

# Hamlet, Semar and the Godfather

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Greg Barton

*Abdurrahman Wahid:  
Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President*  
UNSW Press, \$39.95pb, 414pp, 0 86840 405 5

Damien Kingsbury

*The Politics of Indonesia, Second Edition*  
OUP, \$49.95pb, 318pp, 0 19 551347 9

Kevin O'Rourke

*Reformasi: The Struggle for Power  
in Post-Soeharto Indonesia*  
Allen & Unwin, \$35pb, 499pp, 1 86508 754 8

**H**AVE THE BALI BOMBINGS completely changed our view of Indonesia? Although obviously not designed to do so, these three books provide necessary background on how such an atrocity might be possible in the near-anarchic circumstances of that country. They also give a wide-ranging and informative picture of the present state of Indonesia in all its chaos and uncertainty. They make sobering reading, as if Indonesian politics is a mixture of Shakespearean tragedy, Javanese shadow play and gangster drama: *Hamlet*, *Semar* and *The Godfather*.

Damien Kingsbury's book is the second edition of a work first published in 1998, just before the fall of Suharto, and consequently had to be revised to take into account all that has happened since. The other two titles have appeared since the fall of both Suharto and Abdurrahman Wahid. They have much in common, especially in their description of the cynicism of Indonesian political leaders, the weaknesses of the legal system and of the security authorities, the ineffectiveness of government, and the lack of élite accountability; but they do not overlap as much as one might expect.

Spare a thought for Greg Barton. Any biographer of a living political subject has to be prepared for sudden changes in the subject's fortunes, but Barton suffered a unique experience. Some years ago, he became a regular member of Abdurrahman Wahid's entourage as his official biographer. Then he hit the jackpot, as his subject unexpectedly became the first democratically elected Indonesian leader. But the jackpot turned to dross as Abdurrahman was ejected from office by his political rivals after a mere twenty-one months,

becoming a peripheral and often mocked transitional figure.

Barton portrays Abdurrahman sympathetically as a Javanese from an influential Muslim family who developed democratic instincts, exceptionally wide cultural interests and unusually tolerant religious attitudes. His family background as the son and grandson of important leaders of the conservative and very large NU (Muslim Scholars) organisation made it seem natural that he would eventually become its leader, thereby holding one of the few non-government power bases in the country. Suharto, a quintessential political godfather, was always suspicious of any independent political figure, and Abdurrahman had to play a subtle game, surviving several serious challenges to his leadership, and occasionally choosing to move closer to the ageing autocrat. (In Barton's memorable phrase, the Suharto government was 'an authoritarian régime with totalitarian aspirations.') Abdurrahman became a master of the ambiguous gesture, sometimes confusing his supporters in doing so. But negative features obtruded from early on, including Abdurrahman's inconsistency, his propensity to make ill-considered, off-the-cuff statements, his total lack of administrative skills and his carelessness with money, complicated in recent years by his physical infirmity (clinical blindness).

He became president partly through tactical skill but also by default, because other political leaders wanted anyone but the front runner Megawati. He had some bad luck, as horrors like the conflict in Kalimantan erupted on his watch; and he had a rare success when he eased General Wiranto out of office. His liberal attitudes led to such dramatic gestures as his public apology to the East Timorese. But he undid himself repeatedly by making erratic statements, by unpredictably reshuffling his Cabinet without explaining his actions, and by displaying an astonishing ability to alienate key allies. His reforming efforts were fitful, and he would offend conservatives with occasional hints at reform, as when he canvassed the legalisation of communism, and then he would annoy liberals by not following up.

Both Abdurrahman and Megawati have been inept at various times. The latter thought that the presidency was hers by right because her party had emerged as the largest in the 1999 general elections, and consequently, in Hamlet-like solitude, she failed to lobby actively for it, leaving the way open for Abdurrahman, and grudgingly accepted the second prize of the vice-presidency. Abdurrahman believed that his election as president installed him for the full five-year term, failing to take account of the new power of the legislative branch.

