

Book Review: “Unfinished Nation: Indonesia before and after Suharto”

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Reviewed of *Unfinished Nation: Indonesia before and after Suharto*, by Max Lane, Verso 2008 312 pages.

In May 1998, Indonesian dictator General Mohammed Suharto was forced out of power when his cabinet ministers and the other generals — faced with escalating mass protests — abandoned him. A second upsurge of protest, drawing in even larger layers of the population in November 1998, forced Suharto’s successor as Indonesian president, Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, to call elections. These events signalled the end of Indonesia’s New Order dictatorship, which had dominated Indonesian political life throughout most of the archipelago’s post-colonial history.

Unfinished Nation traces the evolution of Indonesia’s political struggle from the stirring of an anti-colonial movement at the beginning of the 20th century through to the post-Suharto era. It tells the story of the real heroes of this struggle: Indonesia’s workers, peasants and urban poor, whose sustained mass action was the determining force in overthrowing the New Order regime.

The book’s author, Max Lane, writes both from the viewpoint of a participant in this movement — as a close collaborator with Indonesian radicals who formed the Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) in the mid-1990s — and someone who has participated in building solidarity with the anti-dictatorship struggle in Australia. Lane came into contact with the first wave of student protest against Suharto in 1975 as a participant in the Bengkel Theatre, led by dissident playwright WS Rendra. Lane translated one of Rendra’s plays, *Kisa Perjuangan Suka Naga*, into English. The play was published in the US and Australia and later performed in several countries.

In 1981, Lane helped found a journal of Indonesian studies, *Inside Indonesia*, which has contributed to critical debate on Indonesia and roused interest in solidarity with the anti-dictatorship struggle in the 1990s, particularly among Australian university students. During the 1980s, Lane translated Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Buru Quartet*, bringing to light a rich historical narrative of Indonesia’s national revolution that had been suppressed under the Suharto dictatorship.

Returning to Indonesia in 1990, Lane made contact with a younger generation of Indonesian political activists and witnessed the stirring of a new anti-dictatorship struggle that had begun with a series of mass protests against the World Bank-financed Kedung Ombo dam project. There he met with activists who pioneered the revival of street protest mobilisations, factory strikes and land occupations. Many of these activists went on to form the Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD – Peoples Democratic Party), which first emerged from underground in 1994. On his return to Australia, Lane was a founding member of Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASIET), which played an instrumental role in building solidarity with both Indonesia’s anti-dictatorship struggle and East Timor’s independence movement in Australia during the 1990s.

In his introduction to *Unfinished Nation*, Lane explains that his analysis draws the conclusion that "Suharto did not just fall from power — he was pushed and the movement that pushed him from power developed as the result of an arduous, conscious effort to build a political movement, based on mobilising masses of people in action." To understand this revival of *aksi* (protest action), Lane argues that it is necessary to view the rise of the anti-dictatorship movement, and subsequent struggles, within the history of Indonesia's struggle for national liberation. "Mass mobilisation politics", Lane writes, "played a central role in the anti-colonial struggle that began at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued up until 1945 and in a struggle to 'complete the revolution' that unfolded between 1945 and 1965."

Lane draws strongly on the literary novels of Pramoedya to illustrate how Indonesia's national revolution came into being. Pramoedya was, according to Lane, the central literary figure in Indonesia's national revolution and a committed revolutionary. Pramoedya's novels span a thousand years of Indonesia's history. His most famous novels, *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of all Nations*, *Footsteps* and *House of Glass* (known together as the *Buru Quartet*) tell the story of Indonesia's national awakening. They were written during Pramoedya's incarceration on Buru Island.

The first three novels are narrated by their central character, Minke, based on the writer, journalist and political leader, Tirta Adhisuryo. The first indigenous Indonesian to publish a daily newspaper, Adhisuryo used the paper to promote the struggle against Dutch colonialism and the organisation at the forefront of the struggle, Sarekat Islam (Union of Islamic Traders). The traders were the motive force of independent political and cultural life outside the enclaves of native civil servants employed by the Dutch. Sarekat Islam soon attracted all types of traders as well as workers and peasant farmers, claiming a membership of 2 million by 1919.

