



## Special Issue

# The New Nationalism in Indonesia

Edward Aspinall\*

### Abstract

*A new nationalist mood is visible in Indonesia, expressed in increasingly bellicose rejection of alleged foreign interference in Indonesia's affairs and in demands for greater international recognition of Indonesia's power and status. This new mood has been visible for several years, but became particularly marked during the 2014 presidential election and under the new Joko Widodo administration. This article analyses Indonesia's new nationalism, especially as manifested in economic, cultural and territorial spheres, noting both continuities with past episodes, and novel features. A chief novelty is contemporary nationalism's markedly non-ideological and non-intellectual form; continuity is visible in its discursive style, with many contemporary nationalists anachronistically reproducing tropes rooted in earlier periods. The article concludes by identifying forces driving the contemporary resurgence of nationalism, notably the effects of democratisation as well as deeper feelings of insecurity about Indonesia's achievements.*

**Key words:** nationalism, foreign relations, Indonesian politics, democratisation, economic nationalism

\* Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 0200 Australia; email <edward.aspinall@anu.edu.au>. The author thanks Paul Kenny and Eve Warburton for their feedback on an earlier version of this article.

### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, as Indonesia has recovered from the blows of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, resumed economic growth and stabilised as a successful democracy, a mood of assertive nationalism has entered the country's public discourse and domestic politics. Politicians, intellectuals, journalists, leaders of religious and social organisations, and many ordinary citizens frequently state publicly that foreign countries habitually insult, exploit and mistreat Indonesia, and do not accord it the respect it deserves as a great nation. From time to time, there are angry eruptions of public protest and media condemnation of other countries—usually neighbours, such as Malaysia or Australia—in response to alleged insults that they or their leaders have directed in Indonesia's direction. Candidates for political office increasingly draw upon nationalist themes, and political leaders are increasingly moulding public policy to match the nationalist mood, with a host of measures to protect sectors of the Indonesian economy and restrict activities by foreigners. Though nationalist discourse and policy-making have featured in all post-Soeharto governments, they are becoming even more prominent under President Joko Widodo, sworn into office in October 2014.

This article sketches out core features of this new nationalism, analyses its historical roots, and identifies the factors driving its contemporary manifestation. A first section introduces the new nationalism, noting three key arenas of nationalist mobilisation: territorial, economic and cultural. A second section explains the

historical sweep of Indonesian nationalism, both in order to identify roots of the contemporary phenomenon and to identify its novel characteristics. The next sections focus on two features that define the contemporary nationalism: first, a sense of suspicion, sometimes bordering on paranoia, about allegedly hostile intents harboured by foreign countries; second, an obsession with insults allegedly directed at Indonesia, and an overwhelming concern to defend Indonesia's 'national dignity'.

The final part of the article considers factors driving the new nationalism. Indonesia's post-1998 democratisation, and the absence of strong policy or ideological differences between its major parties, provides a domestic political context strongly conducive to nationalist outbidding. The new nationalism is also moulded by current insecurities about Indonesia's place in the world. The emphasis on national dignity, for example, derives largely from anxieties that attend Indonesia's transformation from a relatively poor and underdeveloped nation into a more successful economic player, but one that still lags behind neighbouring countries.

Before we proceed with the argument, let us note two caveats. The first is that the primary focus of this article is Indonesian nationalism with regard to the country's external relations. Nationalism is always Janus faced, looking simultaneously outward, to assert a place for the nation within the international community of nation-states, and inward, to identify and define the critical features of national identity to which citizens should owe their loyalty and (often) to punish those who deviate. These two sides are interconnected, but this essay focuses on the outward orientation. Accordingly, we do not discuss much Indonesian nationalism's achievements with regard to the creation of an inclusionary national identity in which ethnic and religious minorities are accommodated, nor the difficulties which have attended this process. Second, it should be stressed that nationalism involves notably amorphous ideas and dispositions. Because nationalism is typically linked to structures of feeling and emotion more than to the world of rationality

and intellect, its advocates often pay little heed to the logical consistency or implications of their positions. Nationalism is also highly fungible, with nationalists able to combine different aspects of nationalist thinking, and overlay them on other political philosophies and ideas, with almost infinite variation. Accordingly, though the piece discusses contemporary Indonesian nationalism in rather sweeping terms, we should remember that there is in practice considerable variety in how Indonesians articulate, combine and act upon nationalist ideas. Many individuals disagree with the discourses outlined below, or aspects of them. Even so, the nationalist mood described here represents a widely shared and distinctive feature of Indonesia's contemporary political landscape.

