Modern Indonesia
A History Since 1945
By Robert Cribb and Colin Brown

LONDON AND NEW YORK: LONGMAN PRESS, 1995
MAPS, INDEX, ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FURTHER READINGS
180 PAGES

Indonesia is hardly known by most Americans, even among the
most educated elite. That reality was particularly clear last year
as President Suharto saw his thirty-three-year reign coming to a
close under the twin burdens of economic meltdown and political
challenge. As the tensions rose, until well into the drama, the New
York Times, that most elite of American newspapers, continued to
refer to Suharto merely as the “leader” of Indonesia as if he were no
more than another revolving-door prime minister of the sort that
used to be so common in Italy, or Japan more recently. Clearly the
Times assumed, probably rightly, that readers—even their readers—
would not recognize his name.

Even within the American academy Asian studies courses
have primarily emphasized the Asian giants like China and India or
nations with common histories of imperial and economic competi-
tion like Japan. Within Southeast Asia, courses addressing Vietnam
and the Philippines have attracted attention for obvious reasons, but
the rest of the region has largely been ignored. As to the scholarly
and textbook literature, while relatively good for scholarly mono-
graphs and a few undergraduate texts on the entire region, little has
been available for undergraduate reading material on most of the
individual nations like Indonesia, and that is quite astounding when
one realizes that Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation in the
world. Yet, a search of Amazon.com’s holdings on the subject
reveal almost no competitors for Modern Indonesia: A History
Since 1945. Clearly there was a need for this book, and Robert
Cribb and Colin Brown have done a considerable service to the pro-
fession by providing it. They have accomplished more than simply
filling a lucana; they have produced a very informative and readable
introduction to the subject.

The book is divided into ten chapters which chronologically
cover events since the end of the Second World War. The first chap-
ter naturally offers a relatively brief introduction to Indonesia and
its experience under colonization. Then the book moves forward,
offering a sophisticated but quite readable discussion of important
themes from the politics of independence and the first efforts at
nation-building under Sukarno through the era of party politics dur-
ding the 1950s. Cribb and Brown describe well the era of party domi-
nance and the subsequent creation in their different forms of the
“Guided Democracy” eras of first Sukarno and then Suharto. The
book is particularly good on the complicated history behind the
1965 coup and the subsequent massacres of the followers of the
Indonesian Communist Party. The last chapters emphasize Suhar-
to’s arrival to power and his efforts to build a corporate state under
the rubric of a revised interpretation of Pancasila, the government-
sponsored ideology of national unity.

I mentioned earlier that the book is particularly appropriate for
the undergraduate classroom, but having said that, I think I should
mention that for most American students it would have to be used in
an upper division undergraduate classroom. Most lower division
students would probably get somewhat bogged down in some of the
more detailed parts of the text.

Obviously readers of this text, first published in 1995, will
want assurances that the book will be brought up to date given the
enormity of changes that Indonesia has experienced over the last
year. With that in mind my sources confirm that by the time this
review is available, the new edition will be well underway. Thus I
would suggest that interested readers check for that edition rather
than the one I have reviewed here.■

STEVEN LEIBO is the Lead Editor and Co-Founder of H-ASIA, and the
Director of the International Studies Program at the Sage Colleges. He is
also the author of the annual East, Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific,
1999.

STEVEN LEIBO is the Lead Editor and Co-Founder of H-ASIA, and the
Director of the International Studies Program at the Sage Colleges. He is
also the author of the annual East, Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific,
Indonesia, officially the Republic of Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia: Republik Indonesia), is a vast nation consisting of more than 18,000 islands in the South East Asian Archipelago, and is the world's largest archipelagic nation. The name "Indonesia" derives from Greek "indus" or "India," and "nesos" or "islands"). A more modern form of keroncong is called Pop Keroncong. Completely different is the soft Sasando music from West Timor in the province of East Nusa Tenggara. Recently, modern dances and urban teen dances have gained popularity due to the influence of Western culture, as well as those of Japan and South Korea to some extent. Various traditional dances, however, including those of Java, Bali and Dayak, continue to be a living and dynamic tradition.[295]. Indonesia has various styles of clothing as a result of its long and rich cultural history. 