Barton is at times too kind to Abdurrahman. He claims that he 'worked hard' on his relationship with Megawati, which contradicts the general impression in Jakarta that he offended her again and again. Even the understanding Barton becomes exasperated as the endgame approaches, and he describes Abdurrahman as 'erratic' three times in five pages. In the end, humiliatingly, Abdurrahman was removed by the

same political party bosses who had installed him, and further tarnished his liberal reputation with his desperate attempts to dissolve parliament. He has at times been likened to the clown-god Semar in the Javanese shadow play, who, although a coarse clown, had magical powers and could often save the day. Alas for Abdurrahman, the clown identity is undeservedly more evident now than that of the magical warlock.

Pedants' corner, part 1: the index contains no entry entitled 'Abdurrahman Wahid'. Also, experts should not make highly contentious statements as throwaway lines. Did Suharto really defeat the attempted coup in 1965 'with more than a little help from the CIA'? If Barton knows something we don't, he should reveal it.

Damien Kingsbury's prolific word processor has produced a remarkable series of books in recent years, notably an account of the East Timor crisis, and now the second edition of *The Politics of Indonesia*.

In earlier times, many foreign political scientists — particularly those who lost left-wing friends in the 1960s purges — hated Suharto's New Order, while economists often liked it, because of the innovative economic programmes followed by the New Order in its early years. Kingsbury belongs to the tradition of earlier political scientists in the tone of moral disapproval that pervades the book, especially in his comments on the Suharto régime. He adopts a largely thematic approach as he treats successively the cultural and historical background, the rise of Suharto, the economy, political opposition, the media, corruption, human rights, Suharto's fall and the new circumstances. Much of this is essential reading for the student.

The discussion of the economic performance of the Suharto years covers the main macroeconomic indicators. Kingsbury acknowledges overall increases in Indonesian standards of living, but qualifies this with references to widespread corruption, skewed income distribution and huge external debts, so that the end of Suharto is portrayed as the 'collapse of a rotten edifice'. His slant on the accounts of the Suharto economy by economic experts (ANU's Hal Hill is extensively quoted) is questionable. It is startling to read that, in their writings on New Order economic performance, Hill and others 'failed to note what an abysmally low standard of living Indonesians were forced to endure under Sukarno'. Does Kingsbury really mean this?

As Kingsbury notes, every commentator on Indonesia has to cope with conspiracy theories. Kingsbury seems to rank in the middle of the scale. Nevertheless, for this sceptical reviewer, it looks unlikely that — as Kingsbury appears to accept — Jakarta generals deliberately fomented the Dayak–Madurese strife in Kalimantan as a means of destabilising Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency. It is not, however, impossible that the élites exploited local dissension for their own purposes, once it had arisen.

His treatment of Abdurrahman is more severe than Barton's, and he strongly condemns Abdurrahman's 'be-

trayal of fundamental reformist values'. He is wary of Megawati, noting several occasions when she has shied away from real political reform. He entertains little hope of genuine change under her presidency.

Kingsbury commonly encloses important terms in single quotes, as if unsure of the language he is using. To an extent, this is reasonable in Indonesian circumstances. Many things in Indonesia are not what they seem. I lost count of the number of times the word 'nationalism' appeared in single quotes. This is not just a question of language. The impression is that Indonesian nationalism is universally bogus, that it lacks validity in all cases. Indonesian nationalism can have an unattractive side, and many injustices have been perpetrated in its name, but it is a long step from this to the implication that Indonesian nationalism has no substance at all. A corollary is that the break-up of the country would be a desirable outcome. Kingsbury comments that the dissolution of Indonesia into 'many smaller states might actually be more viable in economic terms, they might better fulfil the aspirations of their inhabitants, and, being small and hence more vulnerable, they might try to coexist more peacefully with each other'. While this says much for the idealism that underpins the book, it is hardly practical. As often happens, Indonesia presents us with a choice between evils. The current state of Indonesia may be unappealing, but it is a long step from this to accept with equanimity a series of East Timors in, say, Aceh or Papua or wherever.