## 2. The 2014 Election, Jokowi and the New Nationalism

One sign that assertive nationalism was re-emerging at the centre of Indonesian politics came with the presidential election campaign of 2014. One of the two contestants, Prabowo Subianto, a retired military general, who had played a leading role in Soeharto's New Order (1966-98) regime, built his campaign appeal almost exclusively on a nationalist platform. Though all mainstream politicians in Indonesia, as in other countries, are nationalist to one degree or another, the vehemence of Prabowo's nationalist message, and the passion with which it was delivered, was distinctive. In his stump speeches, Prabowo frequently condemned the foreign actors who were conspiring—in concert with (unnamed) domestic traitors—to drain Indonesia's national wealth, with the consequence that Indonesia had become a 'nation of slaves' (*bangsa kacung*). Foreigners were sneering at Indonesia, he repeatedly stated, and it was time for Indonesia to assert itself as a dignified and great nation. In large part, this meant throwing off the shackles of foreign economic exploitation and limiting the role of foreign companies—especially in the natural resources sector—but it also meant asserting Indonesia's greatness in fields ranging from military power to culture.

Presumably to underline the seriousness of his nationalist message, Prabowo even styled himself on Indonesia's founding father President Sukarno, wearing a black *peci* cap and an old-fashioned military-cum-safari suit modelled like those worn by Sukarno in his heyday (Aspinall 2015).

Although Prabowo's rival, the ultimately victorious Joko Widodo (often called Jokowi) had a less strident approach (Mietzner 2015), he also promoted a fundamentally nationalist platform, promoting a threefold emphasis on political sovereignty, economic autarchy and cultural renaissance. When Prabowo tried to outflank him on nationalist issues in the televised debates, Jokowi responded effectively: for example when Prabowo implied Jokowi was weak on national security by asking him what he would do if a foreign country claimed and occupied Indonesian territory (a live issue because of disputes with Malaysia), Jokowi responded that he would first negotiate but after that: 'If it is clearly our possession then we would have to do anything, if it concerns our sovereignty, yeah, we'll make trouble [*kita buat ramai*]. Don't think I can't be tough. I am tough and bold in making decisions and taking risks!' (Tribunnews.com 2014). After his inauguration, Jokowi's government adopted a host of new nationalist measures. These included new import restrictions, such as a ban on the import of rice alongside a proclaimed goal of achieving complete food self-sufficiency, but also covering such acts as the much publicised burning of foreign fishing boats captured in Indonesian waters and the execution of persons, mostly foreigners, convicted of narcotics crimes.

Stepping back from the immediate context of Jokowi's new government and surveying the years since the fall of Soeharto, we can identify three main arenas in which nationalist mobilisation and policy-making have played out.

### 2.1 Territorial Nationalism

A consistent concern of nationalists in the post-Soeharto era has been maintaining Indonesia's territorial integrity in the face of

alleged external aggression and internal separatism. Indeed, in the minds of most nationalists, these threats are inextricably linked, for reasons touched upon below. Nationalist discourse on this issue reached a fever pitch during and immediately after the 1999 Australian-led UN intervention in East Timor. Despite the fact that this intervention occurred on Indonesia's invitation, after an Indonesian-initiated referendum process, which was followed by widespread Indonesian military abuses, most mainstream Indonesian politicians blame the 'loss' of East Timor on the intervention and do not concede that the history of Indonesian military occupation and human rights violations in the province was responsible.

Similar themes still feature in mainstream discourse on other trouble spots. Military leaders, national parliamentarians and other politicians, for example, routinely state that political unrest and pro-independence sentiment in Papua are linked to foreign plans to destabilise Indonesia and access Papua's mineral wealth. In October 2014, for example, Jokowi's new internal affairs minister, when justifying a policy to split up the provinces of Papua and West Papua, claimed that the policy was necessary to prevent increasing foreign intervention in Papua (Republika 2014). It need hardly be stated that this attitude does not help to guide policy-makers to accurately diagnose the roots of political conflict in these provinces and to design appropriate responses.

