



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### [Review of: M. Ford, T.B. Pepinsky (2014) Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics]

Bakker, L.

**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Southeast Asian Studies

**License**

Other

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Bakker, L. (2016). [Review of: M. Ford, T.B. Pepinsky (2014) Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics]. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 5(3), 575-578. <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2016/12/vol-5-no-3-book-reviews-laurens-bakker/>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Laurens Bakker

Michele Ford and Thomas B. Pepinsky, eds. *Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, x+178p.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2016, pp. 575-578.

**How to Cite:** Bakker, Laurens. Review of *Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics* edited by Michele Ford and Thomas B. Pepinsky. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2016, pp. 575-578.

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2016/12/vol-5-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

**Subscriptions:** <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

**For permissions, please send an e-mail to:** english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Rajesh Daniel

*Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Asia, Bangkok***References**

- Richmond, A. H. 2003. Post Industrialism, Postmodernism, and Ethnic Conflict. In *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*, edited by John Stone and Rutledge Dennis, pp. 83–94. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- O'Riley, Michael F. 2007. *Postcolonial Haunting and Victimization: Assia Djebar's New Novels*. NY: Peter Lang.

***Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics***

MICHELE FORD and THOMAS B. PEPINSKY, eds.

Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, x+178p.

The end of the Suharto regime in 1998 liberated Indonesia's population in a variety of ways: it opened the door to democratic governance and the development of a critical and outspoken civil society, and saw a new government retract the strong grip the state held on numerous aspects of civil, political, and economic life. The regime's end also "liberated" a small group of extremely rich and well-connected individuals. These individuals, risen to wealth and influence under Suharto's protection but not having gone down with him, applied their capital to setting themselves up in the leaderships of the nation's new political parties, to expanding their grasp on resources and industries, and to building a public image sustaining these activities through the television channels and newspapers they owned. The rise of these oligarchs in democratic post-Suharto Indonesia has been worrying and intriguing observers, particularly regarding their influence on democracy, rule of law, and the protection of Indonesia's market to foreign competition. It also raises numerous questions regarding their strategies and *modus operandi*. Should we understand them as a mutually-supportive class with shared interests, or as individual actors with shared characteristics? How are they placed *vis-à-vis* other power holders, how do they obtain popular support?

While research and publications on the role and influence of oligarchy in Indonesia has been undertaken, most notably the works of Robison and Hadiz (2004) and Winters (2011), the number of publications remains limited and contains but little debate. *Beyond Oligarchy* is making an important difference here. The contributors seek to start a discussion between proponents of the "oligarchy framework" (see below) and scholars drawing on other theoretical traditions, exchanging views on starting points and emphases in understanding and explaining the role of oligarchs in Indonesian politics. This discussion has strengthened the debate and avoided the specter of a "collection of inward-looking scholarly camps" (p. x) with a weak collective capacity for understand-

ing Indonesian politics. Furthermore, they aspire to take this debate beyond Indonesia and combine their own expertise with broader scholarship in order to refine theories and concepts and generate new insights.

The discussion element has come out very well indeed. The authors read each other's chapters and address their colleagues' criticisms and theories in relation to their own ideas. To this reviewer, this is already a very valuable contribution to the debate because it makes the book stand out among so many other edited volumes that do not get beyond a collection of thematically-similar papers. This great result is likely due to the fact that the contributions are based on conversations taking place between the authors during two meetings in 2012 and 2013, thus allowing for reflection and reconsideration.

The book consists of nine chapters which, after the introduction by Michele Ford and Thomas Pepinsky, can be seen as falling into three parts. First are two chapters by, respectively, Winters, and Hadiz and Robison in which they outline their theses of the role of oligarchy in post-Suharto Indonesia. Both chapters, albeit differing in various other aspects, place oligarchs in a position of having captured Indonesia's political institutions for the accumulation of private wealth and social power and as a strategy of wealth defense. These chapters constitute what is referred to as the "oligarchy framework" of analysis (given the differences in analyses it might perhaps be more illuminating to speak of "oligarchy frameworks"). The second part of the book consists of chapters by Liddle, Pepinsky, and Mietzner who argue for a study of Indonesian politics that uses broader approaches than the oligarchy frameworks do, and include a greater variety of power resources, interests, and actors. The third and last part consists of the chapters by Aspinall, Caraway and Ford, and Buehler, that are united by their emphasis on contestation through mobilization and social agency.

The central subject of the chapters is the variety within the conceptual understanding of oligarchy and its relation to contemporary Indonesian politics, as given through the authors' approaches. All the contributors after Winters' and Hadiz and Robinson' chapters, furthermore, present their take on the insights and theories put forward by these three authors, who do, however, perhaps differ as much from each other as that they share views. The richness of these first two chapters is that the authors do not simply repeat their earlier work but explain their arguments in the context of the other chapters as well. Briefly put (as per Hadiz and Robison, p.37), the oligarchy thesis concerns a "system of power relations that enables the concentration of wealth and authority and its collective defense." To Hadiz and Robison oligarchy should be understood in the context of capitalist development, the formation and maintenance of a collective interest of oligarchs, and considered from a larger theoretical framework of structural political economy. For Winters, oligarchs' politics, place and relation vis-à-vis each other and other elites is the point of departure. Class interests and joint actions are a possible but not necessary outcome. The authors accept that electoral democracy and oligarchic rule can coexist and that democracy can impact

oligarchic rule, but do not consider competitive elections to automatically diminish the power of oligarchs.

