinese rebellion by launching a massacre of Chinese in the city,
despite the importance of the Chinese to the colonial economy. More often,
however, chauvinism leads to a withdrawal from empire. The withdrawal of
the United States from the Philippines is perhaps one of the clearest examples
of an imperalist power that was not prepared to pay the social and ideological
price of empire by treating the Philippines in a way that would make it
content to be a permanent part of the American empire. Nor was Australia, for
that matter, prepared to pay the social and ideological price of retaining con-

control of Papua New Guinea. The fact that armed struggle, or the threat of it,
contributed to the end of many empires obscures the common decision on the
part of one imperial power after another that the measures necessary to integrate their colonies into an effective empire were not worth the benefits. The Mongol Yuan dynasty in China made precisely this decision in the 14th century. Faced with the political and administrative challenges of famine and the Ming uprising, the Mongols preferred to give up power in China and to return to the purity of their steppe-based nomadism (Christian 1998). Is the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, too, we can see not only centrifugal tendencies among subordinate peoples but also a decision by Russians and Serbs that the price of empire was greater than they wished to pay.

JAVA AND INDONESIA

What, then, of Java and Indonesia? Whether or not it is a nation, Indonesia is also an empire, a vast, ethnically diverse territory under a single central government. As an empire, Indonesia is unprecedented in the history of Southeast Asia. For most of the last 2,000 years there have been two major power centres in maritime Southeast Asia: Java, because of its fertile soil and abundant rainfall, which in turn allowed it to sustain a dense population and sophisticated political forms; and the Melaka Strait zone, less fertile and with a smaller population but prosperous by virtue of its strategic commercial location on Asia's main maritime trade route. Each of these centres exercised a wide cultural influence in the archipelago and even beyond, but neither of them created a substantial or lasting overseas empire beyond their immediate heartland in the Javanese and Malay-speaking regions.

European colonialism altered this persistent pattern in two important ways. First, it greatly weakened the power of the Melaka Strait region. The Portuguese captured Melaka in 1511, and thereafter the European presence prevented the emergence of any true successor to Melaka and its Sumatran predecessor Srivijaya. The partition of the Melaka Strait region between British and Dutch zones in the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 perpetuated this weakness. Second, during the 19th and early 20th centuries the military power of the Dutch lashed to Java a vast archipelagic empire. Not only did the Netherlands Indies include Java's 'natural' hinterland in eastern Indonesia, but it also incorporated the whole of Sumatra. Never before had an empire based in Java come anywhere near to controlling the western shoreline of the Melaka Strait.

Even before the outlines of this empire were fully in place, it began to take on characteristics of the classic empires of world history, drawing into its administrative structures capable and ambitious young men from among its subordinate peoples. The Dutch reserved for themselves a greater proportion of the positions of power in colonial society than did their Western counter-

parts in the Philippines, Indochina and India. Even so, Javanese, Balinese, Malays, Minangkabau, Timorese and Manadoes began to congregate in the lower rungs of the colonial administration and to learn the ways of the West. During the 19th century, the Dutch attempted to limit access to even junior administrative positions in the Western sector to the sons of aristocrats, that is, to individuals who were assured of position and authority in their own societies. Quixotically, however, the demands of the colonial state outstripped the capacity of these gilded youth and avenues of education had to be opened to capable people from more modest backgrounds. The Dutch empire became a tool for social mobility in Indonesian societies. Indeed, to men, and a tiny handful of women, who might otherwise have been trapped by low or mediocre status in small societies, the Netherlands Indies offered a vast stage on which to present new and previously unimaginable dramas.