Unresolved territorial disputes with neighbours, especially Malaysia, have also caused tension. In 2002, the International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Malaysian claims over the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan, located off Borneo, causing great angst and contributing to a widespread belief that Indonesia's maritime regions and outlying islands are vulnerable to predation. Several near clashes between Malaysian and Indonesian navy vessels in the disputed oil-rich Ambalat bloc, also near Borneo, have prompted outpourings of public hostility towards Malaysia involving, among other things, demonstrations at which protestors threw human excrement at the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta and called

for volunteer forces to participate in a new version of the ‘ganyang Malaysia’ (‘crush Malaysia’) campaign of the 1960s. These issues, alongside cultural and other tensions discussed below, have combined to make Malaysia the leading target of nationalist ire in Indonesia in the post-Soeharto period (Clark & Pietsch 2014).

## 2.2 Economic Nationalism

Nationalist policies designed to protect domestic producers or markets against foreign competition have a long history in Indonesia, but the country was forced to open large segments of the economy to foreign investment and trade under International Monetary Fund rescue packages after the 1997–98 financial collapse. After Indonesia paid off its debts and began to enjoy the fruits of the international commodity boom, a return to economic nationalist policies became visible, starting around the beginning of Yudhoyono’s second term in 2009–2010. A raft of new import restrictions have been imposed, typically with the express purpose of protecting vulnerable industries from foreign competition and, especially, supporting agricultural producers. Minerals have been a target of a new ‘resource nationalism’, with new regulations imposing limits on foreign ownership and banning the export of unprocessed ores (Warburton 2014). Yudhoyono’s government also for a time stopped the import of rice, immediately leading to an increase in the price of the commodity and bumping up the poverty rate (rice eats up a large part of the daily expenditure of poor people). Some of these policies have been driven by vested interests and rent seekers, others (such as the rice ban) by public pressure, including mobilisations by farmers and other producer groups.

One striking aspect of this economic nationalist turn has been how politicians have framed it in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist terms: the fevered nature of Prabowo’s denunciations of foreign control over Indonesia’s natural wealth has already been mentioned; Jokowi, too, frequently slips into similar language. For example, recently the president urged young entrepreneurs to more

actively compete in the domestic market and so prevent ‘foreign businesspeople’ from ‘occupying’ (*menduduki*—a word usually associated with military conquest) the Indonesian market (MetroTVnews.com 2015).

## 2.3 Cultural Nationalism

The cultural arena has also become an increasingly important arena of nationalist mobilisation, in part prompted by the spread of modern communication technologies, especially the Internet and social media. The most visible manifestation of this new trend has been a series of disputes with Indonesia’s neighbours, especially Malaysia, which Indonesians have accused of engaging in cultural theft by laying claim to various Indonesian traditions—dances, songs, culinary products and the like—in their own promotional and marketing activities. Thus, for example, when the Discovery Channel featured footage of the distinctive Balinese *pendet* dance in advertisements promoting a series on Malaysia, there was an eruption of condemnation of Malaysia by political leaders and in the media and online, as well as angry demonstrations and calls to ‘crush Malaysia’. The Tourism and Culture Minister sent an official letter accusing Malaysia of a violation of ethics; parliamentarians called on the government to withdraw the ambassador. Similar anger has arisen in response to alleged Malaysian appropriation of, among other things, a famous Ambonese song, a Batak dance, the distinctive *reog* masked dance from East Java and even a particular variety of spring roll. Though such incidents may seem trivial, along with the territorial disputes and other tensions between the two countries, they have contributed to great popular hostility towards Malaysia.

## 3. Historical Roots

In many respects, the new nationalism in Indonesia is not particularly new. As numerous theorists of nationalism have pointed out (a classic statement is Anderson 1983), nationalism always functions to connect individual

citizens to a wider national narrative and birth myth. In the Indonesian case, the birth myth focuses on the struggle against Dutch colonial exploitation and subjugation. Through seven decades of independent statehood, Indonesian nationalism has consistently oriented to this early anti-colonial struggle for its myths, symbols and idiom. Contemporary nationalists, as in earlier periods, draw heavily on the terminology and symbols of the anti-colonial struggle. Every Indonesian school child learns about the epochal moments in Indonesia's national awakening, the various officially designated 'national heroes' who led anti-colonial resistance, and how to sing the 'struggle songs' of that era. They all become intimately familiar—through re-enactments, dioramas, public monuments, movies and other cultural productions—with the iconic image of the long-haired, head-banded and heavily muscled revolutionary youth (*pemuda*) holding aloft a sharpened length of bamboo. Much is made of the 'struggle spirit' (*semangat perjuangan*) of the early nationalists and how this spirit should guide contemporary Indonesians.