Pedants' corner, part 2: statesmen do not 'reign in' inflation; the word 'dénouement' means the resolution of a story, not the fall of a politician; for a second edition, this book contains too many misspellings of Indonesian political terms and titles; and the index is disappointing. It is a puzzle why writers invest huge energies in comprehensive and provocative books, but are content with such miserable indexes.

Expectations of Kevin O'Rourke are mixed after reading the list of attributions in the Introduction to *Reformasi*. He cites three (admittedly distinguished) journalists, one university professor and one long-ago US ambassador as important sources, instilling doubt about the sense of history that will inform this substantial work. Indeed, the tone is somewhat journalistic. But the emphasis is strictly on the past five years, references to history are rare, and I was disappointed — oops, I mean encouraged — to spot only one historical error (Professor Sumitro, the father of General Prabowo, was not a 'drafter of Indonesia's constitution').

O'Rourke's account of recent developments races along, only dragging occasionally when corporate failures and financial chicanery are exhaustively detailed. The command of detail and sources is impressive as he takes us through the May 1998 riots, the fall of Suharto, the rise and fall of Abdurrahman Wahid, the mayhem in Maluku and elsewhere, the East Timor crisis, the links between the military and criminal activities, financial and company scandals, and the exploitative behaviour of political and economic élites.

Unlike Kingsbury, he does not take at face value the blame commonly directed at General Prabowo for the May 1998 riots. He points to the strange behaviour of General Wiranto in ordering almost all senior generals including Prabowo to attend a trivial ceremony outside Jakarta when the crisis was building. Indeed, the taciturn Wiranto emerges as the villain of the piece, opposing real reform, fostering the East Timor carnage, and manoeuvring for political power. Like Kingsbury, O'Rourke outlines many links between factions of the military and criminal *preman* gangs, as well as suggestions of similar links with extremist Muslim factions. But equally villainous in his account are the civilian party bosses in Jakarta who strove to subvert all attempts at meaningful political reform. This is the central theme of the book, revealed in section titles like 'tyranny of the élite', 'hubris of the élite' and 'mêlée of the élite'.

One qualifying thought: the case against the élite is a compelling one, but, since these books were written, a surprising and encouraging process has occurred. This is the decision by the scorned and reactionary parliament to pass constitutional amendments allowing for direct presidential elections in 2004, the creation of a second (regional) house of parliament (the DPD), and limitations on the power of both the president and the supreme council, the MPR. These are the most important constitutional changes for many decades.

Like Kingsbury, O'Rourke entertains theories about the involvement of the Jakarta élite in what look like local disturbances, such as the series of killings of NU figures in East Java in 1998 (the '*ninja*' killings). It is hard to believe that the Jakarta élite started these, as O'Rourke seems to believe, although (again) it is easier to credit that some exploited the killings for their own ends. But scepticism is dulled in at least one case, the Christmas 1999 bombings of churches, where firm evidence showed links to intelligence officials in some locations. Strangely enough, these bombings are now blamed on the controversial Abu Bakar Basyir and his extremist organisation the Jemaah Islamiya (JI), a major suspect in the Bali bombings. But none of these three books contains any reference to either Basyir or JI, showing how recently they have burst into prominence.

Pedants' corner, part 3: Mar'ie Muhammad was not the 'antithesis' of the technocrat, rather he was the exemplar; O'Rourke has said the opposite of what he means. In English the name of the large island next to Java is Sumatra, not Sumatera; bombs are best defused rather than 'diffused'.

In sum, read Barton for a vivid character sketch of a fascinating might-have-been; Kingsbury for important background and a broad-brush approach; O'Rourke for piquant details about the many commercial scandals and the cynical behaviour of the Indonesian élite. Perhaps Indonesia deserves better leadership than it is currently getting, but it also needs helpful cooperation and understanding after recent events.