

Suharto's Cold War: Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and the World

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Mattias Fibiger's latest book, *Suharto's Cold War: Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and the World*, offers a novel account for the international political economy of Indonesia's New Order¹ period (1966-1998) and a thought-provoking overview of a set of domestic, regional, and global interactions during the Cold War, drawing on a historical analysis of rich archival material. The author ambitiously departs from the conventional structuralist explanations of the political economy of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, which portray the New Order as the "mechanistic reflection of capitalist power relations" (p. 7). Instead, his analysis revolves centrally around Indonesian agency, deeply intertwined with the international capital, against the backdrop of Cold War politics. Suharto's anticommunist campaign aligned with the political priorities of Western powers, which in turn financed authoritarianism in Indonesia, according to this argument. In so doing, a main contribution of the book is that it does not treat Indonesia as a passive client of the Cold War politics but instead describes Suharto's New Order as "a dynamic agent capable of driving historical change" (p. 7) due to its ambitious role in containing communism in Southeast Asia. The book examines Indonesia's role in maintaining and reproducing the Cold War from the perspectives of national, regional, and global levels. While Suharto fought against the local communist forces such as the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI) at the national level, as the author details, he also played an active role regionally by eagerly promoting anticommunism and exporting its authoritarian development model, particularly via the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In Fibiger's account, Indonesia served as a champion of anticommunism/authoritarian developmentalism in the region, both ideologically and materially. Suharto also effectively manipulated the Cold War anxieties of Western creditors to finance Indonesia's anticommunist authoritarianism.

1 The New Order regime was characterized by authoritarian governance, developmentalism and suppression of political opposition in an attempt to restructure the country along anticommunist lines.

Chapters I and II cover the period from the turn of the twentieth century to 1966, contextualizing Suharto's anticommunism and authoritarianism within the biography of his early military career and concluding how these formative years shaped his inclinations for authoritarian governance. The author claims that long before the Cold War's impacts reached the country, a robust current of "indigenous anticommunism" was already in the making in Indonesia. Against this backdrop, Chapter II covers in detail Suharto's bloody suppression of communists in the 1960s and his campaign to eliminate the PKI, which was held responsible for the assassination of six generals in the army in a coup attempt, known as the September Thirtieth Movement.

Chapter III extensively examines how, in his first two years in power (1966-1968), Suharto strived to bring Western capital to Indonesia, claiming that economic stability would be key to preventing communism's revitalization in the country. He accordingly made a set of fundamental changes in both domestic and foreign policies, including enacting foreign investment laws, restoring relations with Malaysia and Singapore, and rejoining the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In doing so, he not only earned international legitimacy but also signified his break from the anti-imperialist radicalism of his predecessor, Sukarno.²

Chapters IV and V elaborate on how the Indonesian agency influenced the course of political developments in Southeast Asia and the Cold War between 1968 and 1976. Chapter IV analyzes the making of Indonesia's "national resilience" doctrine, which linked economic prosperity and military power to the nation's security, thereby legitimizing the New Order's relations with Western capital and its authoritarian path of development. Against this backdrop, the formation of ASEAN enabled Suharto to export this ideology to the regional states, thereby preventing the advance of communism in the region and creating an "anti-Chinese axis" (p. 104). This analysis aims to contribute to the ongoing debates on ASEAN's function and importance. Fibiger describes the *raison d'être* of the organization as a "transmission mechanism for authoritarianism" (p. 283), a guarantor of regional anticommunism, and a plea for the maintenance of Western aid and investments. In Chapter V, the author demonstrates how Indonesia internationalized its authoritarian model and national resilience doctrine in the cases of Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and South Vietnam. Although each case varied in the degree to which they embraced the Indonesian doctrine of national resilience and authoritarian model of government, Suharto's efforts to internationalize the anticommunist institutions and practices of the New Order regime substantially shaped the Southeast Asian politics of the Cold War.