Despite a consistent orientation to the myth of the anti-Dutch struggle, Indonesian nationalism has also had distinctive features in different periods, and it has been shaped by changing political imperatives. In the first two decades of Indonesian independence, especially during the period of Guided Democracy under President Sukarno (1957–1966), nationalism was generally leftist in orientation and focused on the unfinished anti-colonial mission of the revolution (notably, nationalisation of foreign enterprises and 'liberation' of Papua). In the final years of his rule, Sukarno tried to focus Indonesia's revolutionary energies outwards, including through a policy of *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) with the newly formed Federation of Malaysia which he described as a neo-colonial dagger aimed at the heart of Indonesia. He did so, most analysts agreed, as a product of domestic politics: Sukarno was trying to hold together a political spectrum undergoing rapid polarisation between supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party on the left and the Army, Islamic forces and their allies on the right.

After the Army emerged victorious from this conflict, Soeharto's New Order regime turned Indonesian nationalism to the purposes of regime maintenance and authoritarian legitimation. Regime leaders were not interested in highlighting the revolutionary content of Indonesia's nationalist history even as they kept alive its iconography and terminology. Instead, they promoted a version of nationalism that stressed an Indonesian national 'personality' founded on harmony and group interests rather than conflict and individual rights. In stark contrast to the Guided Democracy period, when Sukarno had harboured grand ambitions about mobilising the world's New Emerging Forces (NEFOs) against imperialism, Soeharto's government was inward looking and conservative in its international relations. However, as the government came under increasing pressure for political reform in its final decade, and as the international environment after the collapse of the Soviet Union became less supportive, regime leaders began to revive nationalism in order to buttress the regime against internal and external ideological threats. Senior military officers often accused persons who sought political reform of deviating from Indonesia's national personality and as being 'national traitors'. Under Soeharto, nationalism was above all a tool in the hands of a highly conservative military-bureaucratic caste.

Indonesia's contemporary nationalism is still shaped by its historical roots. For example, the belief that political unrest on Indonesia's periphery arises from a fusion of separatism and foreign intervention is directly traceable to the years of the revolution, when the Dutch sponsored a federal Republic of the United States of Indonesia as part of their strategy to defeat the nationalists, and to the 1950s when the United States supported regional rebels and contemplated splitting Indonesia into two or more states (Kahin & Kahin 1995). Many other aspects of contemporary Indonesian nationalism—for instance the militant anti-colonial language in which opposition to foreign investment is often expressed—are also linked to this historical legacy. Indeed, it should be stressed that the three key arenas of

nationalist mobilisation discussed above—territorial, economic and cultural—have been major foci of Indonesian nationalist debate and mobilisation since the early years of independence.

In fact, to say that contemporary Indonesian nationalism is influenced by its history is a significant understatement. In many ways, it seems trapped by it, with much current nationalist discourse sounding very anachronistic, as if ripped straight from an earlier era and transplanted unmodified into the present. What, for example, are we to make of otherwise barely inexplicable statements such as that of Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) (Indonesian National Military) commander Moeldoko at a February 2015 meeting with members of Banser, the security group linked to the mass Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama: ‘Other countries are really terrified if they find out that TNI and Banser are in synergy’, he told the meeting (Detik 2015). In the context of Indonesia’s contemporary international relations, this statement makes no sense: What country would care in the slightest to learn that the Indonesian military was cooperating with a ramshackle organisation of village youths whose regular security function consists of little more than providing honour guards for respected *kyai*, or religious scholars, in their communities? In the context of mainstream readings of Indonesia’s national history, the statement is more comprehensible, invoking as it does myths of a national struggle in which military units fought side by side with popular organisations to drive out the Dutch. The statement also expresses Indonesian military doctrine concerning the mobilisation of popular militias in the event of external aggression, and reflects the TNI’s perception of itself as a people’s army.

