

RICHARD COCKETT

## Their Island Story

Indonesia Etc: Exploring the Improbable Nation

By Elizabeth Pisani

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Indonesia must be the biggest country in the world that you know almost nothing about. With 250 million people it is the fourth most populous, after China, India and the USA – but could you name the president? Or any city other than Jakarta? Or just one famous Indonesian? Maybe one of the above, but certainly not all three. One of Indonesia's smaller islands, Bali, is probably better known than the country itself. And how many people know Bali is in Indonesia?

It's Elizabeth Pisani's mission to dispel some of the ignorance about the country in this sharp, enjoyable and well-organised book. She is surely right in her subtitle: as well as being the biggest unknown country in the world, Indonesia must also be one of the most improbable. Consider the evidence. This is not, like China or America, a coherent landmass with a few offshore islands, but rather a string of islands, 13,466 of them to be exact, and that's just at high tide. Pisani writes that these islands, of all shapes and sizes, 'run around the girdle of the Earth, covering the distance from London to Tehran, or from Anchorage in Alaska to Washington D.C.'

The diversity is dazzling. These islands are home to people from 360 ethnic groups who speak 719 languages between them. The province of Aceh on the tip of Sumatra is a bastion of strict Islamism, almost Arabic in its social and religious texture; Bali's blend of Hinduism and Islam is unique unto itself; and in the forests of Borneo and Western New Guinea you are as likely to encounter animists as a variety of Christians. Yet somehow all these wildly different places and peoples remain, to varying degrees, loyal Indonesians. Remarkably, since independence from the Dutch in 1945, despite insurgencies on the peripheries of the archipelago, most notably in Aceh itself, no bit of the improbable nation has ever broken off – if we discount the very individual

circumstances of East Timor. It's something that Indonesia is duly proud of; not for nothing is 'Unity in Diversity' the national motto.

Thus Pisani claims that 'no other nation has welded so much difference together into so generally peaceable a whole in the space of less than seventy years', and in her book she sets off with a backpack to prove her point. She is a knowledgeable guide to the country, having served as a Reuters correspondent in Jakarta in the late 1980s and as an epidemiologist working on HIV/AIDS for the Ministry of Health in the early 2000s. For this book she embarked in 2011 to spend over a year travelling the length and breadth of the country, often revisiting old friends, older haunts and former colleagues. These encounters form the core of the book, allowing her to build up an instructive perspective on how Indonesia has changed, for better and for worse, over the past thirty or so years.

Her main plan for the trip was not to plan at all, rather to drift through the country, as most Indonesians do, at a pace that the country would naturally allow her – that is, often very slowly, and sometimes barely at all. The result is chance encounters with civil servants, teachers, fishermen, policemen, writers and many more. And it's through their stories, laced with carefully chosen statistics, that she patiently builds up descriptions of Indonesia's perennial problems – the rampant corruption, terrible education system, awful infrastructure – as well as the people's patent virtues: 'an extraordinary generosity of spirit, a tolerance of difference'. Pisani is not an unbiased observer; she loves Indonesia and its people, but she is also relatively clear-sighted about the country. She writes well and has an outsider's eye for the extraordinary and the idiosyncratic. At some 400 pages, however, some may flag at the profusion of characters and places. She just about

managed to drive this reader through to the end, even if at times the book could feel as long as the country itself.

So what are the threads that bind this country together? In the end, after all her travels, Pisani points to a universal sense of 'collectivism – village-based in Java, more clannish in much of the rest of the country, formalized nationwide through the giant web of the bureaucracy'. She is probably right. Almost uniquely for such a big country, the federal state is both all-seeing and impotent at one and the same time. After a decade of extreme decentralisation of power in the name of democracy and *reformasi*, away from the centre in Jakarta to the provinces and districts, it's the local politicians who wield the power in Indonesia. Even at the most humble level of administration, they are busy building up the same patronage systems and corrupt political machines that used to be the exclusive preserve of the highly centralised dictatorship of President Suharto. He spent three decades trying to tighten his grip on the country before being overthrown by a genuine people's uprising in 1998.

By allowing potentially breakaway provinces to manage their own affairs while staying within the Indonesian state, this runaway devolution of power has undoubtedly helped to keep the country together. But it has come at a price. As well as the viral spread of corruption, as thousands of local politicians conspire to auction off forest and mining concessions in exchange for campaign contributions, so it has become increasingly difficult to govern the country at all. Joined-up policy implementation is now almost impossible. There are just too many local officials to appease or pay off. This is one reason why Indonesia, a behemoth in most respects, punches well below its weight in international or even regional affairs. Trying to reconcile, let alone govern, more than 13,000 islands seems to be enough in itself for the slender handful of oligarchs and dynastic politicians who compose Indonesia's governing elite. Indonesians are thus unusually self-absorbed. But as Elizabeth Pisani demonstrates, they can perhaps be forgiven for that.

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