The contributions that follow all add to and critique Winters, and Hadiz and Robison. Liddle finds the focus on great material wealth too limited, and proposes a theory of political change focusing on the actions of key individuals. Pepinsky likewise seeks to expand the explanatory capacity of the frameworks outlined by Winters, and Hadiz and Robison. He argues that pluralism, studied through distributional politics, offers an approach that can explain variation in policy outcomes beyond the direct interests of oligarchs. Mietzner presents an analysis of oligarchs in which he distinguishes five subgroups by motivations and interests, and finds that the difference between oligarchs is an important, but overlooked factor in understanding their role in Indonesian politics. Aspinall, looking at a potentially reforming left, electoral populism, and the rise of an Indonesian welfare state critiques the absence of popular forces and the emphasis on material wealth. He argues that subordinate groups and their organization must be included in the analysis of Indonesian politics.

The next chapter by Caraway and Ford connects nicely to this theme as it deals with the labor movement's capacity to mobilize socially—for minimum wages—and politically in local elections. The authors question whether the oligarchy theories are sufficiently robust to deal with the implications of local differences and nuances. In the final chapter, Buehler looks at the adoption of Sharia law in South Sulawesi to argue that the new political situation in Indonesia has made elites susceptible to the demands of societal groups and, in doing so, finds that vested interests are not those of oligarchs, but of elites. Opportunities for change arise through the changing relations between elites, but elites maintained their dominant positions in society.

The different authors do not seek to arrive at a shared conclusion, but highlight their individual thoughts and theories in relation to those of their colleagues. This presents the reader with an interesting overview of ideas, and leaves us to agree, critique, or question. The book clearly is a much welcomed addition to the field of study of Indonesian politics, but, to this reviewer, also has two weak points. First is the broad scale of statements and conclusions, which rarely (Caraway and Ford, and Buehler are exceptions) go beyond the national level at any depth. The strategies, effects and power relations in regional politics differ markedly in, say, Aceh, Jakarta, Bali, or East Kalimantan. While the importance of such variety is mentioned by several of the authors, it is poorly visible in the discussion and poses the risk of theories coming across as intended to have national, uniform validity. As a related point, the study of oligarchy can benefit from the inclusion of researchers from disciplines beyond political sciences. Social economy, history, anthropology, and other fields have members working on Indonesian politics, bringing in their insights could contribute to an even more complete understanding (or more complexity) of the subject.

Laurens Bakker

*Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam*

## References

- Robison, Richard; and Hadiz, Vedi R. 2004. *Reorganizing Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Winters, Jeffrey A. 2011. *Oligarchy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

### *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty*

PHILIP TAYLOR

Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, 350p.

The Khmer minority of Vietnam, which is indigenous to the Mekong Delta, has long been a bone of contention between the Vietnamese and Cambodian states. From the perspective of the Vietnamese, the delta region was a wilderness which was only tamed when they began to colonize the area and build a productive economy—something which has benefited everyone, including the local Khmers. On the other hand, this historically Khmer-speaking territory, now firmly in the possession of Vietnam, is, for many Cambodians, a historical injustice in need of redress, as well as an ominous reminder of just how weak the Cambodian state is compared to its neighbors. Academic, journalistic, and polemical writings on this issue typically address issues of human rights in Vietnam or political relations between the two countries, but Philip Taylor's book looks at the situation from a different angle, neither from the point of view of Hanoi or Phnom Penh, but rather from the perspective of the Khmer Krom people themselves without subordinating their voices to those of state-level actors.

Taylor's presentation of the Khmer Krom understanding of history, engagement with the economy, and orientation toward the future negate the notion that the Khmers of southern Vietnam are merely an extension of the Cambodian body politic whose interests might lie in a reunification with it. At the same time, Taylor effectively undermines the official Vietnamese narrative that the Khmer inhabitants have failed to develop the region prior to the arrival of the Vietnamese because of their indolence and backwardness, by showing how the Khmers have in fact been very successful in adapting themselves to an inhospitable environment. The book itself is organized into seven chapters describing in detail the ways in which Khmers conduct their social, economic, and religious lives in each of the ecological regions in which Khmers live. These are the coastal dune belt, coastal river-dune complex, freshwater rivers, saltwater rivers, flooded mountains, ocean-side mountains, and the northeast uplands.

Far from being backwards, the Khmer Krom are resourceful engineers who have succeeded in building communities in a land vulnerable to seawater incursions and where groundwater is often undrinkable. The reader truly appreciates the exquisite nature of these adaptations to each different type of hydrological environment in the delta, and the degree to which the contemporary land and economy, which the Vietnamese narrative attributes to the modern and forward-thinking