It is easy to find similar examples in almost any contemporary nationalist controversy. On social media, it is common for individuals to jump from a discussion of, say, whether a particular form of spring roll should be considered part of Indonesian or Malaysian cuisine to invocations of massacres by Dutch troops in Sulawesi in the 1940s, or the 1960s ‘Crush Malaysia’ campaign. And, as mentioned above, when the Discovery Channel broadcast

the images of the *pendet* dance, some Indonesians in Jakarta carried sharpened bamboo spears and head bands as they set about trying to ‘sweep’ the streets and capture Malaysian citizens (Koran Tempo 2009). In short, there often seems to be a mismatch between the tenor of current nationalist rhetoric and the seriousness of the underlying issues.

Setting aside such instances of discursive and symbolic fossilisation, we still need to identify the defining features and underlying political motivations of the new nationalism. As noted above, Sukarno-era nationalism was politically leftist, and shaped by Sukarno’s desire to manage domestic political conflict. Soeharto-era nationalism was politically conservative and functioned primarily to justify authoritarian rule. Both versions, in their own ways, were highly ideological: Sukarno talked at great length about NEFOs and OLDEFOS (Old Established Forces), borrowed freely from political philosophers of various stripes, and coined a plethora of acronyms and slogans to encapsulate his grandiose concepts and ambitions. Under Soeharto, there was equally arcane ideological production, though of a more leaden variety, with regime-approved intellectuals producing a huge volume of turgid tracts about the official ‘Pancasila ideology’.

In contrast, contemporary nationalism is strikingly un-ideological and un-theorised. Indonesian nationalism today has few ideologues but many recyclers of old tropes and promoters of base emotional appeals. But what are those appeals?

#### 4. Foreign Threats

One distinctive feature of the contemporary nationalism is its preoccupation with the notion that various (usually unnamed) foreign powers harbour nefarious and hostile designs on Indonesia. The most articulate spokesperson of this view in recent times was Prabowo during his 2014 presidential campaign. He frequently claimed that foreigners were sucking Indonesia dry of its natural wealth. However, statements along similar lines are unremarkable in contemporary Indonesia, and are made

on virtually a daily basis in national political debate.

Let us take an example involving another senior military officer. From late 2014, the Army Chief of Staff, General Gatot Nurmantyo (since promoted to Armed Forces commander) received much media coverage when he appeared in a series of speaking engagements at campuses. His purposes, he said, was to warn Indonesian youth about the danger of ‘proxy war’ in Indonesia. He described proxy war as ‘a confrontation between two major powers using proxy actors so as to avoid direct confrontation’. The proxies of choice were usually small states but could also be non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations, social organisations, community groups and individuals. Proxy war was *already* threatening Indonesia, he insisted, as manifested by the occurrence of separatist movements, mass demonstrations and inter-group clashes, though he presented no evidence or elaboration to explain how such phenomena were instances of proxy war (Tribun Jogja 2014). In one speech, the general explained that the growing narcotics problem in Indonesia was another sign of the proxy war because ‘This condition happens in order to damage the Indonesian young generation [. . .]. Through an international conspiracy, Indonesian younger generation can unknowingly be destroyed, without having to use armed force’ (Liputan6.com 2014). Though General Gatot clearly believed proxy war was already being waged on Indonesia, in none of these speeches did he identify the country that was the culprit.

This is a particularly elaborate example, but casual references to Indonesia being the target of foreign conspiracies, economic or political subjugation, moral or political subversion and the like are all part of mainstream debate in Indonesia and rarely raise an eyebrow when uttered even by ministers or members of parliament. The belief that foreign countries represent a territorial, physical or security threat is often intertwined with more general moral panic about cultural and social change. Public figures frequently state that social ills such as sexual promiscuity, drug use, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography and the like are attributable to globalisation

and foreign (especially Western) cultural influence. Moreover, such concerns cross the political spectrum—it is easy to find remarkably similar statements about foreign threats to Indonesia’s sovereignty and culture from Islamist groups on the one hand through to secular–nationalist groups on the other.

Over the last five years or so, various government policies have been reshaped to deal with such foreign dangers. As well as military redeployments to areas that are seen as vulnerable (such as remote islands and parts of the maritime border with Malaysia), there has been a tightening of regulations governing foreigners within the country. For example, in 2010 the Minister of the Interior issued a new ‘Guidelines for the Monitoring of Foreigners and Foreign Organisations in the Regions’ (Regulation 29 of 2010) mandating increased surveillance of non-citizens. There have also been new requirements for Indonesian language competence for expatriate workers and tighter government control over both governmental and non-governmental aid programs.

