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## <Book Review>

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## *Electrifying Indonesia: Technology and Social Justice in National Development*

ANTO MOHSIN

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023.

In his seminal article “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture,” Benedict Anderson (1972, 22) likened the concept of Javanese power to a lamp radiating light outward with a “gradual diminution of radiance from the bulb.” Anderson called this an “exact metaphor” for the structure of the state, its center-periphery relations, and territorial sovereignty. He went on to note:

The cone of light’s luminosity expands as the ruler is able to force the submission of rival rulers and demote them to the status of provincial notables; it contracts as provincial notables free themselves from the center and establish their own independent areas of rule. (Anderson 1972, 35)

In *Electrifying Indonesia*, Anto Mohsin writes literally of light bulbs via the broader subject of the electrification of the Indonesian Archipelago. And while taking a notably different approach, he also delves into notions of political and social power in Indonesia. Mohsin brings together two fields, science and technology studies and Indonesian studies, and in their articulation produces a fascinating account that is both deeply empirical and theoretically engaging.

Through in-depth fieldwork and extensive archival research, Mohsin explores how ideas of social justice, development, and nation building came to be woven into the project of electrification, making it much more than a techno-scientific enterprise and one embedded in the transformation

of politics, the economy, and society. Mohsin's core argument is that "the patrimonial New Order government shaped how Indonesia was electrified, and its electrification program, in turn, fashioned how the regime envisioned sociopolitical order" (p. 10).

It was the Dutch who introduced electricity in their colony in the late nineteenth century. Chapter 1 shows how early electrification benefited Dutch companies and industry at paper mills, rubber factories, tea companies, and various mining enterprises. The Dutch sought to claim their colonial possession not just politically but also technologically. But anticolonial leaders also saw the potential of technology, including electrification, as a tool for national unity. After independence, President Sukarno, an engineer by training, called on Indonesians to shift from a "water-minded" (agricultural) nation to an "electricity-minded" (industrial) one, emphasizing the importance of technology to state-led and socialist development (p. 40).

If Sukarno saw electrification as a way to promote national unity, Suharto saw its potential for regime consolidation. Chapter 2 shifts to the New Order regime, borne of the violent mass killings of 1965, which sought electrification as a way to garner rural electoral support for the state party, Golkar, and Suharto specifically. Mohsin calls this "patrimonial technopolitics," the use of technology to disburse patronage for political ends (p. 54). The electrification campaigns helped create and reinforce the narrative that Golkar and the New Order regime were synonymous with development, thereby endowing Suharto's rule with a kind of performance legitimacy. Mohsin carefully documents his findings in a number of ways, including through records of various speeches and banners at electrification ceremonies that explicitly express gratitude to the New Order and Suharto.

Chapter 3 explores the bureaucratic apparatus of electrification, the Perusahaan Listrik Negara (PLN) or the State Electricity Company. In line with the technocratic emphasis of the New Order most famously embodied by the "Berkeley Mafia," the PLN also moved to develop technical expertise. For higher-level and management positions, the PLN recruited and hired from the nation's most prestigious universities, with some employees even attaining advanced degrees abroad. For most other positions, the PLN recruited graduates from technical high schools and sent them to training centers in Jakarta. Mohsin points out that the PLN was not just peddling electricity. As a social institution, it also channeled the New Order government's largesse to its employees and village residents through patronage, grants, and a variety of other social programs. The PLN also served as an ideological conduit for the regime's own interpretation of Pancasila, the national ideology.

Chapter 4 explores the well-known geographic distinction in Indonesia between Java and the "Outer Islands." Java, the central and most populous island, has been historically favored by leaders, including Suharto, while residents in the less populated, less developed, and peripheral regions of the archipelago have tended to feel more neglected. Mohsin shows how electrification reflected that dichotomy despite the rhetoric of social justice and equality espoused by the New

Order government. In other words, “a lopsided Java-centric development” not only persisted but was exacerbated by the New Order government’s electrification campaign (p. 91).