Lane explains that this organisation split in 1921, with a massive left wing, opposed to both colonialism and capitalism, forming the Sarekat Rakyat (Peoples Union). It was from this current that the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) emerged. Although the PKI was brutally suppressed by the Dutch colonial authorities in 1926-27, and again by Indonesian nationalists during the four-year guerrilla war against Dutch attempts to restore colonial rule in 1945-49, it was to re-emerge again in the post-independence era as a mass political force.

According to Lane, "Political parties, and the mass organizations affiliated to the parties, filled a social and cultural vacuum. Four hundred years of colonial intervention had held back energies that were now unleashed, energies to organise social life." Trade unions and peasant organizations flourished, particularly those affiliated to the PKI and the Indonesian National Party (PNI). By March 1958, 6 million workers were organised in trade unions and hundred of thousands involved in strikes. Workers occupied almost every Dutch-owned company in Indonesia, including mines, plantations, factories and import-export houses.

Increasingly ideological divisions emerged. The PKI and Indonesia's first president, Sukarno — whose political strength arose from their organisation of the proletariat and the peasantry — argued that the national-liberation revolution had not been completed by the independence struggle in 1945-49 and that the economy was still in the grip of Dutch and other foreign business interests. The PKI and Sukarno called for the nationalisation of foreign-owned businesses, a role for workers in the management of state-owned enterprises and distribution of land from landowners to tenant farmers and the landless. The army, the right wing of the PNI and the Islamic parties opposed this perspective, instead seeking cooperation with the US and the other imperialist powers and greater access to the economy by foreign capital.

The struggle came to a head in 1965, when Suharto seized power in a military coup and launched a counter-revolution aimed at destroying the PKI and its mass organisations, which claimed a total

membership of 25 million. Despite Sukarno's huge popularity, he had few allies in his cabinet, which was dominated by the right wing of the PNI and the Islamic parties. The army gained increasing economic power as its senior officers asserted themselves as managers (and later owners) of nationalised foreign companies, including more than 400 plantations and scores of commercial, industrial and banking enterprises. Indonesia's military officer caste therefore had a vested interest in Suharto's counter-revolution.

Between 500,000 and 2 million Indonesians were slaughtered by the military and militias connected with the right-wing parties. Lane explains: "Most of these people were leaders, activists or supporters of one component or other of the Indonesian left... [and] many of those killed died horribly, as part of a terror campaign. They were decapitated, disembowelled, dragged behind a truck or otherwise cruelly killed. In addition... hundreds of thousands more were detained... [and] at least 12,000 were further detained for another ten to twelve years."

Commenting on the 1990s anti-dictatorship struggle, Lane observes: "The political party most connected to the struggle to re-establish mass mobilisation as a political method has been the PRD." He also observes that the ideological outlook that underpins the PRD's program of socio-demokrasi kerakyatan (popular social democracy) has continuity with the program of Indonesian socialism espoused in the 1960s by Sukarno and other forces on the left. But he writes: "The PRD has not attempted to build upon the theoretical work done by either Soekarno, the PKI or anybody else active prior to 1965." Lane cites the systematic wipeout of the memory of political history that followed by 1965-67 "ideologicide", and the radically different international context, for this discontinuity.

Despite the counter-revolutionary suppression of the memory of Indonesia's national-liberation revolution prior to 1965, Lane observes that "the historical legacy of a class consciousness developed out of collective national struggle... the charisma of Soekarno and the extraordinary rapidity of the re-emergence and spread of aksi [political activity] remains a fundamental feature of Indonesian politics".

The imposition of harsh neo-liberal policies by successive post-Suharto governments has, according to Lane "deepened class divisions, multiplying socio-economic grievances, creating a huge population of workers, semi-proletarians and peasant farmers collectively suffering under this offensive." Lane concludes, "The method of struggle of the national revolution — mass political mobilisation — has been regained. Political organisation of the popular classes has begun, but remains at an early stage, held back by the counter-revolution's suppression of ideological life, of the people's memory of the national revolution that created Indonesia."

P.S.

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