Of course, at one level, the concern with foreign threats is not surprising: nationalists always define the identity of their nation in opposition to some foreign Other, whether explicitly or implicitly. There is, however, a notable disproportionality about current Indonesian discourse. The regional security context in which Indonesia finds itself is benign, and no country has expressed hostile intent towards Indonesia. Yet much contemporary discourses represent Indonesia as being already under assault. It is hard to avoid concluding that this discourse in fact points towards deep insecurities about Indonesia’s identity and place in the world, a point we return to below.

## 5. National Dignity

A second repeated theme of the contemporary nationalism is a preoccupation with Indonesia’s ‘national dignity’ or *martabat bangsa*. This is a key phrase that recurs constantly in political debate. Contemporary political leaders demonstrate a sometimes overwhelming obsession with insults, denigration, and devaluing of Indonesia by foreigners, and

repeatedly assert that Indonesia needs to stand up to foreign nations more strongly in asserting its own interests. For example, when various foreign governments appealed to Jokowi not to execute their nationals for drugs crimes in early 2015, there was a chorus of public commentary from ministers down that the president should resist such pressures in order to preserve ‘national dignity’. Indeed, politicians and public commentators represent virtually any instance of problematic relations with other countries in this way: as a test of Indonesia’s ability to assert and defend its dignity.

A striking feature of the national dignity discourse is that it is also directed at remoulding the behaviours of Indonesians themselves in ways that policy-makers believe will improve Indonesia’s image in the eyes of both citizens and others. Thus for example, in February 2015, Jokowi announced that he wanted to stop the export of household domestic workers from Indonesia, saying that this was a matter of ‘dignity and self respect’. He complained that ‘Worldwide there are only three countries that supply foreign domestic workers, two in Asia and one in Africa [a patently incorrect statement]. One of the Asian ones is Indonesia. This is a matter of our dignity. When we have bilateral dealings with Malaysia, we are really ashamed’ (Kompas 2015a). Around the same time, the Agriculture Minister announced a ban on the import of offal—an important ingredient in many Indonesian dishes—because it was used as dog and cat food in exporting countries. ‘I wish our republic to be respected by other nations’, the minister explained, saying that he was willing to weather a negative response from exporting countries ‘If we are attacked it doesn’t matter. I’m willing to do anything for the Republic of Indonesia’ (Kompas 2015b). Not to be outdone, the Trade Minister announced a ban on the import of second hand clothes. He said such goods were often contaminated by fungal spores and bacteria (he initially also said they posed a risk of HIV transmission, but later apologised for this statement) and believed the ban was a matter of national dignity: ‘Let’s maintain our dignity and honour as a nation.

Why on earth should we be wearing the used bras and underwear of other nations?’ (Tempo 2015). Despite the fact that such clothes are eagerly bought up by poor consumers in Indonesia, who like both their cheapness and their quality, the minister (one of Indonesia’s wealthiest men) did not like the image the trade projected. Indonesians, too, especially poor ones are thus called upon to regulate their own behaviour in the service of national dignity.

## 6. Explaining the New Nationalism

What then explains this new nationalist mood? One source is political. It is possible to see political manipulation at play in most if not all of the new expressions of nationalism. Efforts by TNI officers to trumpet Indonesia’s vulnerabilities reflect efforts by the military to reassert itself and regain a domestic security role. Likewise, the strongly nationalist tenor of the Jokowi government’s first months expressed the new president’s attempt to demonstrate toughness at a time when his handling of domestic issues—notably an assault by corrupt officers within the national police on the Corruption Eradication Commission—showed that he could easily be pushed around by powerful interest groups.

More deeply, the emergence of the new nationalism is a product of the democratisation of Indonesian political life that has occurred since 1998. To be sure, at first sight the new nationalist mood seems out of kilter with the tenor of Indonesia’s generally stable democratic politics. Nationalism no longer serves the purpose of overcoming ideological polarisation, as was the case in the 1960s when Sukarno mobilised nationalist sentiment in order to allow him to bridge the widening gulf between left and right. On the contrary, contemporary Indonesian politics is marked precisely by the *absence* of divisive ideological cleavages (Mietzner 2008), with all the major parties relying on basically similar clientelist strategies to mobilise electoral support (Aspinall 2014). But in fact, the very thinness and fungibility of nationalism makes it a useful tool for politicians seeking to build popular