Many scholars have capably told the story of how this new Indonesian elite found its path to power blocked by colonial racism and insinuence. We know how educated Indonesians, finding themselves second or third class subjects in their own country, paid less, excluded from social clubs and key administrative positions, bonded together against the Dutch as the single clearest obstacle to prosperity and modernity in their society. But we tend to forget that the Indonesian nationalist movement was also profoundly anti-Javanese. Of course it was not at all hostile to individuals of Javanese ethnicity, but it was strongly hostile to what were seen as the hierarchical assumptions of Javanese society. Nationalists spurned Javanese aristocratic titles, spurned even the Javanese language. We tend to see the rise of the nationalist movement in Indonesia in the early 20th century as simply the rise of an Indonesian nationalist movement, that is, a movement aiming at independence for the entire Netherlands Indies. Nonetheless, this national awakening includes not only such Java-based organisations as Budi Utomo and Jong-Java whose inclusion as Indonesian movements is debatable, but even a Committee for Javanese Nationalism which was unabashed in its preference for basing the future on a Javanese identity, rather than a broader archipelagic one. This committee argued explicitly for Javanese nationalism precisely because of the deep cultural strengths of Java (Shiraishi 1981). The idea of Javanese nationalism, however, was driven out of the political arena rather quickly by the idea of an Indonesia that was to be dedicated to prosperity, modernity and opportunity in a way that old Java had never been (or at least was imagined never to have been). The idea of Indonesia came into the hands not of Javanese nationalism but into those of the 'metropolitan super-culture' described by Hillred Geertz (1967, p. 35).

Incorporation into Indonesia brought many advantages for Javanese. Not least was the social mobility that enabled a village boy like former Sergeant Soeharto to rise to power in the army and ultimately to the presidency, carry-
ing with him others whose careers in a traditional Javanese society would almost certainly have been modest. But the Javanese shared Indonesia with other ethnic groups; Minangkabau, Batak, Bugis and others all achieved real power in the Indonesian state, which was governed, after all, not from the Javanese heartland but from Jakarta on the relatively remote northwestern coast of the island. The Javanese language was treated, like all of Indonesia’s regional languages, as a picturesque remnant, a language for the home and the fields, a repository of ancient wisdom but not a language for administration, politics, science or intellectual debate. Javanese children learn their native language in schools for only three years, exactly as long as children elsewhere in the archipelago studied their own local vernacular, and generations of young Javanese became less certain of the nuances of their complicated hierarchical language.

This process was masked by what appeared to be the clear influence of Java on political practice in Indonesia (Dahm 1969; Resink 1975; Anderson 1972a; McDonald 1980). Javanese terminology crept into the Indonesian language and the Indonesian state made heavy use of Javanese imagery. Javanese were numerous among officials posted in other parts of the country, and of course comprised the majority of transmigrants. It has become a truism in recent years that Soeharto behaved as a kind of latter-day Javanese sultan (Loveard 1999). Indonesians from other ethnic groups could easily come to feel that Javanese culture was being imposed on them. To the Javanese, however, the official culture of the Soeharto era was a bowdlerised, sanitised and manipulated version of Java’s rich culture, with complicated philosophical positions reduced to simple, often banal, aphorisms supporting the existing order (Pemberton 1994).

Along with the rest of Indonesia, moreover, Java suffered from the negative features of the bold Indonesian experiment. Despite the inspiring image of Indonesia as a big state delivering modernity and prosperity to all its people, and despite Sukarno’s efforts to give Indonesia’s identity a noble ideological framework in the form of the Pancasila, Indonesia remained an enormously diverse country in terms of ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic development. An exceptional charismatic leader such as Sukarno could bind the country together with oratory, but for most leaders, and certainly for uncharismatic military figures such as Soeharto, there were few nationally accepted political cues available for generating political support. Soeharto was left with trying to create his own national ideology in the form of the reshaped Pancasila of 1975–98, and with military force. All states are held in place ultimately by some recourse to coercion, but Indonesia’s diversity means that the recourse to violence was closer to the surface than in many countries. This is not to say that violence was required to hold Indonesia together in its early years — though military force was indeed needed to end the separatist Republic of the South Moluccas in the early 1950s — but rather that a whole host of dissident movements, from Andi Aziz in South Sulawesi and the unappealing Army of the Just Prince (APRA) of ‘Turk’ Westerling in West Java to the major challenges presented by Darul Islam and the PRRI–Peremesta movements, took up arms to promote their political views and were suppressed by armed force. Indonesia’s size and diversity, in other words, helped to create a military to whom the practice of violence became increasingly routine. The Army Para commando Regiment (RPKAD) units that slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people in Java in 1965–66 had learnt their craft in a decade and a half of intermittent warfare elsewhere in the archipelago before they turned on the Javanese.