Chapter 5 shows how the PLN bureaucracy sought not just the technical knowledge and capacity to deliver power but also the social knowledge of rural life, including how rural communities used energy. The government invested heavily to produce this knowledge, but, as Mohsin observes, the discourses that emerged were highly motivated; and critics pointed out how government studies overestimated the degree to which electricity provision would reduce inequality, for example, rather than reproduce and exaggerate such inequalities.

Chapter 6 tells the story of an alternative vision of electricity provision in Indonesia through the cases of three rural electricity cooperatives. While such cooperatives appealed to supporters of community-led electricity generation, all three cooperatives, which had been supported by USAID, ultimately failed due to a lack of government and PLN support, perceived mismanagement by their own members, and a lack of enthusiasm from the villagers. Mohsin observes that transporting rural electricity cooperative technologies from one place to another proved “messy and unpredictable” in the context of a new location and landscape such as Indonesia (p. 154).

For scholars of Indonesian studies, *Electrifying Indonesia* offers a nuanced understanding of the New Order authoritarian regime, which was founded in violence and ruled with the proverbial stick but also dangled plenty of carrots throughout its rule. Suharto is still often referred to as the “father of development” and remembered fondly by many Indonesians today. *Electrifying Indonesia* helps us understand why this is the case. While many studies of the New Order focus on the elite-centric nature of Suharto’s patrimonialism, Mohsin highlights the role of villagers and rural communities that were embedded in the techno-political patrimonial system. As a result, *Electrifying Indonesia* also helps us understand the New Order regime’s relative durability and longevity.

For students of politics more broadly, this work helps to expand our conceptualization of the political. Mohsin argues that technology is both a site and an objective of politics and that “techno-politics is the strategic practice of designing or using technology to constitute, embody, or enact political goals” (p. 54). By marrying the analysis of traditional political institutions such as elections, political parties, and bureaucracies with techno-science, he offers new ways to think about political power, authority, and legitimacy.

Finally, for scholars of science and technology studies, this rich historical case study of Indonesia brings in examples from a region less explored. Furthermore, by highlighting the process of importation and articulation, the study underlines how techno-scientific artifacts are reshaped by different regimes in different locales to achieve profoundly diverse outcomes.

In that vein, in the specific context of techno-politics in Indonesia, one question that arises is about the electoral effects of electrification. Mohsin convincingly demonstrates that New Order elites clearly and urgently perceived the connection between electrification and election.

Furthermore, Golkar did win disproportionately at the polls in rural areas, including in the villages that the government electrified. But did Golkar experience losses—or at least narrower wins—in villages where electrification was forgone? It may be that this level of fine-grained data is not available, but if it were, it would further strengthen the argument of the electricity-election link.

A mark of any good scholarship is its ability to change how we see the world, and by that measure *Electrifying Indonesia* succeeds wonderfully. Whereas Anderson encouraged us to view the light bulb as a metaphor for power, Mohsin shows us how political and social power came to be intertwined with electricity.

Finally, it is worth noting that while Mohsin's study is focused primarily on the past, it also hints at the present. In one interview, a former PLN employee recalls the "aura" of rural electrification and how that aura disappeared "after the Orba" (New Order government). But the interviewee quickly adds "Although it seems to start again" and cites an electrification ceremony in Bali in 2012, during the Yudhoyono presidency (p. 62). Techno-patrimonialism, it seems, may still be alive and well.

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## *Global Anti-Asian Racism*

JENNIFER HO, ed.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

Racism is a core problem of our times, yet we have only just started to tackle its different dimensions. While some progress has been made, not least due to some important academic contributions and participation in public debates, the more fundamental underlying dimensions of racism are still dawning on us. Because of the urgency of the problem, which manifests in daily reports about racist violence and discrimination, I was very keen to read *Global Anti-Asian Racism*, edited by Jennifer Ho. I was intrigued by the concept of bringing together a range of voices and perspectives from different parts of the world but also by the format of the intervention: brief essays. Having read the volume closely, I am left with rather mixed feelings. While some essays are well crafted and truly insightful, others read more like an assemblage of interesting but