support in such a denuded ideological landscape. In conditions such as those in contemporary Indonesia, in which the major parties and aspirants to executive office differ very little in policy and programmatic terms, nationalism is a useful legitimating device by which such actors can try to distinguish themselves from rivals and court public support. In other words, both the shallowness *and* the vehemence of the new nationalism are reflections of the *absence* of other salient cleavages in Indonesian politics—such as a clear right–left split on economic policy. Indeed, nationalist outbidding is common in newly democratic countries, often leading to the targeting of ethnic minorities (Snyder 2000). Indonesia went through a period of violent ethnic mobilisation of this sort in the immediate post-Soeharto years (Bertrand 2004), but since that time domestic politics have stabilised and the search for a threatening Other against which politicians can focus public attention has led them to emphasise foreign dangers.

We should also seek explanations for the new nationalism in broader economic, social and cultural dynamics. One explanation for the tenor of the new nationalism is simply that it reflects the hyper reality of the internet age, in which a media image of a Malaysian advertisement appropriating an Indonesian cultural artefact, or a misjudged statement by an Australian Prime Minister, can instantly be disseminated, reproduced, memed, mocked, and reinterpreted among millions of people in ways that can give rise to sudden eruptions of nationalist feeling, only to dissipate just as rapidly.

More deeply, however, the new nationalist mood points to deep insecurities among both the Indonesian elite and public about Indonesia's own record of achievement and its place in the world at this particular historical juncture. Many of the calls to uphold national strength and dignity point to an underlying belief that Indonesia is in fact sadly lacking in both qualities. Certainly, Indonesia for the past two decades has been undergoing changes that bear great promise but which have exposed many systemic economic and political failings.

Nationalism is a distorted reflection of these failings.

Economically, Indonesia has been transforming itself from being a poor, largely agrarian society that was a major recipient of foreign aid to becoming a middle-income country that is far more modern and economically successful. However, it still exhibits many signs of poverty (almost half the population live on \$2 a day), and lags visibly behind many of its neighbours. The new nationalism can thus be read partly as a displaced reaction to the continuing problem of social inequality and poverty. Anger about foreign exploitation of Indonesia's natural resources and the related lament that Indonesia has become a 'nation of slaves' are expressions of disappointment about Indonesia's continuing reliance on commodities rather than modern sectors, and about its inability to generate firms that can compete effectively against the foreign resource giants. Moreover, growing regional economic integration heightens rather than diminishes awareness of the gap between Indonesia and its neighbours. The mass export of Indonesian labour to Singapore and Malaysia deserves particular mention. This migrant labour outflow has become a painful reminder for many Indonesians of their country's relative underdevelopment. Malaysian, Singaporean and other employers often mistreat and humiliate these workers, whose suffering is exposed in horrifying detail in the Indonesian media, in ways that justifiably anger many Indonesians but also undercut claims that their country is a great nation, at least economically.

This dynamic helps also to explain a striking feature of the new nationalism: its tendency to target Indonesia's closest neighbours and natural allies, notably Malaysia and Australia (and Singapore to a lesser extent) rather than countries that might be considered as posing greater long-term military or cultural threats, such as China or the United States. Certainly, border issues play a role in producing this outcome, but another factor is that Indonesia's more intense engagement with these countries creates greater opportunities to look at the Other, as it were, through an unflattering mirror. The popular hostility to Malaysia—a

country that shares great cultural commonalities with Indonesia—is particularly revealing in this regard.

The economic disappointments are part of a broader pattern. Indonesia has been experiencing a period of difficult democratic transition for the last decade and a half, prompting painful awareness among many Indonesians of their country's weaknesses in law enforcement, corruption, educational achievement and other areas. Many persons who are virulently nationalist when it comes to discussing Indonesia's relations with other countries also excoriate national performance in such fields, and can switch freely from berating Malaysia about cultural theft, say, to bewailing the perfidies of Indonesia's elite or its political system. Likewise, the very elite who trumpet Indonesian self-resilience are at the same time avid consumers of prestigious international brands and are likely to seek medical treatment in Singaporean hospitals and deposit their wealth in Singaporean bank accounts. To make matters worse, for the last several decades Indonesia has had a poorly performing diplomatic corps and few notable successes on the international stage. Even the Indonesian military—the pride and joy of many nationalists—is repeatedly exposed in the domestic media as being a hopelessly ramshackle organisation wracked by poor discipline and corruption and burdened with outdated and inadequate equipment.

