

Brief review for *Democratization* by Olle Törnquist, University of Oslo, of Mikaela Nyman "Democratising Indonesia. The Challenge of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi". NIAS Press, 2006.

The rise of the world's third largest democracy and the largest of the new, Indonesia, has mainly been analysed in terms of manoeuvres among the civil and military elite in Jakarta, at the backdrop of the Asian economic crisis. Mikaela Nyman's book is a commendable effort to add the importance of civic groups and social movements. This is however, a difficult task. First, there are still swift changes. Nyman covers the period until the second new elections, in 2004. Further, the civic groups and social movements are even more fragmented and disintegrated after Suharto than earlier; now they are also increasingly localised. Thus, civil society, irrespective of how one defines it in theory, is difficult to identify in reality. Nyman focuses on a number of secular groups that are able to demand their civic rights – i.e. a thin minority of actually existing associations and movements. She also limits herself to some of those with a base in the capital of administration and commerce, Jakarta, and the centre of scholarship and (Javanese) culture, Jogjakarta – i.e. leaving behind much of the country and the myriad of local actors. This is not to argue that Nyman herself should have covered a longer period, more groups and wider areas. Her task has been difficult enough. But the question is how the choices are made, if and how one's own data are supplemented by the results of others, and what conclusions this allow for.

Nyman begins with a discussion about the possible importance of civic action for democracy from the point of view of the social movement paradigm. She focuses on how these general ideas have been more or less adapted to the Indonesian framework. This is followed by three case studies of civic groups that have related to broader social movements among students, labour and women. She concludes with a general discussion of the problems and options for the civic groups to promote more consistent democracy in the country. Nyman says that she wants to test the proposition 'that civil society, spearheaded by social movements, has contributed and continues to contribute to Indonesia's ongoing democratic transition, despite criticism concerning its fragmentation and failure to achieve any real political and social change' (and that this) 'fits well into the theoretical assumptions made by social movement scholars' (p. 27). Not surprisingly, she deems the proposition to be verified by her study.

However, the conclusion is not entirely convincing. Nobody disputes that some groups and movements have contributed to certain aspects of Indonesian democracy. But the interesting puzzle is what actors have done so while others have not – and in what respect, to what extent and why. To answer one needs to specify the groups and their activities as well as democracy, thematically and over time. This is not made systematically and conceptually. It is also not clear if Nyman is primarily studying the contribution of civil society and related movements to democracy or rather whether their work is in line with the assumptions of some of the general theorists. The latter question is also valid, but then it is essential to compare with at least a few of the many relevant theories about civil society, social movement and democracy. Also, one should consider related studies of what movements and groups have actually proved possible to

achieve in other cases such as Brazil, South Africa or the Philippines. Neither of this is done. Similarly, for Nyman to discuss convincingly whether or not the civic groups and movements are doing better than what the critics argue, she would have had to specify and take these challenging arguments seriously. There are very few references to the rather extensive academically-critical research since the early-nineties of the role of civil society and related movements and ‘social capital’ in Indonesia and elsewhere. Some of these studies have been carried out in cooperation with major pro-democracy groups and actors themselves. One major conclusion is that the *politics* of democratisation has been neglected. In addition, Nyman frequently defines civil society normatively (rather than theoretically or descriptively) to include those who act in a ‘good’ anti-statist and pro-democratic way (see e.g. p. 120). Whatever speaks against the ‘goodness’ of the civic thesis may thus be excluded by definition. Finally, this is not compensated by a critical discussion of the sources and attempts to include and compare with results from parallel research by other scholars of a wider numbers of associations and movements, including in other parts of the country. Nyman does not even draw on the most comprehensive study of the post-Suharto democracy movement, carried out jointly by scholars and activists; the preliminary results of which were discussed in Jakarta in January 2002 (when she did interviews in the surrounding) and published through her own publisher in late 2003, before she concluded her book.

Yet again, there is a lack of analytical writings about the contribution by non-elitist groups and movements to the rise of Indonesia’s democracy. Hence, while Nyman’s book is not a very successful academically-critical study of the proposition that civic groups and movements outside organised politics are of prime importance for democracy, it is a fine presentation and illustration of the argument as such in the context of Indonesia; and the empirical chapters are indeed useful introductions to the field.

/end