Second, Indonesia’s access to natural resource wealth in the outlying provinces had a profoundly distorting effect on national politics. Even though resource revenue had an undoubtedly positive effect in paying for infrastructure and public capital investment, the income from the sale of natural resources was effectively ‘free’ money to the ruling elite, money which it could employ independently of the political responsibility that is generally attached to tax revenues. In other words, even if the distribution of resource revenues unfairly took capital away from the other islands, it had its most profoundly distorting social effect in Java, where the rentiers who gained those revenues were unreasonably advantaged over agricultural and industrial entrepreneurs.

The disadvantages for Java of being part of Indonesia have been hard to see, partly because the promise of Indonesia as a prosperous and modern society remains beguilingly attractive, and partly because of the conventional wisdom that resource-poor Java depends on the Outer Islands. The continuing power of the idea of Indonesia should not be underestimated, but the argument that Java needs to control outer Indonesia politically in order to extract its resources is seriously outdated. Natural resources of all kinds are abundantly available on the open market in today’s global economy. Political control of resources may suit the interests of particular individuals in Jakarta, but for Java as a whole there is little point in controlling what can easily be bought in any case. It needs hardly be said that the examples of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan all point to the relative unimportance of natural resources as a basis for economic take-off. People, along with their productive and intellectual capacities, are the truly valuable resource of the new century.

In fact, Java’s potential was beginning to become clear during the 1990s. For the generations of Indonesia specialists who grew up regarding Java as the basket-case of the archipelago, poverty-stricken, overcrowded and underdeveloped, it is worth pointing out that this condition is anomalous in the history of the region. For most of the last two millennia Java was prosperous, except when it was wracked by warfare. A catastrophic decline in Java’s welfare took
dented disillusionment with the idea of Indonesia. At the moment, many Indonesians appear to have placed their hopes of bringing government closer to the people in the decentralisation process. That process, however, is moving slowly and there are strong indications that the structures being put in place will lead to greater inefficiency and will strengthen the power of local elites, many of them with strong criminal ties. If the decentralisation exercise ends unsatisfactorily, then Indonesians will be all the more ready to try radical solutions, and Java’s moment for seeking independence may yet come.

NOTES

1 For a refutation of romantic ideas of traditional Javanese hierarchy and harmony, see Kumar (1980). Henley (1995) is a stimulating discussion of the contingency of the emergence of Indonesia as a nation.

2 The Pancasila was formulated by Sukarno in 1945 to show that the Indonesian people, for all their diversity, were united by a set of noble and profound principles. Apart from implying unity, it had no significant political implications and indeed was rarely referred to during the revolution against the Dutch (1945-49). During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Pancasila gradually took on an anti-communist character, because it was widely believed that communists could not accept the principle of belief in God (though communists themselves argued that they accepted that other people believed in God). During the early New Order, the Pancasila still stood for the unity of all non-communist Indonesians and little more, but after the Malari affair of 1974 Soeharto appears to have decided to shape it into a much more prescriptive corporatist ideology, drawing on powerful corporatist traditions in Indonesian politics. This reshaping began to influence politics from about 1975 and the result was a Pancasila ideology whose political meaning was obedience and discipline, rather than unity in the pre-75 sense. The corporatist Pancasila ideology in fact had begun to show signs of weakness by the early 1990s and it largely disappeared from Indonesian political discourse with the fall of Soeharto in 1998.

3 The Darul Islam (House of Islam) movement was founded in 1948 and aimed to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state. Its greatest strength was in West Java and South Sulawesi, but it had a presence in several other regions. It was suppressed by the army in a long series of military campaigns ending in 1962.

4 Permeata denoted the unilateral declaration of martial law by local commanders in eastern Indonesia in March 1957. The movement was strongest in North Sulawesi and had largely been defeated by June 1958. The PRR was formed in February 1958 by regional and anti-communist politicians opposed to Sukarno’s abrogation of parliamentary rule, Nasution’s centralism in the army and the growing power of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in politics. It was based in West Sumatra and was largely defeated by June 1958.