Chapter VI shows how, from 1968 to 1971, Suharto's success in attracting international capital enhanced his government's legitimacy and popularity, thereby consolidating his

2 Sukarno was one of the leaders of the anticolonial nationalist movement against the Dutch rule in Indonesia and became Indonesia's first president after independence. Starkly different from his successor, Suharto, Sukarno was a left-leaning political figure, and he enjoyed good relations with the Indonesian Communist Party and communist China.

regime at home. While he ensured the loyalty of the navy and air force due to the influx of American military aid, he also enhanced his international image by relying on his popular support, which in turn increased his chances of securing more international capital. However, Chapter VII demonstrates that the developments of the early 1970s thwarted Suharto's smooth development path. As a wide range of groups expressed their discontent with the regime at home, Suharto was also stalemated in the international arena since the rising human rights revolution exposed his government to heavy criticism. Moreover, the end of the Vietnam War reduced the importance of the region in the eyes of the Western bloc. Furthermore, while the collapse of Bretton Woods dealt a major blow to Suharto's pursuit of international capital, the superpower détente also hindered him from capitalizing on Cold War animosities.

Although all these domestic and global transformations put Suharto in a tight spot for a temporary period, Chapter VIII explores how the 1973 oil crisis relieved the New Order regime. While the increasing revenues collected from the oil sector improved the regime's economic performance, a program of economic nationalism sought a higher level of domestic legitimacy. In Chapter IX, the author makes it evident that starting from 1976, Suharto's Cold War ended when political Islam gained power both at home and abroad, having replaced the communist ideology as the primary security threat to the New Order regime. This replacement transformed his domestic and foreign policies to sustain the New Order regime. On the one hand, the threat of political Islam increasingly compelled Suharto to seek domestic legitimacy through popular support, to incorporate moderate Islamists into the regime coalition as a counterweight to the radical Islamists, and to impose his political program on all parties to align them with the state's ideology. On the other hand, the decreasing importance of communism as a security threat led Suharto to release many political prisoners and to establish diplomatic and economic relations with Beijing.

The book has several strengths. First, it fulfills its promise to uncover Indonesia's role in shaping the Cold War. In this way, it sets an important example for further studies to find the agency of other Third World actors in international politics. Second, the book is an empirically rich example of how area studies knowledge might be fundamental in making sense of global developments. Thus, it should be of interest to the students of both Southeast Asia Studies and International Relations. Third and most importantly, the book makes a particular contribution to the broader literature on Third World internationalism, in which the agency of the Third World comes to the fore with its reportedly progressive practices, such as championing consensus building, creating human rights norms, or forging transnational solidarity networks of anticolonial nationalisms.³ While they may be considered a set of valuable contributions to our understanding of the Third World, they are also at odds with the current trajectory of

3 See, Amitav Acharya. 2014. Who are the norm makers? The Asian-African conference in Bandung and the evolution of norms. *Global Governance* 20: 405-417; Amitav Acharya. 2011. Norm subsidiarity and regional orders: sovereignty, regionalism, and rule-making in the Third World. *International Studies Quarterly* 55, 1: 95-123; Tim Harper. 2020. *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*. Harvard, Harvard University Press; for a general discussion on Third World's co-constitutive role in ideational realm, see Pinar Bilgin. 2021. How not to Globalise IR: 'Centre' and 'Periphery' as constitutive of 'the International'. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 18, 70: 13-27.

the Global South, which is still haunted by inequality and authoritarianism. Building on an illusion of the non-West as a monolithic political space, several scholars tend to attribute too much emancipatory power to non-Western projects. Thus, Fibiger's book fills a significant gap by showing that not all Third World actors adhere to emancipatory projects. Still, they can also exploit, reshape, and even reinforce the global structures of power, such as those of the Cold War. Therefore, *Suharto's Cold War* offers valuable insights to understand the dissemination of counterrevolution and anticommunist internationalism.