Most ardent Indonesians nationalists are deeply aware of such failings, and it is hard to avoid seeing a subtext of frustration in the overweening confidence they articulate. Read this way, the increasing assertiveness of Indonesian nationalism is not in fact a sign of growing self-confidence, but rather its reverse.

September 2015.

## References

- Anderson B (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London.
- Aspinall E (2014) Indonesia's 2014 Elections: Parliament and Patronage. *Journal of Democracy* 25(4), 96–110.
- Aspinall E (2015) Oligarchic Populism: Prabowo Subianto's Challenge to Indonesian Democracy. *Indonesia* 99, 1–28.
- Bertrand J (2004) *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Clark M, Pietsch J (2014) *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Cultural Heritage, Politics and Labour Migration*. Routledge, New York.
- Detik (2015) *Panglima: Negara Lain Ngeri Kalau TNI-Bansor Bersinergi*, viewed February 2015 <<http://news.detik.com/read/2015/02/23/125609/2840028/10/panglima-tni-negara-lain-neri-kalau-tni-banser-bersinergi?nd772204btr>>.
- Kahin A, Kahin G (1995) *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia*. New Press, New York.
- Kompas (2015a) *Jokowi Akan Stop Pengiriman TKI*, viewed February 2015 <<http://regional.kompas.com/read/2015/02/14/03274001/Jokowi.akan.Stop.Pengiriman.TKI>>.
- Kompas (2015b) *Mentan: Jeroan Itu Makanan Anjing, Impor Saya Tutup*, viewed January 2015 <<http://bisniskeuangan.kompas.com/read/2015/01/27/100132626/Mentan.Jeroan.Itu.Makanan.Anjing.Impor.Saya.Tutup>>.
- Koran Tempo (2009) *Razia Warga Malaysia Dinilai Tak Beradab*, 10 September 2009.
- Liputan6.com (2014) *KSAD: Penyalahgunaan Narkoba Miliki Keterkaitan "Proxy War"*, viewed October 2014 <<http://news.liputan6.com/read/2117518/ksad-penyalahgunaan-narkoba-miliki-keterkaitan-proxy-war>>.
- MetroTVnews.com (2015) *Jokowi Puji Anak Jaman Sekarang Lebih Kreatif Baca Peluang*, viewed March 2015 <<http://ekonomi.metrotvnews.com/read/2015/03/12/370224/jokowi-puji-anak-jaman-sekarang-lebih-kreatif-baca-peluang>>.
- Mietzner M (2008) Comparing Indonesia's Party Systems of the 1950s and the Post-Suharto Era: From Centrifugal to Centripetal Inter-Party Competition. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39(3), 431–54.
- Mietzner M (2015) *Reinventing Asian Populism: Jokowi's Rise, Democracy, and Politi-*

- cal Contestation in Indonesia*. East West Center, Honolulu.
- Republika (2014) *Mendagri Prioritaskan Pemekaran Dua Provinsi di Papua*, viewed October 2014 <<http://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/umum/14/10/31/neanre-mendagri-prioritaskan-pemekaran-dua-provinsi-di-papua>>.
- Snyder J (2000) *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. W.W. Norton, New York.
- Tempo (2015) *Gobel: Masak Pakai Celana Dalam Bekas Bangsa Lain*, viewed February 2015 <<http://www.jpnn.com/read/2015/02/03/285281/Menteri-Gobel-Ingin-Babat-Impor-Pakaian-Bekas-ke-Indonesia>>.
- Tribun Jogja (2014) *Kasad: Pemuda dan Mahasiswa Harus Waspada Proxy War*, viewed September 2014 <<http://jogja.tribunnews.com/2014/09/18/kasad-pemuda-dan-mahasiswa-harus-waspada-proxy-war>>.
- Tribunnews.com (2014) *Jokowi: Kedaulatan Diklaim Negara Lain, Kita Akan Buat Ramai*, viewed June 2014 <<http://www.tribunnews.com/pemilu-2014/2014/06/22/jokowi-kedaulatan-diklaim-negara-lain-kita-akan-buat-ramai>>.
- Warburton E (2014) *In Whose Interest? Debating Resource Nationalism in Indonesia*. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 15, viewed March 2015 <<http://kyotoreview.org/yav/in-whose-interest-debating-resource-nationalism-in-indonesia/>>.